

Prologue

Challenging the Status Quo

The root of all superstition is that men observe when a thing hits, but not when it misses. Sir Francis Bacon

We are the masters of our own fate. Nothing is more powerful, or more satisfying, than this one simple truth.

Living better is actually easy: we simply have to shed the constraints that keep us from achieving our goals. We need to let go. We need to let go of long-held assumptions that hold us back. A skydiver can never experience the joy of free flight if she never releases her grip from the safe embrace of the cabin. We all cling tightly to the familiar like Linus to his blanket, but we can grow and prosper only by letting go of that which imprisons us with false comfort. Moses almost had it right when he said, "Let my people go." A simple plea to "Let go" would have saved a few thousand years of angst!

Learning how to let go is precisely what we teach. There is tremendous joy in realizing that life is not controlled by some unseen and mysterious force, but by an individual's own choices. There is incredible clarity in understanding that purpose and meaning in life are self-derived, and that these precious commodities are not some gift from above that can be taken away arbitrarily by a wrathful deity working in mysterious ways. We each contain within us the truly awesome power to pave our own road to a better life.

You can harness that amazing power in just three steps:

- 1) Reject old assumptions about your limitations.
You are master of your own fate; you can do more than you've done.
- 2) Discover within yourself your inherent good.
Your moral core is yours! Find it. And then act on that better instinct.
- 3) Take full and complete responsibility for the choices you make.
With freedom to create your own destiny comes the obligation to proceed sensibly.

Our claim to the simple truth of self empowerment, however, is not uncontested. Before we can fully embrace the three steps to personal freedom we first must face the seemingly daunting task of moving a huge stubborn boulder of change across a vast open plain, unassisted by any mechanical advantage. As we struggle and push with our bare hands, we are reminded that the forces of the status quo are as powerful and as fundamental as the relentless pull of gravity. None of us like change. Comfort in the

familiar is basic to our existence. We are all prone to wallowing in the thousands of reasons why we cannot accomplish our goal instead of finding the one reason we can.

Entrenched interests and established institutions will work mightily to resist change and preserve the current order no matter the cost to current or future generations. And that cost is high. We are just shy of descending into another Dark Age in which ignorance and faith triumph completely over reason and fact. Ignorance is the enemy of personal freedom.

Nowhere is this appeal to ignorance seen more clearly than in how society has reacted to the issue of climate change. Depending on the year measured, somewhere around 40% of Americans believe that climate change is exaggerated or a hoax. The number of Americans who agree that the scientists are correct about our climate predicament hovers near 55%. When the floods and famine come, our heirs will be paying dearly for the colossal foolishness of their parents and grandparents.

But global warming is not the point; we will fight that battle elsewhere. Climate change is important here only in that the debate reveals something important about us beyond the potential for rising seas. We have entered a time in which scientific illiteracy has reached that catastrophic point where science transmutes from a search for objective truth to just another opinion, carrying no more weight than the blathering of a talking head with an opposing view. This cannot be denied when the collective opinions of thousands of professional meteorologists have been equated to nothing more valid than the uneducated opinion of a radio host. Such false equivalency is a sure sign we are in deep trouble.

But really this blindness to reality is not surprising. Society is mired in the consequences an archaic moral code incapable of handling the demands of modern life or the impacts of global industrialization. We stick our heads in the sands of religious intolerance and unreason.

We have been here before! In 1612 Galileo encountered powerful opposition to his view that the sun was the center of the solar system. Based on his observations, Galileo claimed that the earth revolved around the sun, a conclusion that was in direct contradiction to teachings of the Church. His idea also contradicted the widely-accepted world system proposed by Aristotle in the fourth century B.C.E. and later refined by Ptolemy. Galileo was simultaneously challenging the orthodoxy of the Church and the revered Greeks. Not only was Galileo attacking the concept that the earth was the center of the universe, he was at the same time dethroning the idea that humankind was sitting at a special place in the cosmos. Both his intended idea, and the logical consequences of his conceptual framework, were a threat to established authority, and a direct challenge to a central tenet of the Catholic Church.

The iron-fisted resistance that Galileo encountered when confronting entrenched religious authority is relevant to our efforts today to articulate a new foundation for moral behavior divorced from any religion or god. A small detour describing Galileo's fate will help put in historic context our current efforts to challenge long-established dogma.

