

ON THE VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS  
RATIONALITY:  
PLATO (AND THE BUDDHA) VERSUS THE NEW  
ATHEISTS

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**ABSTRACT:** Holocaust survivor Victor Frankl claims that human beings are spiritually and mentally free, and that it is possible to maintain one's dignity even in a concentration camp. If this tremendous claim is true, it is true regardless of who says it. However, it is only when the claim is made by someone like Frankl that it functions rhetorically, actually prompting the listener to reflect on what it might mean. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates argues for an even more extreme version of this same idea: that it would be better to be tortured to death than to torture someone else, because it is impossible for a torturer to be happy. This paper shows why, if what Frankl and Socrates say is true, both tradition and myth are perfectly rational modes of discourse, and why a culture that rejects the capacity of tradition and myth to disclose truth will almost inevitably reject these claims as irrational. This discussion is framed in terms of an interesting disjunct in the meaning of the term "atheist," as it is used by the New Atheists and as it is used by Plato, and is set in dialogue with the claims of Vipassana meditation teacher S. N. Goenka, whose teachings bear remarkable similarity to Plato's.

**KEYWORDS:** Plato; Atheism; Daniel Dennett; Buddhism; S. N. Goenka; Ontology; Religion; Torture; Rhetoric; Aristotle; Vipassana

INTRODUCTION

In an attempt to debunk the idea that religious people are irrational, sociologists Rodney Stark and Roger Finke argue that both religious people and non-religious people are equally rational, but that they are operating in different understandings of the world. They describe their position through a series of propositions and definitions: "*Definition 4. Gods* are supernatural "beings" having consciousness and desire."; "*Proposition 8.* In pursuit of rewards, humans will seek to exchange with a god or

gods.”; “*Definition 5. Religion* consists of very general explanations of existence, including the terms of exchange with a god or gods.”<sup>1</sup> In short, Stark and Finke argue that it is perfectly rational for someone who believes in the existence of Gods who can influence human affairs to engage in exchanges with these gods for the sake of rewards. In book X of the *Laws*, Plato describes three misunderstandings of religion: “(1) the gods do not exist, or (2) that they exist but take no thought for the human race, or (3) that they are influenced by sacrifices and supplications and can easily be won over.”<sup>2</sup> In the *Euthyphro*, meanwhile, Plato openly mocks the idea that religious piety consists in “a sort of trading skill between gods and men.”<sup>3</sup> This means, in short, that Plato would regard Stark and Finke’s definition of religion, upon which they hope to make the case for the rationality of religious people, as fundamentally irrational, a deep misunderstanding of religious truth.

In rejecting the rationality of this kind of religion, Plato would seem to be in broad agreement with the so-called “New Atheists.” Daniel Dennett, for example, defines religion as “social systems whose participants avow belief in a supernatural agent or agents whose approval is to be sought,”<sup>4</sup> and he defines atheism as a rejection of this belief: “If what you hold sacred is not any kind of Person you could pray to, or consider to be an appropriate recipient of gratitude (or anger, when a loved one is senselessly killed), you’re an atheist in my book.”<sup>5</sup> If this is what is meant by the term “atheist,” then Plato would be an atheist. However, while both Dennett and Plato agree that it is irrational to believe in Gods who give rewards to those who follow their arbitrary demands, Plato would add that it is even more irrational to believe in atheism, positing against both a mysterious “theism” that does not seem to be represented in the current discourse. Thankfully, Plato does not simply assert his position as a revelation – his dialogues can be read as a sustained attempt to persuade those who believe doctrine (1), (2), or (3) that his “argument is a better expression of the truth.”<sup>6</sup>

An extreme example might be useful in clarifying the options so far:

The Aztec rain-god, Tlaloc, was induced to send rain through the deaths of very young children who were drowned or taken to mountain peaks and walled up in

<sup>1</sup> Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*, London, University of California Press, 2000, 90-1. Bold and italics in original.

<sup>2</sup> Plato, *Laws*, trans. Trevor J. Saunders, in *Plato: Complete Works*, John M. Cooper (ed.), Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997, 885b.

<sup>3</sup> Plato, *Euthyphro*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, in *Plato: Complete Works*, 14e.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, Toronto, Penguin, 2006, 9. Italics in original.

<sup>5</sup> Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 245.

<sup>6</sup> Plato, *Laws*, 885e. Italics in original.

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caves. The copious weeping of these terrified children was considered a good sign for success: the more the children cried, the more the Aztecs believed it would rain.<sup>7</sup>

By Stark and Finke's definition, such behavior is perfectly rational: the Aztecs operate within an understanding of the cosmos whereby the god Tlaloc exchanges rain for the tears of dying infants; such sacrifices, therefore, would be the Aztec manifestation of the same means-ends thinking that characterizes our modern understanding of rationality, and it would be prejudicial of us to presume otherwise. Both Dennett and Plato would disagree: the sacrifice of babies is irrational because the universe is not actually like this. Dennett, however, would reject this Aztec belief in the name of the atheist cosmos supposedly revealed by modern science, while Plato would reject it in the name of a mysterious "theism" we have not yet elucidated.

Near the end of *Breaking the Spell*, Dennett states that he "would like nothing better than for [his] book to provoke a challenge – a reasoned and evidence-rich scientific challenge – from researchers with opposing viewpoints."<sup>8</sup> The purpose of this essay is to make such a challenge from Plato, presenting the ancient philosopher's argument for what we will call "Platonic theism" in the spirit of Dennett's enlightened attitude toward rational debate:

Eventually, we must arrive at questions about ultimate values, and no factual investigation could answer them. Instead, we can do no better than to sit down and reason together, a political process of mutual persuasion and education that we can try to conduct in good faith. But in order to do that we have to know what we are choosing between, and we need to have a clear account of the reasons that can be offered for and against the different visions of the participants.<sup>9</sup>

This is a noble attitude, the attitude of a true philosopher: in order to make an informed decision between the rationality of atheism, the rationality of Stark and Finke's understanding of religion, and the rationality of Plato's mysterious theism, we need to first understand what each position actually is. It might even turn out that, in the same way as Plato would be an atheist by Dennett's understanding of the term, Dennett and his New Atheist cohort will turn out to be theists by Plato's. At the very least, it should be useful for those engaged in the contemporary debate to have a better grasp of how Plato understood these issues – as, consciously or unconsciously,

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<sup>7</sup> Brenda Ralph Lewis, *Ritual Sacrifice: An Illustrated History*, Gloucestershire UK, Sutton Publishing, 2001, 86.

<sup>8</sup> Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 312.

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 14.

legitimately or illegitimately, it is very likely that Plato's definitions are still at work in the common understanding of these terms.

Let us begin by defusing some potential prejudices: first, the arguments necessary to arrive at "Platonic theism" have nothing to do with the famous "theory of the forms"; second, these arguments do not rely on an ancient cosmology that modern science has already disproven; third, they do not rely on some shaky proof for the existence of God. In fact, Plato is very careful to hide his dialectical arguments behind a veil of beautiful rhetoric, and he has a very good reason to do so: if reality is indeed as he argues it to be, there is a dangerous self-performative incoherence in blithely and openly presenting the truth. Dennett acknowledges this possibility, actually deriving the title of his book from it:

Wouldn't such an exhaustive and invasive examination damage the phenomenon itself? Mightn't it *break the spell*? That is a good question, and I don't know the answer. *Nobody knows the answer*. That is why I raise the question, to explore it carefully now, so that we (1) don't rush headlong into inquiries we would all be much better off not undertaking, and yet (2) don't hide facts from ourselves that could guide us to better lives for all.<sup>10</sup>

If reality is as Plato argues it to be, then Plato knows the answer: it is indeed quite dangerous to rush headlong into this inquiry. That being said, the only way to understand the reason for this danger is to make the inquiry, understand the possibilities, and judge the problem from the context of this knowledge.

This essay, in other words, is something of a gamble: if Plato is right, then it is possible that these arguments will make their readers both less happy and less good; on the flip side, it is also possible that by being exposed to a rational possibility that the modern understanding of reason has rendered invisible, the same readers will be inspired to become both happier and more virtuous. When weighing the risks of this gamble, however, we can take courage from some of the pronouncements of the New Atheists themselves. Sam Harris, for example, writes that we should trust that "our fellow *Homo Sapiens* possess the requisite intelligence and emotional maturity to respond to rational argument, satire, and ridicule on the subject of religion," because most people would "prefer not to be completely mistaken about the nature of reality."<sup>11</sup> Harris is certainly correct about the stakes of the debate: we are talking about the fundamental nature of reality, and someone is indeed completely mistaken. Richard Dawkins, meanwhile, firmly states his refusal to "don kid gloves to handle

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<sup>10</sup> Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 15.

