

# “Religion Without God”

Background reading for “Is There a Right to Religious Freedom?”

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Legal Theory Workshop  
UCLA School of Law

**2/9/2012, 5:00p.m.-6:45p.m., Room 1314**

<http://www.law.ucla.edu/home/index.asp?page=817>

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## Religion Without God

### Chapter 1

#### Introduction

The theme of these lectures is that the discovery or invention of gods is only one manifestation of a deeper human impulse that I believe it appropriate to call a religious attitude. Albert Einstein, who said he did not believe in any god, expressed this deeper impulse in these striking words:

"To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty, which our dull facilities can comprehend only in the most primitive forms--this knowledge, this feeling, is at the center of true religiousness. In this sense, and in this sense only, I belong to the ranks of the devoutly religious men."

William James, in his catalogue of the varieties of religious experience, also made plain that he did not limit the religious attitude to theism. Clifford Geertz, an eminent anthropologist, was careful to say the same thing, and so was Robert Bellah, in his recent compendious history of religion. It is extremely difficult – as James's efforts show – positively to define the religious attitude. In Lecture 3 I suggest that, in legal and political contexts, the concept of religion is what I have called an interpretive concept. The definition of religion that we should accept in those contexts depends upon what more general theory of liberty we should endorse.

We need a more general characterization now. This will do. A religious attitude comprehensively rejects the metaphysics of naturalism. That philosophical theory holds that reality is exhausted by what the natural sciences, including psychology, can describe. The religious attitude insists that there is more: it insists that reality also includes an entirely co-extensive universe of value. It spreads objective, mind-independent value across nature's entire domain: real value both in life and in the total natural environment in which life is lived. The religious attitude holds, by instinct or after reflection, that human life has intrinsic value or "meaning," and that the universe does not just exist but is a matter of wonder and transcendental beauty. This permeating value is wholly independent of what the various sciences that study life and nature can demonstrate: it is revealed only through an independent, different, cognitive process that science can neither validate nor undermine and whose success or failure it cannot explain. The presence of the religious attitude in so many human beings may or may not be explained by the processes of biological evolution. But the accuracy of the value convictions it yields must be judged in the light of other convictions of value: we can posit no special capacity that otherwise confirms or denies them. Of course, it is possible to believe part of what I describe and not the rest: to think that human life has meaning but that the universe is otherwise just valueless gas and energy, for instance. But the religious attitude, as I will understand it, is comprehensive. It follows Spinoza. It finds value in everything there is.

I hope it plain why a belief in a god or gods – in a supernatural immortal creative intelligence – is a manifestation of the religious attitude. A god that created the universe and its life might account for that permeating value. But I assume, as Einstein did, that we can manifest the attitude as atheists as well. I am anxious to avoid a merely verbal understanding of this claim. Of course we can rearrange our vocabulary to make what Einstein said a self-contradiction. We can define a religious attitude so that it must include a belief in a god. But then we would need to find some other word to describe the deeper impulse Einstein had in mind. I believe no other word could capture the profundity of

what he called “true religiousness.” If you disagree, choose your own word but make sure it does not make what I call the religious attitude seem parochial or trivial.

In this first lecture I argue that though a god may exist, and though a god’s existence may be the best explanation of why we and the rest of the universe exist, neither of these assumptions can in fact support what the religious impulse claims at its heart: that human life has meaning and that the universe is objectively beautiful. The existence of a god cannot bear, one way or the other, on the truth of these convictions. They therefore belong to godless religions as much as to godly ones. In the third lecture, as I said, I consider the moral and, particularly, the political consequences of recognizing godless religions. This requires complex adjustments in human rights practice. I end the three lectures by examining, in that light, a variety of controversial topics: state-supported religion, religious holidays, drugs in religious ritual, homosexuality, abortion, and the banning of crucifixes, headscarves, burkas or minarets in public places.

### Religious Atheists

Wars between people who cherish different gods are an old story. In North America, Europe and elsewhere a different kind of religious war now holds the field: between believers in a god – I will call them all theists – and atheists who believe in no god. These new wars are fought not on battlefields but in politics at every level, from presidential campaigns to school board curriculum fights. Theists have great political power in America now: the so-called religious right is a bloc that is eagerly courted and makes open and brazen demands. Apparently no one could be elected to any high office in America who openly confessed to atheism.