<sup>11</sup> Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science can Determine Human Values*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2010, 175.

religion,”<sup>12</sup> thereby inviting the same respect from those who would make arguments against him. It is Dennett, however, who once again gives voice to the proper philosophic attitude:

Some see religion as the best hope for peace, a lifeboat we dare not rock lest we overturn it and all of us perish, and others see religious self-identification as the main source of conflict and violence in the world [...]. Who is right? I don't know. Neither do the billions of people with their passionate religious convictions. Neither do those atheists who are sure the world would be a much better place if all religion went extinct.<sup>13</sup>

This is precisely the case. We need to acknowledge the possibility that we do not know the answer if we are going to bother trying to look for it – and, as Plato would put it, once we have begun the search, “the lover of inquiry must follow his beloved wherever it may lead him.”<sup>14</sup> Dennett follows his beloved into an exposition of why he thinks we should all become atheists, and he exhorts those who disagree with him to at least engage with what he has to say. As a mirror to Dennett's project, this essay will first provide the arguments for Platonic theism, show why this position has become invisible to modern scientific culture, then consider how the New Atheists measure up if we judge them by Plato's definitions. In the spirit of Dennett, I encourage those who currently believe themselves to be atheists to engage with these arguments. Indeed, if Dennett is speaking the truth when he writes that atheists display an “incessant demand for self-examination,”<sup>15</sup> then it is possible that these arguments might even be persuasive – as it was this same incessant demand that led Socrates to the mysterious position I will now elucidate.

#### PART ONE: THE RHETORICAL NECESSITY OF NOBLE SUFFERING

During the Second World War, Victor Frankl survived over two and a half years in Nazi concentration camps. In *Man's Search for Meaning*, first published in Germany almost immediately following the war, Frankl makes a powerful claim based on his experiences:

Even though conditions such as lack of sleep, insufficient food and various mental stresses may suggest that the inmates were bound to react in certain ways, in the final analysis it becomes clear that the sort of person the prisoner became was the result of an inner decision, and not the result of camp influences alone. Fundamentally, therefore, any man can, even under such circumstances, decide

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<sup>12</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, New York, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006, 27.

<sup>13</sup> Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 16.

<sup>14</sup> Plato, *Euthyphro*, 14c.

<sup>15</sup> Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 16.

what shall become of him – mentally and spiritually. He may retain his human dignity even in a concentration camp.<sup>16</sup>

In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle notes that the first and “the most effective means of persuasion [a speaker] possesses”<sup>17</sup> is the personal character of the speaker: “We believe good men more fully and more readily than others: this is true generally whatever the question is, and absolutely true where exact certainty is impossible and opinions are divided.”<sup>18</sup> We can test the truth of this by imagining what would happen if, instead of a holocaust survivor like Victor Frankl, a wealthy individual from North America were to make the same claim, say, to the starving residents of a gulag: “Fear not, my friends! Even if your bodies are crushed by the necessities of survival, true freedom, spiritual freedom, does not depend on outward circumstances! You can maintain your dignity no matter how much you suffer!” If the claim is true, of course, it remains true regardless of who speaks it. As this absurd example should indicate, however, it is only when the claim is made by someone like Frankl, who actually retained his dignity under the harshest conditions, that the claim functions rhetorically, prompting the listener to reflect on what it might mean. When spoken by those who have never passed this kind of ordeal, the rhetorical effect is almost exactly opposite: listeners will likely be infuriated by the insensitivity of a speaker who dares to make claims about something he or she cannot possibly comprehend.

That being said, even if people who have never suffered cannot persuasively express such positions in their own voice, they can still think and speak about such matters through the mediation provided by the words of people like Frankl. In short, if such people wanted to persuade either themselves or others that human beings are indeed free to decide what shall become of them no matter how terrible their circumstances, it would be perfectly rational for them to cite the words of people like Frankl in their arguments. Aristotle calls this kind appeal to authority one of the “‘non-technical’ means of persuasion,”<sup>19</sup> an appeal to what he calls “ancient witnesses,” ancient martyrs, “poets and all other notable persons whose judgements are known to all.”<sup>20</sup> Such appeals are specifically useful in questions concerning “the quality of an action, to its being just or unjust, useful or harmful,” because the ancient witness “cannot be corrupted.”<sup>21</sup> There is wisdom here too. The problem that prompted

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<sup>16</sup> Victor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning: an introduction to logotherapy – From Death Camp to Existentialism*, trans. Ilse Lasch, Boston, Beacon Press, 1962, 66.

<sup>17</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, Richard McKeon (ed.), New York, Random House, 1941, 1356a10.

<sup>18</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1356a5.

<sup>19</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1375a22.

<sup>20</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1375b27.

<sup>21</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1376a17.

Rawls to posit the veil of ignorance was that living speakers will always find their vision of justice and morality unconsciously inclining towards views that justify their own selfish interests. Because of this, when two living speakers argue over the nature of justice, the debate can very easily transform into a façade for the political struggle of desire against desire. However, because the words of an ancient witness stand independent of the particular speaker who cites them, they can be heard in a mode approaching disinterested reflection. Simply put, because Frankl is already dead, we do not have to worry that he is making his claim as part of an attempt to trick us. Needless to say, the speaker who cites Frankl might be doing so, but Frankl's claim itself still stands, independent and transcendent to its particular instantiation. This means that the members of cultures that possess ancient witnesses like Frankl will find it easier to talk about profound moral questions: speakers, no longer obliged to speak from their own authority, can make moral claims without being constantly forced to defend themselves against charges of naïveté or conscious/unconscious hypocrisy; listeners, meanwhile, would be less able to retreat from such claims by means of *ad hominem* attacks on the authority of the speaker to speak.

The fact that we now live in a culture in which such witnesses exist allows us to contemplate the opposite possibility: it is clearly not necessary for a culture to possess authorities like Frankl. His words are the result of historical contingency, historical tragedy – and while lamenting the conditions that enabled Frankl to speak authoritatively, we can note that in a culture without this kind of witness, it would be much more difficult for people to adopt the kind of position that Frankl insists is true. Again, if the claim is true it is true, regardless of whether common cultural authorities exist who can be called upon to vouch for it. However, if someone came to believe such a claim in a culture without the relevant authorities, it would be much more difficult to persuade others of its truth. This, I will argue, was the situation in ancient Greece prior to Socrates – not that there were no cultural authorities who could be cited in moral argumentation, but rather that there were no moral authorities who could be called upon to support the tremendous moral position that Socrates consistently argued for. Because of this, Socrates was compelled to argue in his own voice, from the goodness of his own character, and was ultimately obliged to accept an unjust death in order to prove his character sufficient to his claims.

The moral position Socrates upholds is actually far more extreme than Frankl's, perhaps the most extreme position one can possibly take with regard to human morality. Socrates argues that “doing what's unjust [is] worse than suffering it, and not paying what is due worse than paying it.”<sup>22</sup> This is true, however, not only because it is

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<sup>22</sup> Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. Donald J. Zeyl, in *Plato: Complete Works*, 474b.

morally wrong to inflict injustice. Socrates asserts that an unjust person cannot possibly be happy, and he further insists that everyone already agrees with this position even if they do not know it, because people believe in justice and no one “can say anything else without being ridiculous.”<sup>23</sup> In the *Gorgias*, the unscrupulous Polus counters that this is absurd and that everybody in fact believes the opposite: that it is better to inflict injustice on others than to suffer it oneself. Polus then describes what would follow if Socrates were correct:

Take a man who’s caught doing something unjust, say, plotting to set himself up as tyrant. Suppose that he’s caught, put on the rack, castrated, and has his eyes burnt out. Suppose that he’s subjected to a host of other abuses of all sorts, and then made to witness his wife and children undergo the same. In the end he’s impaled or tarred. Will he be happier than if he hadn’t got caught, had set himself up as tyrant, and lived out his life ruling in his city and doing whatever he liked, a person envied and counted happy by fellow citizens and aliens alike?<sup>24</sup>

Even in the face of this extreme consequence, Socrates stands his ground: although the would-be tyrant who is tortured to death and the successful tyrant who rules his city are both miserable – because both act unjustly – “the one who avoids getting caught and becomes tyrant is the more miserable one.”<sup>25</sup> Polus responds with scornful laughter. He claims that Socrates is “saying things the likes of which no human being would maintain.”

Considered in light of Aristotle’s point concerning the persuasive power of a person’s moral character, there is truth to Polus’ critique: without cultural authorities to appeal to, Socrates is forced to argue from the strength of his own character – and no matter how good he shows himself to be, no living human can ever credibly claim to have a moral character so excellent as to prefer being tortured to death than to continue to live unjustly. When making claims to listeners who do not already agree with him, therefore, nothing Socrates says can be convincing: he appears to be either a naïve fool, a hypocrite, or a skilled debater who enjoys making other people look like fools in public. If, however, the reality beneath this appearance is that Socrates is indeed “dead earnest about this,”<sup>26</sup> as his friend Chaerephon insists him to be, then Socrates would be in the unenviable position of thinking he knows what people need to do in order to be happy but, like the tragic prophetess Cassandra, being constitutionally unable to persuade those who most need his help. This, in turn, is why Socrates must accept an unjust death rather than flee unjustly. This act proves the

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<sup>23</sup> Plato, *Gorgias*, 509a.

<sup>24</sup> Plato, *Gorgias*, 473c-d

<sup>25</sup> Plato, *Gorgias*, 473e.

<sup>26</sup> Plato, *Gorgias*, 481b.

strength of his character, which retroactively serves to support the plausibility of his claims. When Plato subsequently transforms Socrates into a cultural authority, an ancient witness who other people can appeal to in their own thinking on such issues, Plato's witness of the witness of Socrates helps give rise to a culture in which it would be easier to argue for and believe the position Socrates lived and died to uphold.

We can clarify the rhetorical necessity of Socrates' death by comparing it to the famous example of Galileo. When the church threatened to burn Galileo at the stake unless he renounced his belief that the earth revolved around the sun, Galileo recanted. In this case, however, since anyone who actually observes the Solar System will inevitably come to the same conclusion, Galileo's death would have made no difference to the strength of the argument. Socrates, however, is not making an argument about the shape of the universe; he is making an argument about how a person must act in order to be happy: "no one who isn't totally bereft of reason and courage is afraid to die; doing what's unjust is what he's afraid of."<sup>27</sup> If Socrates, the person who makes this tremendous statement, subsequently runs from death, he proves himself to be a hypocrite, someone who does not really believe his own words, and his argument is tarnished in direct proportion to the strength with which he previously upheld it. Polus' scoffing critique, meanwhile, would be vindicated:

POLUS: [...] So you'd take suffering what's unjust over doing it, would you?

SOCRATES: Yes, and so would you and everyone else.

POLUS: Far from it! I wouldn't, you wouldn't, and nobody else would, either.<sup>28</sup>

By accepting death, Socrates proves that he would indeed take suffering what's unjust over doing it, and Polus' rebuttal transforms into a description of Polus rather than a description of reality in general: even if Polus is so deluded as to prefer doing injustice to suffering it, Socrates is not. This single counter-example, meanwhile, also refutes the claim that nobody would act in this way, thereby forcing Polus to contemplate the possibility that, while reality might appear a certain way to him, the fact that Socrates diametrically opposes this view is not just a clever façade. That being said, even if we now have proof that Socrates is indeed serious about what he says, none of this functions as an argument for the truth of Socrates' claim. Even if we can no longer retreat from the argument by impugning Socrates with charges of hypocrisy or flippancy, it is still possible that Socrates is nothing more than a madman. Simply put, all we have so far is a definition, which I will hereby propose as a preliminary definition of "Platonic theism": as human beings, we are spiritually and mentally free, and we can retain our dignity even in the depths of suffering, and if forced to make a choice, it would be better for us to be tortured to death than to torture another person,

<sup>27</sup> Plato, *Gorgias*, 522e

<sup>28</sup> Plato, *Gorgias*, 474c.

because it is ontologically impossible for torturers to be happy – or even to comprehend what a word like “happiness” actually means.

Let us recapitulate the argument so far. We have derived the necessity of Socrates’ death from an obvious problem in moral rhetoric: the fact that only those who have suffered nobly can plausibly argue that human can retain their dignity no matter how dire the circumstances. More concretely, it would be entirely rational for us to give more weight to the moral arguments of a virtuous person like Victor Frankl than a tyrant like Joseph Stalin, even if they made the exact same claims in the exact same words – because we could trust that Frankl actually cared about our wellbeing, while we would have good reason to suspect that Stalin was simply trying to trick us into obediently submitting to one of his nefarious schemes. From this, we saw why it would be rational for those believed Frankl, yet lacked the experiences necessary to prove their own virtue, to make arguments with reference to cultural authorities whose noble suffering vouched for they were saying. We then saw why, for the extreme moral argument that Socrates upholds, it is actually impossible for living speakers to persuasively argue in their own words, because nobody who is not already dead can prove their character so excellent as to prefer a painful death to an unjust life. This means that if Socrates’ claim turns out to be true, it would only be possible to plausibly make the case for it in cultures that had developed cultural authorities who had “merited the victory of an unjust death,”<sup>29</sup> as Boethius says with regard to Socrates’ demise.

A series of interesting if controversial conclusions can be derived from these obvious points on the nature of moral rhetoric. First, as a cultural authority, Socrates is not entirely sufficient to his argument. In other words, he still cannot persuasively claim that the tortured person is happier because he himself was not tortured to death. However, while someone could still reject the witness of Socrates as insufficient to the argument, the same critique cannot be made of Jesus, a man who was filled with nothing but compassion for his tormentors even as they crucified him, who understood that the only way these men could possibly commit such an act was by numbing themselves to the misery they were bringing into their own souls, and who prayed as he died that his tormentors be spared this pain: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”<sup>30</sup> In other words, if we are trying to persuasively make the case that the torturer is more to be pitied than the tortured, Jesus represents the perfect ancient witness, the logical and complete solution to a problem of moral rhetoric that Platonic

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<sup>29</sup> Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. Richard Green, New York, Macmillan Publishing Company, 1962, 7.

<sup>30</sup> Luke, 23:34, KJV.

philosophy broached but only partially managed to resolve. This analysis becomes even more compelling when we recall a point that Socrates himself makes at the end of the *Gorgias*: after presenting his own myth of judgment after death, he says that “it certainly wouldn’t be a surprising thing to feel contempt for [this story] if we could look for and somehow find one better and truer than it.”<sup>31</sup> In terms of persuasive power, the story of Jesus is a better story, providing a more compelling witness to the same position that Socrates himself accepted death in order to make convincing. Because of this, it would be rational for anyone who already agreed with the Platonic position to begin arguing with reference to Jesus once the new religion became a cultural possibility – which means, again, that Christianity represents a logical and rational development of an ancient culture that had already been partially persuaded by Socratic moral argumentation. The main difference between Platonic philosophy and Christianity would lie not the content of their fundamental moral claim but rather the character of the primary audience to whom they were making it: while Socrates directs his rhetoric at those who might attempt to become tyrants, trying to prove that unjust actions will necessarily make them unhappy, Jesus directs his rhetoric at those who have been victimized by tyrants, demonstrating through his death that it would be more fitting to love and pity their oppressors than to hate them.

Turning now to theology, for those who believe Socrates, his death would be seen as giving rise to a cultural situation in which the truth and the capacity to speak the truth, Being and *Logos*, would be closer together – since, by referring to the martyrdom of Socrates, it would be easier to believe in the truth of a position that would otherwise appear almost entirely implausible. This would be even more the case after the death of Jesus – which means that once this new story emerged into ancient culture, it would have made sense for those who already accepted the authority of Socrates to think of the crucifixion of Jesus as the historical moment when Being and *Logos* came into accord, when the cultural community that oriented itself around the ancient witness of Jesus actually gained the power to speak the truth through the medium of his witness. Similarly, if we consider God’s proclamations in Genesis that the world is good as an attempt to persuade humanity that, despite the clear realities of suffering and death, *the world is indeed good*, the same rhetorical difficulty arises: for the same reason that a millionaire will be unable to persuade the residents of a slum that life is wonderful, God will not function as an effective speaker of this extreme affirmation until God has suffered more than all of God’s potential listeners. Jesus, in other words, is God’s answer to Job: after the crucifixion, it is no longer possible to reject God’s claim by arguing that God does not really understand what he is talking about.

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<sup>31</sup> Plato, *Gorgias*, 527a.

Finally, lest these arguments be misunderstood as a sinister attempt to prove the cultural superiority of the Christian religion and of Western philosophy, S. N. Goenka lays out the exact same position as the deepest truth of Buddhism:

The moment you defile your mind, the moment you generate any negativity, nature starts punishing you then and there. [...] Anybody who generates anger now will experience nothing but unhappiness and misery. This person may have any name, may be from any caste, from any community, from any sect or from any country: it makes no difference at all. Because one has generated negativity, one is bound to suffer here and now.<sup>32</sup>

This claim corresponds to Plato's definition of injustice: "the mastery of the soul by anger, fear, pleasure, pain, envy and desires, whether they lead to any actual damage or not."<sup>33</sup> Translated in Platonic vocabulary, Goenka is arguing that as soon as the soul is overcome by anger, it becomes unjust and therefore miserable, with the conclusion that it is therefore better to be tortured than to torture as the *ad absurdum* consequence. The difference between these traditions, meanwhile, would lie not in the content of the claim but rather in the means of transmission: while Occidental culture has focused on developing a language that can speak this truth persuasively, Buddhism has sought to bring its adherents to the same place by means of silent meditation.

## PART TWO: THE RATIONALITY OF RELIGIOUS MYTH

We now have the first half of an account of why, if Platonic theism is true, it has become invisible to modern culture: if the only way to persuasively make the case for it is with reference to cultural authorities, then the members of a culture that has rejected the capacity of traditional authority to disclose truth would find themselves in the same position as the members of a culture that had not yet developed ancient witnesses like Frankl, the same situation Socrates needed to die in order to resolve. This would not be a problem if Socrates' position turns out to be false. If Socrates is right, however, then the culture that has cut itself off from tradition would also have cut itself off from its own capacity to speak the truth persuasively; moreover, since Socrates also insists that truth, virtue, and happiness are ultimately all the same, such a culture would also have lost all sense of how to make its members happy.

The second half of the account relates to the philosophic role of story and beautiful rhetoric. As we will see, a culture that rejects the capacity of story to disclose truth will face the inverse problem: if the rejection of tradition makes the argument impossible to

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<sup>32</sup> S. N. Goenka, *The Gracious Flow of Dharma*, Vipassana Research Publications, Maharashtra, India, 1994,

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<sup>33</sup> Plato, *Laws*, 863e.

uphold, the rejection of story makes the argument impossible to avoid. The members of such a culture would find themselves forced to deal with the extreme consequences of dialectic philosophy before they are spiritually ready, and their retreat from these consequences would almost inevitably make them less truthful, less happy, and less good than they would otherwise have been.