The new power of theism in politics has, predictably, provoked an opposite though hardly equal reaction. Crude militant anti-religion, though politically inert, is now a commercial success. Richard Dawkins’ book, “The God Delusion” sold two million copies almost overnight, and dozens of other books mocking religion crowd bookstores. Arguments for the existence of a god used to be philosophical curiosities. The inanity of the biblical account of creation seemed too obvious to bear mention. No more. Scholars devote their careers to refuting what once seemed, among those who buy their books, in no need of refutation.

This sharp division between two parties – the religious and the godless – leaves many millions shut out in the cold. It leaves out those who identify themselves – in effect if not in these terms – as religious atheists. They count themselves religious even though they believe no god or other supernatural intelligence exists. I have already quoted Einstein’s example. True, Einstein talked often about God in a joking way. He said that he found the special theory of relativity by looking into God’s mind, and that if his general theory proved wrong then God had missed a golden opportunity. But when more serious he offered the more careful opinion I described. He said he believed in a new kind of religion that had no place for a god. In fact godless religion is not, as he sometimes suggested it was, a new idea. Einstein himself cited Spinoza as a predecessor. Countless other scientists held similar views of religion. The biologist Stephen Jay Gould, for instance, said that since science and religion do not intersect: neither could undermine or threaten the other. That is true only if we understand religion to be independent of any creator god: otherwise every claim about the creative career of that god would be in direct competition with some scientific theory.

It is not only scientists and philosophers who embrace godless religions. Millions of ordinary people have the same thought: they say that though they don’t believe in a god they do believe in something “bigger than us.” That phrase, “something bigger than we are,” is a familiar vehicle not just for rejecting moral skepticism but for renouncing naturalism more generally. It embraces religion without a god. Across the world constitutions and international human rights conventions

declare a right of religion, and judicial and other interpreters insist that the concept of religion, at least in that context, cannot be limited to godly religions. The American Supreme Court, called upon to interpret the Constitution's guarantee of "free exercise of religion," declared that many religions flourish in the United States that do not recognize a god, including something the Court called "religious humanism."<sup>1</sup> If we insist on a sharp division between religion and atheism -- if we insist that a religion just is a belief in god -- we leave no room for these popular convictions and judicial rulings.

So we can set aside the merely verbal challenge: that the idea of religious atheism is ruled out just by the meaning of words. I must face more substantial challenges to the idea, in a moment, but I shall first try to give the claim of a godless religion more structure. Orthodox religions have two parts: a science and a set of associated values. Their science declares that a god created the universe, judges human lives, guarantees an afterlife, and responds to prayer. Of course I do not mean that orthodox religions offer what we count as scientific arguments for the existence, career and activities of their god. I mean only that this part of each religion makes claims about matters of fact and about historical and contemporary transactions in the causal order. Some believers do defend these claims with what they take to be scientific arguments; others profess to believe them as a matter of faith or through the evidence of sacred texts. I call them all scientific in virtue of their content not their defense.

Second, each traditional religion expresses value judgments that together make up what we might call its regime of value. These values differ somewhat among religions. Some are godly commitments, that is, commitments that are parasitic on and make no sense without the assumption of a god. They declare duties of worship, prayer, and obedience, for instance, to the god the religion endorses. Other religious judgments are ethical, moral and aesthetic convictions that are at least formally independent of any god. Two of the latter I believe define the most basic religious attitude. The first holds that human life has intrinsic meaning or importance and that each person has an innate and inescapable responsibility to try to make his life a successful one. The second is that what we often call Nature -- the universe as a whole and in all its parts -- is not just a matter of fact but itself sublime: something of intrinsic wonder.

These two value judgments are shared among the familiar Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Together they declare inherent value in both dimensions of human life: biographical and biological. We are part of nature because we have a physical being and duration: nature is the locus and nutrient of our physical lives. We are apart from nature because we are consciousness of ourselves as making a life and must make decisions that, taken together, determine what life we have made. The two dimensions are interwoven: "He who does not know what the world is does not know where he is, and he who does not know for what purpose the world exists, does not know who he is, nor what the world is."<sup>2</sup> Einstein and others who call themselves religious atheists do not believe in a god and so reject the science of conventional religions and the godly commitments parasitic on that science. But they do embrace, perhaps fervently, independent commitments which they understand to express a religious attitude. I find that true for myself.

I accept both of the convictions I just described. I believe that the life of every human being is objectively important, that it matters objectively how that life goes and that everyone has an innate, inalienable ethical responsibility to direct his life in a way that he judges makes it successful. (I described my convictions at some length in a recent book -- *Justice for Hedgehogs* -- and I will summarize that discussion later in this lecture.) I find natural wonders like great canyons not just beautiful but breath-taking. I find the latest discoveries of cosmologists and particle physicists not just interesting but fascinating -- not just fascinating but awe-inspiring. I was both alarmed and

excited by the recent speculative announcement that neutrinos may travel faster than the speed of light. Alarmed because the discovery seemed to threaten the beauty Einstein had found in the universe; excited because the discovery, if confirmed, might conceivably help to remove a stain on that beauty: the inability of physicists yet to reconcile Einstein's equations of gravity with the standard model of quantum mechanics. I find it perfectly natural to describe these convictions and reactions as part of a religious attitude and myself as a religious atheist.

#### Is God Necessary for Value?

The first challenge objects that I cannot plausibly defend these convictions, or show those reactions to be appropriate, if I reject the existence of any supernatural creative intelligence who bestowed meaning on human lives through his grace and grandeur to the universe through his creation. If we deny such a god, then though we may claim to understand and embrace those values, we actually leave them empty and pointless. The convictions I said I affirm could only be true and the responses I report could only be only appropriate if there were a god to support and fund them. The objection is misconceived, however, because – to put it briefly at first – it misunderstands the necessary independence of what I called the value part of conventional religion from its scientific part.

Whether any judgments about value are true or any emotional responses to such judgments appropriate is not a question for the scientific part. It is a question for the value part because it is a moral or ethical or aesthetic question rather than a scientific one. Any judgment about meaning in human life or wonder in nature relies ultimately not only on descriptive truth, no matter how exalted or mysterious, but also on more fundamental value judgments. There is no direct bridge from any story about the creation of the firmament, or the heavens and earth, or the animals of the sea and the land, or the delights of Heaven, or the fires of Hell, or the parting of any sea or the raising of any dead, to the enduring value of a monastic life or the sublimity of a sunset or the appropriateness of awe in the face of the universe or even a call for reverence for a creator god.

I emphasize: I do not argue against the existence of any god or gods. I claim only that a god's existence cannot in itself make a difference to the truth of non-godly religious values. If a god exists, perhaps he can send people to Heaven or Hell. But he cannot of his own will create right answers to moral questions or instill the universe with a glory it would not otherwise have. A god's existence or character can figure in any case for value as a fact that makes some other, background value pertinent; it can figure only as a minor premise. Of course, a belief in a god can shape a person's life dramatically. Whether and how it does this depends, of course, on the character of the supposed god and the depth of commitment to that god. An obvious and crude case: someone who believes he will go to Hell if he displeases a god will lead a different life. But whether what displeases a god is morally wrong is not up to that god.

I am now relying on a philosophical principle that I called, in *Justice for Hedgehogs*, Hume's principle. Judgments of value cannot be drawn from a scientific description or history alone – even an exotic history that includes supernatural, all-powerful, omniscient creatures. Judgments about value can only be defended – to the extent they can be defended at all – by locating those judgments in a larger background network of values each of which draws on and justifies the others. In that book I defend this holistic picture of value philosophically, by trying to show how the kind of truth a value judgment might have restricts any justification to a holistic procedure. Coherence, I said, for that reason, is a necessary condition of responsible belief in this domain and this must be coherence with other values not with any causal hypothesis alone.