In the *Phaedo*, Socrates makes a thoroughly obvious point: that “the very good and the very wicked are both quite rare, [...] most men are between these extremes.”<sup>34</sup> Now, for people who are not already “very good,” the idea that the person being tortured to death is necessarily less miserable than the torturer will probably sound wildly implausible. Socrates, however, not only claims that this is true. He further claims that this is the only possible rational position, that all other ways of thinking about justice will inevitably give rise to contradictions – as particular visions of justice that unconsciously reflect selfish interests are forced into contact with the reality of justice, as inevitably revealed by dialectic courageously carried forward. If this is indeed the case, then dialectic philosophy, properly conducted, will always arrive at a conclusion that the majority of people will find absurd. Such people could escape the apparently ludicrous conclusion in one of two ways: either reject the capacity of dialectic to lead to truth, or reject the reality of justice itself. Socrates dubs the former mode of escape “misology,” the hatred of rational discourse, a condition that occurs “when one who lacks skill in arguments puts his trust in an argument as being true, then shortly afterwards believes it to be false [...] and so with another argument and then another.”<sup>35</sup> He dubs the second mode of escape misanthropy, hatred of people, which arises in a similar way to misology: “when a man without knowledge or skill has placed great trust in someone and believes him to be altogether truthful, sound and trustworthy; then, a short time afterwards he finds him to be wicked and unreliable.”<sup>36</sup>

Because naked dialectic will convince most people to become either misologists or misanthropes, Socrates does not use naked dialectic when speaking to the majority of people. Instead, he relies on charms that “consist of beautiful words”<sup>37</sup> to awaken in his listeners a love of the good, a love that will give them the courage to push through the pain of transformation that pure dialectic will, if taken seriously, necessarily induce. A culture that rejects the capacity of story to disclose truth, therefore, will have stripped away the mediation that formerly protected the majority of people from these dangers. The members of this culture will find themselves impaled by a dialectic choice they are not ready to face – between suffering injustice and inflicting injustice, between being

<sup>34</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, in *Plato: Complete Works*, 90a.

<sup>35</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, 90b.

<sup>36</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, 89d.

<sup>37</sup> Plato, *Charmides*, trans. Rosamond Kent Sprague, in *Plato: Complete Works*, 157a.

tortured or being the torturer – and they will tend to escape the consequences of this choice either by arguing that dialectic is clearly ridiculous, or by arguing that justice itself is an empty concept, nothing more than a device used by the powerful to justify the oppression of the weak.

It will probably come as no surprise to the members of modern culture that philosophy can be used to justify unjust political relations. If Socrates is right, whenever those who use philosophy in this way actually engage in real philosophic reflection, they will constantly run into contradictions – as their attempt to justify their position in society comes into conflict with the unavoidable reality of justice. Misologues protect themselves from this unpleasantness by rejecting the capacity of dialectic to form a coherent bridge between their own particular definition of justice and what justice actually entails. There are, however, two distinct ways to do this. On the one hand, one can simply refuse to think dialectically, maintaining the illusion that one's own particular definition of justice is equivalent to real justice by never questioning it. This kind of misologue simply refuses to engage in self-reflection – an attitude that roughly corresponds to the kind of piety the New Atheists oppose: the piety of religious fundamentalists who refuse to question the absolute truth of their beliefs. On the other hand, one can believe that dialectical thought necessarily unsettles all fixed definitions, but is altogether incapable of positing anything in their place. Socrates explicitly warns that those who are not already “very good” will necessarily experience dialectic in this way. In the face of this phenomenon, however, Socrates advises that “We should not allow into our minds the conviction that argumentation has nothing sound about it; much rather we should believe that it is we who are not yet sound and that we must take courage and be eager to attain soundness.”<sup>38</sup> The second kind of misologue ignores this advice, taking this fluctuation as evidence that no understanding of justice is rationally defensible, that all are arbitrary, that dialectic is nothing more than a kind of battlefield where different irrational preferences seek dominion over each other. Both kinds of misologue, therefore, arrive at the same end by diametrically opposite paths: both reject the possibility that their particular conception of justice can be subject to rational critique, the former because they refuse to think, the latter because they believe that their own experience of dialectic, whereby all understandings appear unfixed and fluid, reveals the truth about justice as opposed to the truth about themselves. This second kind of misology corresponds roughly to the type of reason the New Atheists, and modernity in general, uphold against what they see to be the irrationality of religious belief – which means that the debate between what the New Atheists define as “religion” and

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<sup>38</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, 90c.

what they define as “atheism” would, according to Plato, be a debate two kinds of misology, two different ways of running away from rationality.

Plato would actually argue that the second kind of misology is much worse than the first, that it would be far better to refuse to question one’s own understanding of justice than to reject all possible understandings as arbitrary. In fact, it is not even necessary to refer to Plato to show why this would be the case: a subset of contemporary atheists adopt this position as the only logical approach to reality. Consider, for example, the criticism that S. T. Joshi levels against Sam Harris. Harris argues, in apparent agreement with Socrates, that “as with all matters of fact, differences of opinion on moral questions merely reveal the incompleteness of our knowledge.”<sup>39</sup> While characterizing this as a “no doubt noble and worthy” attempt to produce “an eminently workable system of ethics,” Joshi nevertheless denounces the project as fundamentally unsound:

Offensive as it may be to many, it is a brutal truth that everyone’s system of morals is merely a bundle of preferences that, insofar as they are preferences, are logically shielded from refutation. To say that I prefer chocolate ice cream to vanilla ice cream is the expression of a preference. [...] The difference between this preference and the belief that “Murder is wrong” is only a difference of degree, not of kind.<sup>40</sup>

Joshi, refusing to shirk from any consequences, goes on to state that someone who “believes in the extirpation of the human race as the highest moral good [...] is not by any means irrational.”<sup>41</sup> Atheist philosopher Russell Blackford levels a similar critique against Harris’ project: “I’ve never yet seen an argument that shows that psychopaths are necessarily mistaken about some fact about the world. Moreover, I don’t see how the argument could run.”<sup>42</sup> While Harris himself represents a slightly more complicated case, Joshi and Blackford have clearly fallen victim to what we have just described as the second form of misology: the idea that our understandings of goodness and badness are beyond the ken of rational dispute, a series of parochial preferences that will differ from person to person, culture to culture. Rationality, for those who have adopted this position, would be a universal acid, dissolving all belief, disenchanting all worlds – and religious people would indeed be suffering from a kind of irrational madness, only able to maintain their beliefs by refusing to engage in rational thought.

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<sup>39</sup> Harris, *The Moral Landscape*, 10.

<sup>40</sup> S. T. Joshi, *The Unbelievers: the Evolution of Modern Atheism*, New York, Prometheus Books, 2011, 228.

<sup>41</sup> S. T. Joshi, *The Unbelievers*, 228.

<sup>42</sup> Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape*, 220.

This position, the “offensive” and “brutal truth” that all morality is ultimately based on arbitrary preference, is precisely the position that Plato defines as atheism. In the *Republic*, Plato puts this position into the mouth of the character Thrasymachus. In his *History of Western Philosophy*, English philosopher Bertrand Russell, who Joshi lauds as “the most distinguished philosopher of the twentieth century,”<sup>43</sup> more or less endorses what this character says: “Although [Plato’s] dramatic sense leads him to state the position of Thrasymachus forcibly, he is quite unaware of its strength, and allows himself to be grossly unfair in arguing against it.”<sup>44</sup> Bertrand Russell does not seem to realize that the following nine books of the *Republic* are not so much the blueprint for how to found a perfect city as they are a concerted attempt to refute a position Plato sees as the most disastrously incorrect way to apprehend the world. This is what Thrasymachus says:

If someone commits only one part of injustice and is caught, he’s punished and greatly reproached – such partly unjust people are called temple-robbers, kidnappers, housebreakers, robbers, and thieves when they commit these crimes. But when someone, in addition to appropriating their possessions, kidnaps and enslaves the citizens as well, instead of these shameful names he is called happy and blessed, not only by the citizens themselves, but by all who learn that he has done the whole of injustice. Those who reproach injustice do so because they are afraid not of doing it but of suffering it. So, Socrates, injustice, if it is on a large enough scale, is stronger, freer, and more masterly than justice. And, as I said from the first, justice is what is advantageous to the stronger, while injustice is to one’s own profit and advantage.<sup>45</sup>

In short, since all people agree that the worst thing that can possibly happen is to become the victim of another’s unjust action, the most rational course of life is, as Socrates ironically puts it, “that one ought either to be a ruler himself in his city or even be a tyrant, or else to be a partisan of the regime in power.”<sup>46</sup> Reason, for such an understanding, would be the art of gaining and maintaining power; those in power would define justice as they saw fit, and their subjects would remain obedient to this definition out of fear. Those who protested that the regime in power was unjust would, in reality, simply be trying to take power for themselves – and whatever appeals they made to the “justice” of their cause would, in reality, be nothing more than ideological weapons in their ersatz revolutionary coup.

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<sup>43</sup> S. T. Joshi, *The Unbelievers*, 12.

<sup>44</sup> Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, London, Routledge, 1993, 133.

<sup>45</sup> Plato, *Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube and rev. C. D. D. Reeve, in *Plato: Complete Works*, 344b-c.

<sup>46</sup> Plato, *Gorgias*, 510a.

In *The Future of an Illusion*, Sigmund Freud presents this brutal truth as one of the discoveries of modern science:

We have spoken of the hostility to civilization which is produced by the pressure that civilization exercises, the renunciations of instinct which it demands. If one imagines its prohibitions lifted – if, then, one may take any woman one pleases as a sexual object, if one may without hesitation kill one’s rival for her love or anyone else who stands in one’s way, if, too, one can carry off any of the other man’s belongings without asking leave – how splendid, what a string of satisfactions one’s life would be! True, one soon comes across the first difficulty: everyone else has exactly the same wishes as I have and will treat me with no more consideration than I treat him. And so in reality only one person could be made unrestrictedly happy by such a removal of the restrictions of civilization, and he would be a tyrant, a dictator, who has seized all the means to power. And even he would have every reason to wish that all the others would observe at least one cultural commandment: ‘thou shalt not kill’.<sup>47</sup>

For those who believe that modern science was the first to unearth this offensive and brutal “truth,” it might come as a surprise to learn that Plato was perfectly aware of it more than two millennia prior to its “discovery” in the modern period. None of these shocking interpretations are foreign to Plato’s thought: the idea that the happiest person is the tyrant who is no longer obliged to restrain his or her instincts; the idea that the only reason one might restrain one’s instincts is out of fear of punishment; the idea that morality can be derived from the necessity of tyrants to instill respect into their subject populations. The difference between Plato and the modern proponents of this vision is that Plato rejects this as the most irrational way to understand the world, while Russell, Freud and their spiritual descendants recommend it as the only possible rational position.

Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas dubs this position “the ontology of war,”<sup>48</sup> the belief that the job of rationality is “the art of foreseeing war and of winning it by every means,” and that morality is just another kind of weapon, promoting intra-group cooperation so as to ameliorate the domination of everyone else. He says that this is the conclusion that all philosophy necessarily arrives at – “We do not need obscure fragments of Heraclitus to prove that being reveals itself as war to philosophic thought.”<sup>49</sup> He says that only belief in the Messiah gives grounds for believing that this

<sup>47</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, in *Civilization, Society and Religion*, Albert Dickson (ed.), trans. James Strachey, New York, Penguin, 1991, 194.

<sup>48</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1969, 22.

<sup>49</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 21.

is false. Plato would agree in condemning the position, but would disagree in the condemnation of philosophic thought. He argues instead that the ontology of war is completely irrational, and the grounds for this argument are evident even in the statements of its modern adherents.

Consider what Bertrand Russell has to say about how Plato's arguments would sound to someone who has adopted the view of Thrasymachus:

Anyone who agrees with Thrasymachus will say: 'There is no question of proving or disproving; the only question is whether you *like* the kind of State that Plato desires. If you do, it is good for you; if you do not, it is bad for you. If many do and many do not, the decision cannot be made by reason, but only by force, actual or concealed.'<sup>50</sup>

In other words, when those who believe the "brutal truth that everyone's system of morals is merely a bundle of preferences" turn their attention to politics, they will realize that Dennett's enlightened proposal, that we ought to "sit down and reason together, a political process of mutual persuasion and education that we can try to conduct in good faith," is really just nonsense. "Mutual persuasion," when it comes to the type of problem that people have political disputes about – whether something is good or bad – cannot possibly be rational, since reason has nothing to say about values. Instead, only "force, actual or concealed" would be able to bring people together, and rational debate would be little more than a forum for the veiled exchange of threats and bribes. This is why Levinas calls it "the ontology of war," why Plato rejects it as the incarnation of irrationality: it repudiates the use of reason as a means to solve political disputes. Nietzsche, meanwhile, provides another succinct expression of this view of reality: "The world seen from within, the world describe and defined according to its 'intelligible character' – would be 'will to power' and nothing else."<sup>51</sup> For those who have adopted this kind of "platonic atheism," politics will appear to be nothing more than the clash of irrational desires trying to dominate each other.

That being said, we cannot refute a position by showing what bad things follow if it is true. As Russell argues in the final pages of *History of Western Philosophy*: "Morally, a philosopher who uses his professional competence for anything except a disinterested search for truth is guilty of a kind of treachery."<sup>52</sup> It is here, however, that we encounter the strangest reversal: the position espoused by Platonic *atheism* is actually very similar to the deepest truth of Platonic *theism*. The Platonic theist simply makes a distinction that the Platonic atheist does not: the types of things people prefer are not necessarily the types of things that will actually make them happy, and the larger the

<sup>50</sup> Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, 133-34.

<sup>51</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, New York, Penguin, 1990, 67.

<sup>52</sup> Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, 788.

gap between someone's preferences and their real good, the more it would be good for this person to believe in some kind of moral standard, mediated by a tradition of inspiring stories that helped to awaken the innate goodness of the soul, so as to strengthen the will in its fight against these maladaptive preferences.

We can describe the similarity and difference between atheism and theism in terms of Joshi's comparison between the preference for chocolate ice cream and for murder. It is clearly possible for someone who likes chocolate ice cream to also be allergic to it. In such a case, we could make an argument based on facts: "You should not eat chocolate ice cream because it will make you feel sick." Returning now to the Buddhist discussion, S. N. Goenka would agree that the difference between the example of chocolate ice cream and the example of murder is a matter of degree, not of kind. In short, the real reason you should not kill people is that it will make you feel sick. It is impossible for a human being to murder someone and remain happy:

Suppose you kill somebody. How is it possible to kill? You can't kill anybody unless you generate a tremendous amount of anger, hatred, ill will and animosity. You can't kill while smiling or laughing. You have to generate negativity in your mind; and as soon as you generate negativity, nature starts punishing you. You may kill that person later on, but you will be the first victim. You have started harming yourself because you have started generating impurity, negativity in the mind.<sup>53</sup>

In other words, if Platonic theism is correct, the real reason you should not murder other people is exactly the same as the reason those who are allergic to chocolate ice cream should not eat it: following your arbitrary preference will actually bring you misery; it is against your real self-interest. However, the vast majority of people, whose souls are somewhere between very good and very wicked, will not understand the matter like this. It is for this reason that wise people have provided us with moral precepts. By doing our best to follow these precepts, we act as if we were already very good, which will actually be in our own real self-interest:

At the apparent level it seems that if you observe [...] the moral precepts – if you don't harm others, if you don't hurt others by action, vocal or physical, then you are obliging others and you are obliging society, [...]. But this is only the apparent truth, not the actual truth, not the truth at the deeper level of Dharma. At the deeper level of Dharma, you are not obliging anybody by practicing [...] morality. You are obliging yourself. It is in your own self-interest.<sup>54</sup>

Having a preference for murdering the entire human race would be a bad idea not because it is immoral, but because entertaining such a preference would in fact be

<sup>53</sup> S. N. Goenka, *The Gracious Flow of Dharma*, 29.

<sup>54</sup> S. N. Goenka, *The Gracious Flow of Dharma*, 28-29.

against the real self-interest of the very individual who held it. Needless to say, the person who holds such a preference would almost certainly disagree with this appraisal – and this, precisely, is the problem with dialectical rationality. People whose souls have become unjust, overwhelmed by “anger, fear, pleasure, pain, envy and desires, whether they lead to any actual damage or not,” are not in a good position to judge what their real self-interest actually is. Their capacity to reason has become enslaved to their passions. If such people then engage in dialectical philosophy and discover that, for them, all understandings of the good turn out to be contradictory, and thereby conclude that all traditional understandings of morality are nothing more than a bunch of arbitrary and irrational injunctions, they will lose touch with the guardrails that were actually helping them to achieve a modicum of happiness. Having rationally undermined their capacity to believe in traditional authority, such people will have no grounds to resist whatever preferences happen to arise in their souls; flattered by their desires, they will sink into injustice.

This is not to say that tradition can never be wrong – this would be the position of the first kind of misologue. It would also be a fallacy to say that this kind of person will necessarily become immoral. As Plato puts it, “a complete atheist [...] may have a naturally just character and be the sort of person who hates scoundrels, and because of his loathing of injustice is not tempted to commit it.”<sup>55</sup> Joshi makes the same point: “the idea that moral subjectivism or relativism somehow inhibits our moral outrage or the actions we might take based upon that outrage is simply false.”<sup>56</sup> The problem with Platonic atheism is, once again, political: those who understand reality in this way will be unable to see political life as anything more than a battle of force against force, with rational debate as nothing more than the veil for an intractable war. If we add that all people who would respond to being tortured to death with feelings of hatred, fear, and anger – as opposed to sad but compassionate love for their tormentors – are at least slightly overwhelmed by an unjust feeling of fear, we might argue that every human being is probably going to need the help of inspiring words and moral guidance to help them be truly selfish. The difference, therefore, between the Platonic theist and the Platonic atheist lies not at the level of dialectic: both agree on what reason will inevitably show to be true. The difference between the positions lies in the way they understand inspiring rhetoric and religious myth: the platonic theist argues that inspiring words and moral guidance are like a ladder that will help make people emotionally capable of living happily in the blazing light of the dialectical truth. The atheist argues that inspiring words are simply false. They need to be replaced immediately by the blazing light of truth.

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<sup>55</sup> Plato, *Laws*, 908b.

<sup>56</sup> Joshi, *The Unbelievers*, 229.