So the claim of the first challenge – that only the existence of a god could sustain religious values – depends on whether some further, background value judgment makes a god's existence crucial to

the meaning of life or the wonder of the universe. But, in my view, we cannot identify an appealing background value with that consequence. Consider these candidates. We have a moral obligation to obey the commands of any immortal being. Or of any being who created us and the rest of the universe. Or of any being who can cause us to burn for an eternity. No such premise seems remotely attractive or plausible. Consider this further possibility: whether something has value depends on whether its creator decides that it should have value. That is obviously not generally or even occasionally true. A painter can paint a wonderful or a banal painting, but he cannot make it one or the other by his fiat; whether a child's life is successful may depend on what his parents do, but whether it is important that his life be successful is not for his parents to decide. A theist may say: my god is different because my god just *does* have the power to make such decisions. That sounds like a concession rather than an argument, but we will return to it very soon.

We have at least tentatively reached a strong conclusion. The existence of a god, so far from being essential to any argument on behalf of religious values, does not seem even to bear on any such argument. A theist is in no better argumentative position to defend those values than an atheist is. However, there is another, rather different, way to put the first challenge. A belief in god might be essential to the defense of religious values not because it plays a role in an argument for those values but because it licenses belief without argument. Most theists believe in a god as a matter of faith, or direct perception or intuition, not on the basis of a rational argument. They can include, in their act of faith, the values they associate with religion. But atheists, on this story, must believe what they do as a matter not of faith but of what they take to be the demands of reason. However, no rational argument compels the religious convictions that life has meaning or that the universe has wonder. These convictions can *only* be matters of faith, and therefore atheists can make no claim to them. Only those who believe in a god are entitled to believe anything else as a matter of faith alone.

I hope the non-sequitur is apparent. If religious science cannot establish religious value, then it cannot, just on its own, establish faith as a responsible basis for embracing religious value. We should now pause, however, to consider what it is to believe some proposition as a matter of faith. It cannot mean believing with no reason to believe. Theists who say their faith teaches them their religious science do not mean that they have no reason to believe that their god exists. They mean they have no reason of a certain kind. What kind? We might put the matter this way. Someone believes as a matter of faith when he knows that the reasons that move him carry no promise of even eventual convergence on the truth of what he believes. But then, if Hume's principle is right, no conviction of value can be held in any way *other* than finally as a matter of faith. For unlike propositions about causal transactions, whose truth contributes to people's belief in their truth, the truth of value judgments make no such contributions, and so hold no promise of convergence whatsoever.

#### The Second Challenge: Three Gods

The second challenge insists, to put it roughly, that my response to the first challenge is misconceived because gods are exempt from Hume's principle. They are exempt because it is part of the very idea of a god that he is the creator of both universe and value together. We might compare this claim with the famous argument, apparently formulated first by St. Anselm in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century. The ontological argument, as this is called, claims that God must exist because we conceive him as a perfect being and it is part of perfection to exist. The argument is more difficult to refute, or, in any event, its refutation is more complex, than might first appear. But the ontological argument is of interest to us now only as an analogy. We are interested only in a parallel claim: that if a god does

exist, that god must be an independent and complete source of value because the very idea of a god is of an independent and complete source of value.

I propose to consider that claim through a fanciful, Just-So story, history of gods. I cannot provide even a crude account that aims at accuracy, but I hope that even a caricature can help make my point. It is only certain kind of god that people might be tempted to assign a role in defending the truth of religious values. I therefore make a rough distinction among three kinds of gods as paradigm types: I call these the Pagan God, the Sistine God and the Bookmark God.

There have been many Pagan Gods, of course, with different features in different religious traditions, but I will speak of them collectively ignoring differences and I will take Homer's Olympian gods as particularly brilliant examples. Pagan Gods are very like human beings but with two important differences: they are immortal and they are mostly very bad. Together, over generations, they created the universe and sired and bore human beings. They continue to take a great interest in human affairs and to exercise a typically malign influence over them. Their interest is dominantly selfish: they demand to be worshiped to the exclusion or at least subordination of other gods, they demand strict obedience and costly sacrifice, they are jealous, capricious, whimsical and often cruel. Over the centuries, the Pagan Gods bestowed many benefits and fulfilled many needs of those who discovered or invented them. They made weak and vulnerable people feel powerful: they were the scourge of their worshippers' foes: they parted seas and sent plagues to reward the faithful and punish their oppressors. But they were not moral teachers. Their existence could do nothing to defend religious values.