That being said, even those who refuse to acknowledge the philosophic role of beautiful words will still use them to dull the violent edge of their vision. Bertrand Russell, for example, is so horrified by the consequences of this line of thought that he concludes his discussion of the philosophy of Nietzsche with a beautiful story about an imagined debate between Nietzsche and the Buddha before God, each “offering advice as to the sort of world He should create.”<sup>57</sup> At the end of the story, Russell concludes that “the ultimate argument against [Nietzsche’s] philosophy, as against any unpleasant but internally self-consistent ethic, lies not in an appeal to facts, but in an appeal to the emotions. Nietzsche despises universal love; I feel it to be the motive power to all that I desire as regards the world.”<sup>58</sup> Russell, it would seem, would be the type of person Plato described as an atheist with a good character. Philosophically, the difference between Plato and Russell would be that Plato includes the story, designed to inspire its listeners to feel “universal love,” as an integral part of the philosophic project, while Russell excludes it as philosophically irrelevant. The word “philosophy,” we might note, contains both the word for wisdom and the word for love. If Russell puts the all emphasis on wisdom, knowledge, truth at all costs, Plato splits the emphasis down the middle: the purpose of philosophy is not just to know the truth, it is also to fall in love with it. Since people tend to fall in love with things that are beautiful, the job of the philosopher is to make the truth beautiful, and philosophers who refuse to do so, who delight in displaying the “offensive” and “brutal” truth for all to see, are actually doing a tremendous disservice to their listeners.

Besides Russell’s admittedly parochial thought experiment, there is at least one other dreadfully common beautiful story that modern atheists use to mitigate the consequences of their ontology: the myth of progress, a faith what Freud calls “Our God, *Logos*.” Freud, for example, armed with a beautiful story about how human civilization is slowly pacifying the brutal violence of nature, maintains the following hope for the future:

The voice of the intellect is a soft one, but it does not rest till it has gained a hearing. Finally, after countless rebuffs, it succeeds. This is one of the few points on which one may be optimistic about the future of mankind, but it is in itself a point of no small importance. And from it one can derive yet other hopes. The primacy of the intellect lies, it is true, in a distant, distant future, but probably not in an *infinitely* distant one. It will presumably set itself the same aims as those

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<sup>57</sup> Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, 738.

<sup>58</sup> Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, 739.

whose realization you expect from your God [...], namely the love of man and the decrease of suffering.<sup>59</sup>

Basically, Freud hopes that good intelligent people can get together and create the world that they would like to live in. Sam Harris is also a firm believer in the moral progress of the human species: “No one has ever mistaken me for an optimist. And yet when I consider one of the more pristine sources of pessimism – the moral development of our species – I find reasons for hope. Despite our perennial bad behavior, our moral progress seems to me unmistakable.”<sup>60</sup> Kant describes the logic of this project perfectly: “The problem of organizing a state, however hard it may seem, can be solved even for a race of devils, if only they are intelligent.”<sup>61</sup> Essentially, those who believe in the beautiful story of progress believe that once we have understood how the world really is, we will be able to rationally organize the world so as to maximize the greatest happiness for the greatest number. We will achieve this by setting up our system of taxes and subsidies, sticks and carrots, such that a collective of rational individuals doing everything in their power to fulfil their arbitrary preferences would still be peaceful.

It is certainly better to believe in this beautiful story than to believe that reality is war all the way down, that the only thing rational people can hope for is to never be on the receiving end of the injustice of others. We might still ask ourselves, however, whether belief in this beautiful story remains sensible, given the steadily worsening ecological catastrophe and a recurring banking crisis precipitated by a coterie of Kantian devils who rig the system for their own benefit, all the while claiming to be working for the good of all. We further might add that, even if some form of the story turns out to be sensible, those who have adopted it as a way to mitigate the awful consequences of the ontology of war would not be in a good position to rationally judge the matter. If they ever allow themselves to question this beautiful narrative, they will be exposed to the most intractably unpleasant vision of the world, and their only defense against such exposure would be the first form of misology, a refusal to question the truth of the myth of progress. The only modern atheist to take this ontology to this final apotheosis, to utterly reject the myth of progress as nothing more than a false veil over the horrible reality, was Nietzsche: “How much truth can a spirit *bear*, how much truth can a spirit *dare*? that became for me more and more the real measure of value. Error ( – belief in the ideal – ) is not blindness, error is *cowardice*.”<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, 238.

<sup>60</sup> Harris, *The Moral Landscape*, 177.

<sup>61</sup> Immanuel Kant, “Perpetual Peace,” trans. Lewis White Beck, in *Kant On History*, Lewis White Beck (ed.), Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1963, 112.

<sup>62</sup> Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, Toronto, Penguin, 1992, 4.

Thankfully, perhaps, providence has established that when an entire society overtly adopts this as their stance on the world, people like Frankl are once again given the opportunity to speak the Platonic position in their own voice, and thereby renew our capacity to seriously consider a position that, if it is indeed true, never ceases to be the case.

### PART THREE: THE ONTOLOGY OF BEAUTY OR THE BEAST

Let us once again recapitulate the argument. In the first section, we saw how a culture that rejects tradition will find itself unable to persuasively argue that it is better to die than to become unjust. In the second section, we saw how a culture that rejects the philosophic validity of inspiring stories will, when it thinks dialectically, be forced to either accept a position that seems utterly absurd, or else to escape this apparently absurd position by rejecting either the validity of philosophy or the validity of the concept of justice, misogyny or misanthropy. We then showed how the debate between “religion” and the “New Atheists” amounted to a debate between two kinds of misogyny: the kind that refuses to think rationally versus the kind that experiences rational thought as a universal acid. This second kind of misogyny, however, is actually worse than the first: it logically develops into misanthropy, the idea that the world is really nothing more than an endless battle of irrational desire against irrational desire, that reason is really nothing more than a weapon these desires use to dominate each other, both in the individual and in society at large. That being said, modern culture generally mitigates the most extreme consequences of this “ontology of war” by means of the beautiful story of progress, a mythic narrative whereby the rational mind reorganizes society in such a way that these irrational desires can satisfy themselves without coming into violent conflict with each other. If Platonic theism is true, then those who adopt the myth of progress would be using it as their own inspiring story, their own link between what they are and what they hope to become. However, given the ongoing ecological catastrophe and the recent financial collapse, it seems possible that the myth of progress has become a pernicious and damaging doctrine. This is a problem, since those who believe it would be unable to question it, lest they collapse completely into the horrible ontology they have already implicitly adopted. For a modern mind, in other words, questioning the myth of progress is likely to instigate the same spiritual crisis that would befall a fundamentalist questioning the reality of God.

The solution to this problem, however, is not to shore up our wounded myth in order to maintain the illusion of hope for the future. The problem is ontological. The New Atheists, and modernity in general, have adopted the ontology of war, and this ontology is false – or rather, this ontology is one of two possible fundamental ontologies that every human being is going to have to choose between. Consider the

following short anecdote from Frankl's book, about a young woman whose death he witnessed in a concentration camp:

This young woman knew that she would die in the next few days. But when I talked to her she was cheerful in spite of this knowledge. "I am grateful that fate has hit me so hard," she told me. "In my former life I was spoiled and did not take spiritual accomplishments seriously." Pointing through the window of the hut, she said, "This tree here is the only friend I have in my loneliness." Through that window she could see just one branch of a chestnut tree, and on the branch were two blossoms. "I often talk to this tree," she said to me. I was startled and didn't quite know how to take her words. Was she delirious? Did she have occasional hallucinations? Anxiously I asked her if the tree replied. "Yes." What did it say to her? She answered, "It said to me, 'I am here – I am here – I am life, eternal life.'"<sup>63</sup>

Aristotle's point about rhetoric applies here: "We believe good men more fully and more readily than others: this is true generally whatever the question is, and absolutely true where exact certainty is impossible and opinions are divided." The underlying reality of the words that poor young woman heard on her deathbed would surely qualify as a question where "exact certainty is impossible and opinions are divided." The atheist asserts, without certainty, that these words are just a hallucination, an obvious sign that the mind of the dying woman is pulling away from the horror of reality into a fantasy of self-generated meaning. The Platonic theist asserts, also without certainty, that whatever it is that says "I am here – I am here" to a young woman as she lies dying in a concentration camp, is speaking all the time to all of us, but that we are almost always so overwhelmed by our own selfishness that we are unable to hear it. In order to distinguish this second position from "the ontology of war," let us call it "the ontology of mystery."

It seems safe to presume that, just as most people are between extremes of virtue and viciousness, most people also do not consciously hear the voice this young woman heard on her deathbed. This would mean that the vast majority of people are not in a position to personally judge whether what this woman has said is true or false. As such, most of us are simply going to have to pick which account we are going to adhere to: is the voice an illusion, or is it true? Socrates opts for the latter position. He tells us that true happiness is possible only for those who are able to hear that voice, and the function of his beautiful rhetoric and his noble death is to help inspire us to become the kind of people who can do so. Modern scientific culture, by contrast, opts for the former position, viewing this as one of the many facts that science has disclosed about the nature of the world. In *River out of Eden*, for example, Dawkins tells us that "nature

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<sup>63</sup> Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: From Death Camp to Existentialism*, 68-69.

is not cruel, only pitilessly indifferent. This is one of the hardest lessons for humans to learn. We cannot admit that things might be neither good nor evil, neither cruel nor kind, but simply callous – indifferent to all suffering, lacking all purpose.”<sup>64</sup> For someone who believes that science has indubitably proven this position to be true, Platonic theism will probably appear to be nothing more than unscientific rubbish. It is in light of pernicious misunderstanding that I have framed my arguments: the position described by Dawkins so eloquently has not been proven by science at all; instead, this is the way that a culture that refuses to engage with tradition and story will necessarily come to see the world. In short, if the world is as Socrates says it is, it makes perfect rational sense why someone like Dawkins would think what he thinks. The reverse, however, does not hold: the only sense that Dawkins can make of someone like Socrates is that he must either be joking or insane.