They were succeeded by the god that, today, most believers worship. The Sistine God is the middle-aged elegant Renaissance prince who forever creates mankind on the ceiling of Michelangelo's chapel and, in the person of his son, judges Adam's descendants on the back wall. When the Sistine God was discovered or invented – sometime before the beginning of the Christian era – a dramatic change had occurred: this god was *both* omnipotent and the fountainhead of value. The very idea of this god does indeed embody both creation of the universe and the ultimate and sole source of all religious (and, indeed, all other) value. He is the god in whose name the second challenge is made. But he embodies value not because this follows from the idea of a god, but because he, different from other gods, was discovered or invented to mate value with power. The fusion was, however, his downfall.

The Sistine God's marriage of the two departments I distinguished, of science and value, was both personally and politically valuable to many powerful people. A society's shared values are much more effective if they are tied to supernatural power, and a society's political institutions are much more potent if they are bathed in value. If divine authority reflects an infallible moral sense, rather than arbitrary, or perhaps even cruel, whimsy, it is more easily transferred to mortals who govern in that authority's name. Obedience to government is ordained by the Sistine God and then sanctioned by him through eternal reward or the most terrifying punishment. People go to Heaven or Hell only because they *deserve* it. Following rulers to Crusades is a moral duty; fulfilling that duty insures eternal happiness. The fusion of science and value has had another, even more important, consequence. By situating value in the mind of a god, it establishes finally that value is independent of the minds of his creatures. If beauty or goodness or rightness is in the eye of a god it cannot be in the eyes of us as beholders. When a god creates value, value becomes, in the modern philosophical diction, objective.

But the Sistine God gradually became vulnerable on both wings of the fusion. He set out his science in sacred texts and gradually scientists became his enemies (though some of them claimed to be friends) because they challenged the science his texts declared. They were astronomers, geologists,

archeologists, biologists, and, worst of all, a single man, Charles Darwin. Some of the Sistine God's defenders reacted to this challenge boldly, by declaring the epistemic superiority of revealed over experimental truth. Others responded more reasonably, by treating sacred text as esoteric or allegorical. The bible story of creation in a few days is transformed when a day is treated as a set of archeological eras.

The challenges to the Sistine God were however, if anything, more serious on his value wing. One formidable challenge has been called the problem of evil. If the Sistine God is so good and so powerful, why did he permit the wholesale mechanized slaughter of European Jews? Why is there cancer? Why are so many lives of such innocent and good people so horribly ugly? Theologians have created a discipline called theodicy to answer these questions but it has produced no answer remotely satisfying.

A second problem is more germane to our study. I will call it Plato's dilemma because Plato set it out with great clarity in his dialogue, *Euthyphro*. Socrates, approaching his capital trial for impiety, asked whether an action is pious because the Pagan Gods love it, or whether those gods love it because it is pious. The Sistine God faces the same dilemma in this different form. Is justice good because he loves it? If so, justice is not intrinsically good, and the Sistine God cannot claim goodness in himself because he loves justice. Whatever he happens to like becomes, just for that reason, deemed good, so his goodness is only a pointless tautology. Or does the Sistine God love justice because it is good? If so, honesty may perhaps be said to be intrinsically good, but the Sistine God is not then author of its goodness. There must be some independent standard of goodness in virtue of which honesty is good; it is that standard, not the god's will or virtue, that justifies religious convictions. If so, then any direct argument from the existence of the Sistine God to any religious value disappears. That god can play a role in any such argument only, as I said, as a minor premise. He can play even that role, however, only if some more basic value premise, for whose truth he is not responsible, creates it for him, and we could not find any plausible candidate for that more basic role. Any successful argument for life's value or a person's ethical responsibility or the beauty of the universe must work, if at all, without the Sistine God's help. Prudence might demand obedience to that god's demands, but ethical or moral or aesthetic value is not gained by prudence.