We might now reframe the problem as follows: for the adherents to the ontology of war, war is true and mystery is false, war is rational and mystery is madness; for the adherents to the ontology of mystery, however, there are actually two plausible accounts of reality. Either the ontology of war is true, in which case that poor woman was hallucinating and the fundamental structure of the world is indeed cold indifference, or else the ontology of mystery is true, in which case that poor woman had, at the very nadir of suffering, been shown a vision of the loving ground of being. Socrates, at least up until the very end of his life, was faced with the same dilemma. He describes it eloquently in the *Phaedrus*:

I am still unable, as the Delphic inscription orders, to know myself; and it really seems to me ridiculous to look into other things before I have understood that. [...] Am I a beast more complicated and savage than Typhon, or am I a tamer, simpler animal with a share in a divine and gentle nature?<sup>65</sup>

Kierkegaard calls this “The Absolute Paradox,”<sup>66</sup> the wall against which the human intellect inevitably collides, a question we *must* be able to answer in order to distinguish between wisdom and foolishness, but also a question that human thinking cannot possibly resolve. Modern scientific culture adopts the former position, viewing humanity as savage and complicated beasts, arguing that this is an indubitable scientific discovery, and that to believe otherwise is just a cowardly flight from the truth. Socrates views human life as torn between these two options, and he constantly encourages both himself and his friends to pick the second – this, in fact, would be the function of religious and philosophical discourse for a “platonic theist”: to help

<sup>64</sup> Dawkins, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life*, New York, Basic Books, 1995, 95-6.

<sup>65</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, in *Plato: Complete Works*, 230a.

<sup>66</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edward V. Hong and Edna Hong, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1985, 37

ourselves and our friends, whose hearts are torn inveterately between these two ontological possibilities, to opt again and again for the latter possibility, and to provide guidance for what this choice might actually entail for the practical living of everyday life. If Socrates is right, in other words, then life is fundamentally about choice: each of us must choose which ontological option we are going to put our bets on – with the caveat that we will cease to see our lives in terms of such a choice precisely to the extent that we have opted for the ontology of war.

So far, we have mainly focused on how reality would look from the perspective of the ontology of war, and how this terrifying vision is almost always palliated by means of some optimistic story that one *must* believe. If the ontology of mystery is true, however, the truth is also terrifying – not because the world is really nothing more than a meaningless concatenation of violence, pitiless and indifferent, but rather because we have all habituated ourselves to lives of injustice, and it is tremendously painful to be made aware of this fact. In the words of Socrates, unjust habits cause our “soul to fester incurably,”<sup>67</sup> and peering through the protective layer of beautiful stories into the direct dialectical truth of our condition means coming face to face with this festering corruption. We are, in other words, suffering exactly to the extent that we have allowed “anger, fear, pleasure, pain, envy and desires” to master us, and the only cure for our suffering is more suffering: as Socrates puts it, for those who have become unjust, “their benefit comes to them, both here and in Hades, by way of pain and suffering, for there is no other possible way to get rid of injustice.”<sup>68</sup> Put more positively, Socrates is claiming that we are fundamentally good, but that we have been “twisted by bad company into lives of injustice,”<sup>69</sup> and have thus forgotten our innate goodness. We are able to endure living with an unjust soul only because we are able to numb ourselves to the agony of our real selves, and the only way to become just is to allow ourselves to feel the pain our real self is already enduring. The only way that a good soul would be capable of torturing another human being, or indeed committing any act of injustice whatsoever, would be by becoming numb to this inner goodness and subsequently refusing to examine itself lest it stumble across the pain of its own fall from grace. Moreover, the more unjust we have become, the more pain we will feel whenever we remember, or are brought to remember, our own deep innocence, the memory of our “rapture at sacred revealed objects that were perfect, and simple, and unshakeable and blissful.”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Plato, *Gorgias*, 480b.

<sup>68</sup> Plato, *Gorgias*, 525b.

<sup>69</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 250a.

<sup>70</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 250c.

The function of stories and myths, in this context, is almost opposite to their function in the intellectual universe of the ontology of war. The stories are not walls that block our vision, absolute truths that we must never question lest our hopes shatter. The stories rather help awaken in us the memory of this forgotten inner goodness, so that we will have the strength to endure the suffering that we have numbed ourselves to. At the same time, however, the stories protect us from confronting too much of this suffering too quickly. For someone who has adopted the ontology of war, again, the story will function like a wall, blocking vision of an inhuman truth. For someone who has adopted the ontology of mystery, by contrast, the story will function like a window, through which we can see what is outside and at the same time be protected from it. This is precisely how Socrates suggests we engage with stories about life after death: “It is likely that those who established the mystic rites for us were not inferior persons but were speaking in riddles long ago when they said that whoever arrives in the underworld uninitiated and unsanctified will wallow in the mire.”<sup>71</sup> The mythic stories given to us by our traditions are riddles – and by attempting to give answers to these riddles, we gain knowledge about ourselves and the world in which we live.

Consider Carl Sagan’s interpretation of the story of Genesis:

We were starving for knowledge – created hungry, you might say. This was the origin of all our troubles. In particular, it is why we no longer live in a garden: We found out too much. So long as we were incurious and obedient, I imagine, we could console ourselves with our importance and centrality, and tell ourselves that we were the reason the Universe was made. As we began to indulge our curiosity, though, to explore, to learn how the Universe really is, we expelled ourselves from Eden. Angels with a flaming sword were set as sentries at the gates of Paradise to bar our return. The gardeners became exiles and wanderers. Occasionally we mourn that lost world, but that, it seems to me, is maudlin and sentimental. We could not happily have remained ignorant forever.<sup>72</sup>

By expressing his position in terms of this story, Sagan achieves two ends: first, he makes his position readily comprehensible to anyone who already knows the story; second, he opens himself to critique in terms of a story that transcends his own particular interpretation. The story thus serves a role similar to definition: it provides a common ground, allowing two different people to hold radically different positions and yet remain mutually comprehensible. As Dennett says *a propos* his own definition of religion – “the definition is subject to revision, a place to start, not something carved in

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<sup>71</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, 69c.

<sup>72</sup> Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot*, New York, Random House, 1994, 56-57.

stone to be defended to the death”<sup>73</sup> – so is the story a place to begin talking, not a period that functions to end all discourse. It is something like a Rorschach test: by interpreting the inkblot of Genesis, Sagan sheds light on both the world and on himself – and it becomes possible to criticize Sagan’s interpretation of the world and of himself by developing a counter-interpretation of the story.

In Western Christianity, the Fall is usually interpreted as occurring when we ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. In Eastern Christianity, by contrast, the Fall is understood as occurring when we hid from God after eating from the tree. Now, when modern science first emerged, it is understandable that its first adherents would have been overwhelmed with joy at the promise of these new techniques, and that they would have rejecting all traditional modes of knowledge so that they could freely explore just how far the new methodologies could lead them. We, however, who have inherited the results of this initial exuberance, stand in a much better place than our forebears to rationally appraise where this project has succeeded and where it has failed. In other words, if there are any legitimate limits to what modern science can teach us, these limits could not possibly have been known to the first people to adopt the method. We might therefore agree with Sagan in saying that the fall that comes from eating from the tree of knowledge is inevitable, because you never know the limits of something until you have crossed them. However, the fall that comes from hiding from God is not inevitable. In terms of Sagan’s interpretation, we would say that even if modern science was inevitably going to arise, and even if, after it arose, it was inevitably going to try to apply itself to everything, a project which would inevitably entail rejecting the authority of tradition and story, which would in turn inevitably render Platonic theism invisible to the rationality of the new culture – now that all of this has happened and we have the capacity to observe and learn from it, we are no longer obliged to continue down the same course. If, however, we refuse to reflect, stubbornly insisting on the dichotomy that scientific culture initially posited between itself and religion, stubbornly insisting on definitions of religion that wise people in our own traditions have unequivocally rejected, then we are guilty of the fall right now. It is not the case that “we expelled ourselves from Eden,” as though this fall happened at some point in our historical past. We are expelling ourselves from Eden right now, and it is not “maudlin and sentimental” to mourn it.

## CONCLUSION

In *The God Delusion*, Dawkins tells of an unpleasant letter addressed to fellow atheist Brian Flemming. The writer of the letter is clearly a very angry man. He writes that he

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<sup>73</sup> Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 9.

would “love to take a knife, gut you fools, and scream with joy as your insides spill in front of you.”<sup>74</sup> This angry man is also a Christian. He briefly notes that his religion condemns such acts: “GOD teaches us not to seek vengeance, but to pray for those like you.” He concludes by informing Flemming that he and his fellow atheists will be tortured for eternity in hell: “The best part is that you WILL suffer for eternity for these sins that you’re completely ignorant about.” He does, however, feel a faint glimmer of compassion for the suffering that awaits Flemming in the next world: “For your sake, I hope the truth is revealed to you before the knife connects with your flesh.”<sup>75</sup>

Dawkins finds it “puzzling that a mere difference of theological opinion can generate such venom.”<sup>76</sup> In this statement, however, Dawkins has taken for granted a particular understanding of the relationship between the feeling of anger and the object of anger. The problem can be put like this: if we want to determine whether religion is a pernicious influence on the world, we should ask whether this angry man is angry *because* he is a Christian, or whether the fact that he is angry and the fact that he is a Christian are contingent. It is certainly the case that if he were not a Christian he would not be angry with atheists. However, if it turns out that the fact that he is religious and the fact that he is angry are contingent, then if he were not a Christian his anger would not disappear; instead, it would simply find some other target to vent itself on. If, for example, this angry man happened to be an atheist, it is possible that he would vent his anger on religious people, accusing them of being the source of all the world’s problems.

The Platonic theist would argue that the anger does indeed precede the target of the anger. If this is true, then getting rid of Christianity would do nothing at all to change the fact that this man is an angry man. In fact, if we recall that this angry man does at least briefly recall that “GOD teaches us not to seek vengeance,” we might even say that getting rid of Christianity would do a disservice both to this angry man and to the people around him: because he believes in a religion that teaches him to restrain his anger, he is inspired to do his best, and his outburst is kept to the relatively benign level of language. If this angry man were an adherent of some cruel faith that believed in a God who delights in the entrails of infidels, it is more likely that this man’s anger would progress to actual murder. We might even argue that the movement from the kind of religion that calls for human sacrifice to the kind of religion that calls for forgiveness and love could be understood as “moral progress.”

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<sup>74</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 211.

<sup>75</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 212.

<sup>76</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 212.

It is a fact that this man is an angry man. It is also a fact that he is a Christian, and it certainly appears that Christianity is helping him contain his anger. This prompts an interesting question: what would the New Atheists say or do with the fact of this angry man? Dawkins clearly believes that religion is the cause of his anger. At the beginning of *The God Delusion*, for example, Dawkins flatly states that if religion did not exist, there would be “no suicide bombers, no 9/11, no 7/7, no Crusades, no witch-hunts, no Gunpowder Plot, no Indian partition, no Israeli/Palestinian wars, no Serb/Croat/Muslim massacres, no persecution of Jews as ‘Christ-killers’, no Northern Ireland ‘troubles’, no ‘honour killings.’”<sup>77</sup> In light of this belief, Dawkins proposes a political project: we should get rid of religion and thereby get rid of angry people. But perhaps Dawkins is adopting a counter-productive strategy in his quest to produce a better world. He tells these angry people that they are delusional maniacs responsible for making the world terrible. Surely such a rhetorical strategy will serve only to make such angry people even more angry. We might also note that this angry man has provided us with a wonderful example of religious rationality: “Although my own preference is to disembowel you, given that I believe the teachings of my religion to be true, I acknowledge that such an action would make me into a hypocrite; I will therefore resist my preference and trust that God will deal with this matter appropriately.” Perhaps Dawkins’ project would be better served, for the time being, by citing some insightful passages from this angry man’s own holy books: John 8:7, “He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone”; Matthew 7:3, “Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?”; Mark 11:25, “Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.” Perhaps, once this angry man is no longer so angry, and therefore no longer needs the help of religiously backed morality to help him deal with his anger, he would be in a better frame of mind to engage in the kind of rational debate the New Atheists insist they desire.

Harris, whose optimism for the future is based on his belief in moral progress, views “human beings as forces of nature,”<sup>78</sup> proclaiming that “if we could incarcerate earthquakes and hurricanes for their crimes, we would build prisons for them as well.”<sup>79</sup> He believes that our moral sense is inconsistent: while “we might say that a wild bear is, like a psychopath, morally insane,” we are also “very unlikely to refer to [the bear’s] condition as a form of ‘evil.’”<sup>80</sup> Harris also believes that the common idea

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<sup>77</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 1.

<sup>78</sup> Harris, *The Moral Landscape*, 109.

<sup>79</sup> Harris, *The Moral Landscape*, 109.

<sup>80</sup> Harris, *The Moral Landscape*, 100.

that “*You* decide what to do and not to do,” that you are “an agent acting of your own free will,” is an pernicious illusion that “cannot be reconciled with what we know about the human brain.”<sup>81</sup> He therefore scoffs at the Supreme Court of the United States, which “has called free will a “universal and persistent” foundation for our system of law,”<sup>82</sup> and he argues that we need to change these foundations in order to accord with what science has taught us about the world. He imagines the day when neuroscience discovers “a cure for human evil,” and he encourages us to imagine what it would mean if “every relevant change in the human brain can be made cheaply, painlessly, and safely,” such that “Evil is now nothing more than a nutritional deficiency.”<sup>83</sup> Surely, he suggests, it would be unethical to hold back the cure for evil from this angry man in order to hold him responsible for what he may or may not have done.

I am afraid that, while Dawkins might represent a somewhat benign form of atheism, the vision Sam Harris adopts as the proper rational stance on the world is utterly and dangerously mad. If Platonic theism is true, which it is, then what Harris believes to be the indubitable truth about the world is actually an illusion. In other words, while Harris’ vision certainly contains some truths, these truths are grounded on an ontological falsehood that we would be well advised to extricate ourselves from as quickly as possible. Practically speaking, this means that the kind of world Harris is putting his hope in, the world he envisions as the logical and rational outcome of scientific progress, which he thinks will give rise to a world of happiness and peace, will actually give rise to nothing but monstrous misery for everyone. In other words, while this might appear to be an abstract debate about the nature of reality, it is also a debate with stark political consequences. It concerns how we are going to live together, with Platonic theists and atheists providing fundamentally different visions of where we should go as a society, as a species, as a planet hallowed by the beauty of life. That being said, it would seem that many of today’s cultural elite have already more or less adopted the insane vision of reality as the truth – and for this reason alone the New Atheists deserve our gratitude. By recommencing “a battle of gods and giants [...] over being,”<sup>84</sup> by refocusing our culture’s attention on such fundamental questions, the New Atheists have given us the opportunity to talk some sense into a culture that has already been sliding down the wrong ontology for several centuries.

Given the stakes involved, it can be very difficult to talk about this issue without getting angry. People have been getting angry about this for well over two thousand

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<sup>81</sup> Harris, *The Moral Landscape*, 102.

<sup>82</sup> Harris, *The Moral Landscape*, 106.

<sup>83</sup> Harris, *The Moral Landscape*, 109.

<sup>84</sup> Plato, *Sophist*, trans. Nicholas P. White, in *Plato: Complete Works*, 246a.

years. For those who take the Platonic position, “one inevitably gets irritable and annoyed with these people who have put us to the trouble, and continue to put us to the trouble, of composing these explanations.”<sup>85</sup> As for those on the other side, whenever anyone claims “that something without a body is, they absolutely despise him and won’t listen to him any more.”<sup>86</sup> Let us conclude, therefore, with one final turn back to Dennett, who once again provides a much needed voice of wisdom:

If you can approach the world’s complexities, both its glories and its horrors, with an attitude of humble curiosity, acknowledging that however deeply you have seen, you have only scratched the surface, you will find worlds within worlds, beauties you could not heretofore imagine, and your own mundane preoccupations will shrink to *proper* size, not all that important in the greater scheme of things. Keeping that awestruck vision of the world ready to hand while dealing with the demands of daily living is no easy exercise, but it is definitely worth the effort, for if you can stay *centered*, and *engaged*, you will find the hard choices easier, the right words will come to you when you need them, and you will indeed be a better person. That, I propose, is the secret to spirituality, and it has nothing at all to do with believing in an immortal soul, or in anything supernatural.<sup>87</sup>

On the basis of this exhortation, we can safely assert that if Plato is an atheist by Dennett’s categories, Dennett is probably something like a theist by Plato’s. The difference between Dennett and Plato would lie not in the fundamental vision but rather in their understanding of the path we should promote as the way to get there. Dennett believes that atheism is the most secure route to this august spirituality. If, by atheism, he means that we should stop believing in a God who arbitrarily rewards this or that behavior, and by disbelieving in such a God, we are inspired to stop doing things that make us angry, fearful, filled with hate, but instead come to understand and act in ways that will actually make us happy, then Plato might agree with him. If, however, he understands atheism to mean that human beings are really just clever beasts, that politics is really just mediated war, and that wise people should fear being tortured to death more than they fear becoming unjust, then Plato would absolutely disagree and he would do his best to refute him. Socrates puts it perfectly: “I fear that it may even be impious to have breath in one’s body and the ability to speak and yet to stand idly by and not defend justice when it is being prosecuted.”<sup>88</sup> In this sense, the preceding essay could be seen as an attempt to introduce this ancient form of piety into the language of our contemporary debate.

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<sup>85</sup> Plato, *Laws*, 887d.

<sup>86</sup> Plato, *Sophist*, 246b.

<sup>87</sup> Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 303.

<sup>88</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 368b.

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