The third god in our roster, the Bookmark God, was discovered or invented in the Enlightenment, in response to the scientific and value problems of the Sistine God I described, and he has had a steady if not enormous constituency ever since. This god makes scientific claims, but very different ones from the claims of the Sistine God. He is not vulnerable to any established science because he claims credit only for creating what science has so far not explained. As discoveries march on, the Bookmark God takes his place further back in the story. He is the prime mover, the first cause of everything, the point at which explanation ceases in an appeal to his power. But he yields to experimental and theoretical science the decision of the scope of creation for which he directly responsible. He is now credited, by some, with having created nothing but little strings that live in 10 dimensions. Those little strings, unguided, then created everything else.

So the scientific claims of the Bookmark God are much less vulnerable than those of the Sistine God alone or the Pagan Gods collectively. The Bookmark God has entirely abandoned, moreover, the moral and ethical claims of the Sistine God. Having created the potent little strings, or whatever other artifacts he is next credited with creating, he turned his back on that creation long before the processes began that produced human beings. He did not himself create animals, he takes no interest in their affairs; he has no ear for their prayers. He is otherwise engaged, though it is wholly unclear on what project. So he can provide no link between any deeper moral or ethical values and the values people call religious.

But what about the different religious value I mentioned? Can we argue, for example, that the universe is properly awe-inspiring because the Bookmark God created its foundations? No, because Plato's dilemma applies with the same force in this dimension. Is the universe sublimely beautiful because that god created it? Or did he create it that way because he wanted it to be beautiful? In the first case, there are no independent standards of beauty in cosmic creation, so the claim that the universe is beautiful because he created it is empty. Whatever he created would, just as tautology, be beautiful. In the second case, there are independent standards of cosmic beauty, and the beauty of the universe depends only on whether its structure meets those standards. No god can contribute to the argument that it does.

We asked: can the existence of a god provide foundation or support for religious values such as those I described? The Pagan Gods can provide only prudential reasons for the obedience and deference they demand. The Bookmark God cannot offer even prudential arguments for any religious value or attitude. The Sistine God has been worshipped for centuries as the fount of both creation and value. But he, too, fails. Even if the scientific claims of Genesis, on which his contribution to awe depends, are correct, his claims to be the foundation of religious or any other form of value are defeated by Plato's dilemma. Perhaps no argument can justify the cardinal religious values: perhaps we can subscribe to these values only out of bare conviction, as a matter of faith. But in any case it makes no difference whether we do or do not throw in divinity.

#### The Third Challenge: Conceptual Opacity

I expect it now to be said that I am guilty of unimaginative literalism. When we speak of or think about a god – particularly the Sistine God – we must perforce use the concepts we have, those that allow us to negotiate our lives and our experimental and theoretical science. They are the only concepts we have. But we must not think that these concepts, formed and used in that context, allow us more than the roughest and most compromised insight into the nature of a god. St. Paul said that in this life we can see divinity only “through a glass, darkly.” My arguments so far have wholly ignored that limitation. I have been just assuming, with wholly unwonted confidence, that Hume's principle and Plato's dilemma must apply with the same force for the supernatural as they do in terrestrial arguments. I seem to have assumed, for instance, that the expression “created” has the same causal sense when it is said that God created the universe as it has when we say that a child has created a sand castle. We understand how children make castles of sand: they use muscles to dig in and push around what is already there. These are simple causal events. But God is not embodied – his creation is not a matter of muscle meeting resistance of some kind – and he does not work with something already there but creates out of nothing. God's creation is not a causal transaction: we use the word “create” to gesture – it can be no more than a gesture – toward what some theologians call a “theological creation” in which, in a way we cannot understand, God is present across creation rather than causally involved in it. Do we not understand that distinction? How could we? Perhaps dimly intelligent creatures like us will never have the concepts or capacity properly to understand it. But we shouldn't pretend that we do by deploying philosophical principles that a moment's reflection would show can have no application to the divine mystery.

I believe, however that this shoe is on the other foot. There must be some limit to the extent that proponents of a thesis – in this case the thesis of divine creation – can deny human capacity to understand that thesis and yet claim to believe it. It does not matter that they claim to believe it as a matter of faith. The question is rather whether there is any proposition to believe – either through faith or in any other way. Perhaps the thesis can be elaborated – as I say, some theologians suggest it can be – in some way so that the creation it reports can be understood in a non-causal way. The pertinent question is whether it can be understood so that it is not a matter of fact whether the God

it cites did create the universe. If not, then I cannot see, even through a glass darkly, that any proposition at all has been offered. If so, then Hume's principle, which is a philosophical claim, has not been turned away.

### The Meaning of Life

I take the popular idea that there is meaning to life to come to this: it is important for each person how he lives his mortal life, not only if and because he thinks it important, but because it really *is* important, that he would be in some way defective or not fully responsible if he was indifferent to how his life was going. Because it is important in that way, each person has what we might call an ethical responsibility to identify what would count as a successful life for him, and generally to pursue that life. I agree that many people want to deny all this: ethical skeptics of different kinds, including existentialist philosophers, for instance. I do think, however, that almost everyone, including existentialist philosophers, leads his life in a way that contradicts that skeptical opinion. I defended that judgment in *Justice for Hedgehogs*, and I will not repeat what I said there.

I will ask a different question instead. Many people who want to believe in the meaning of their lives, understood in that way, apparently think they would not be entitled to the belief unless a god exists. But for some of them, at least, the connection we have been exploring seems to run in the opposite direction. They believe in a god because they believe – they cannot but believe – that their lives have meaning. If, as I have been arguing, there is no connection between religious science and religious value, then the argument fails in that direction as well. But why should they even be tempted to think that their responsibility to live well depends on the truth of theism?

The answer, I think, is this. They think that any such belief in the meaning of life needs a ground: some argument of some kind in its favor. Otherwise it might be just an illusion, something that it seems comforting to think but for which there is no actual reason to believe. God, they think, provides that ground. If he has a plan, and the plan includes the human beings he created living well, if he cares very much about that, then it follows that it is important that people live well, not just if they want to but whether they do or not. They think, in other words, that skepticism about ethical responsibility is the responsible default position: unless they have a good, positive reason to think that their lives have meaning, then they must accept, however sadly, that their lives do not, after all, have any meaning; that life really is all just sound and fury signifying nothing.

It is therefore important to emphasize that there is no default in this neighborhood. The existentialist's judgment that our lives have no objective importance – that is important how we live only if and because we decide to want to live well – is just another value judgment. Whatever kind of reason we think we need to believe that our lives are intrinsically or objectively important, we need just the same kind of reason to think that this is not intrinsically or objectively important. If we distrust the affirmative judgment because many people deny it and we have no way of proving that they are wrong, then we must distrust the negative judgment for the same reason: many people – in fact many more people – deny the negative judgment and we have no way of proving that *they* are wrong.

I anticipated this point when I earlier offered an explanation of what it is to believe something on faith. Since there is no default in value judgment, since no reason for accepting or rejecting any such judgment, positive or negative, carries any promise of convergence, we must just do the best we can without any backstop guarantee that we can demonstrate that we are right by converting disbelievers. We must think responsibly by testing our convictions against the great web of our other conviction, and then we must judge and, finally, believe what we believe. When our spade just turns, we must stop. People who have abandoned religion of any kind in favor of skepticism often

say that they have converted to reason.<sup>3</sup> They misunderstand their own history: they have converted from one faith to another.

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<sup>1</sup> Torcaso v. Watkins: "Among religions in this country which do not teach what would generally be considered a belief in the existence of God are Buddhism, Taoism, Ethical Culture, Secular Humanism and others. See Washington Ethical Society v. District of Columbia, 101 U. S. App. D. C. 371, 249 F. 2d 127; Fellowship of Humanity v. County of Alameda, 153 Cal. App. 2d 673, 315 P. 2d 394; II Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences 293; 4 Encyclopaedia Britannica (1957 ed.) 325-327; 21 id., at 797; Archer, Faiths Men Live By (2d ed. revised by Purinton), 120-138, 254-313; 1961 World Almanac 695, 712; Year Book of American Churches for 1961, at 29, 47."

<sup>2</sup> Marcus Aurelius: citation,

<sup>3</sup> See Louise Anthony's book of atheists' autobiographies