The link between morality and religion has been established so firmly over the past 2000 years that any shift to a strictly secular model will strike many as heretical even today, on par with Galileo's transgression; that is so in spite of the long history of secular moral theories challenging religion over the past few hundred years. None of

those challenges has been too successful. Life in the 21st century offers no refuge: religious authority is not to be questioned. Just the act of publishing some cartoons critical of a prophet caused riots worldwide and dozens of deaths. In the United States, the religious right has hijacked the Republican Party, creating what is close to a theocracy, one that seeks to impose on the general population a narrow, intolerant religious moral code.

Galileo's observations were a significant threat to the world order because he verified by direct observation the heretical ideas put forth by Copernicus seventy years earlier in *The Revolution of the Heavenly Bodies (De revolutionibus orbium coelestium)*, published shortly after Copernicus died in 1543. The Church was not amused by Galileo's advances in astronomy, or by his support of Copernicus. In 1614, Father Tommaso Caccini denounced the opinions of Galileo in the church of Santa Maria Novella, claiming Galileo's ideas about the movement of the earth to be false. Galileo went to Rome to defend himself against Caccini's charges, but to no avail. In 1616, Galileo was formally admonished by Cardinal Bellarmine and told that he could not defend Copernican astronomy because such teachings went against the doctrine of the Church.

The Church's opposition to Galileo was no surprise, given earlier and predictable reactions to Copernicus. Upon hearing the views proposed by Copernicus, Luther remarked at a dinner in 1539 that "this fool (sometimes translated as "that fellow") wishes to reverse the entire science of astronomy; but sacred Scripture tells us that Joshua commanded the sun to stand still, and not the earth." Rarely has an epithet

been so far off the mark, for Copernicus possessed one of the greatest minds of his times. Such is the blinding power of religious fervor.

In spite of a growing body of religious opposition, Galileo obtained permission to publish his ideas when his friend and supporter, Maffeo Barberini, became pope Urban VIII. The pope insisted only that Galileo would, in addition to presenting his heliocentric theory, put forth as well all the evidence to support prevailing dogma that the earth was at the center of the solar system. As promised, in his book, *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World-systems (Dialogo sopra i due massimi sistemi del mondo)*, published in 1632, Galileo presented the religious position, but he carefully and convincingly demonstrated with science and mathematics that the Church's view was not supportable by any evidence.

The character Galileo used in the dialogue to support the Church's view was named Simplicio, a not-too-subtle slight, and Urban VIII suspected that this imperial and slightly ridiculous character was loosely based on none other than himself. For good reason, too, for Galileo used Simplicio to argue the point about god's omnipotence made by Barberini himself in previous discussions with Galileo. Adding further insult to the Church, the book was written in Italian, not Latin, in order to increase readership. Galileo was subsequently arrested for this work in October that same year, under the all-encompassing charge of heresy. The Pope became one of Galileo's harshest and most unforgiving critics. His pride was wounded.

The wording of the document condemning Galileo is powerful testament to the dangers of dogma.

We say, pronounce, sentence and declare that you, Galileo, by reason of these things which have been detailed in the trial and which you have confessed already, have rendered yourself according to this Holy Office vehemently suspect of heresy, namely of having held and believed a doctrine that is false and contrary to the divine and Holy Scripture: namely that Sun is the center of the world and does not move from east to west, and that one may hold and defend as probable an opinion after it has been declared and defined contrary to Holy Scripture.

Under threats of torture and death, an unpleasant fate to consider, the Inquisition forced Galileo to renounce his views and to make a public statement that the earth stands still and the sun revolves around the earth. He complied, in order to avoid burning at the stake, and wrote the requisite abjuration. The boilerplate language in his retraction is revealing in light of Galileo's clear understanding that the earth moves around the sun:

I abjure with a sincere heart and unfeigned faith these errors and heresies, and I curse and detest them as well as any other error, heresy or sect contrary to the Holy Catholic Church. And I swear that for the future I shall neither say nor assert orally or in writing such things as may bring upon me similar suspicions; and if I know any heretic, or one suspected of heresy, I will denounce him to this Holy Office, or to the Inquisitor or Ordinary of the place in which I may be.

So Galileo not only submitted to the Church, he basically agreed with this language to become a snitch.

Yet, when submitting this strongly worded retraction, in which he affirms the Church's view that the earth remains motionless at the center of the universe, he is said to have muttered, "Eppur si muove..." (Nevertheless, It Moves...). Historians of Galileo doubt seriously he actually uttered this phrase, but the story, whether factual or not, has

taken on significance as a metaphor for the struggle between the search for truth and religious dogma.

Considering the powerful forces arrayed against him, and the horrific consequences of being condemned, Galileo's mumbled and perhaps apocryphal insistence that data must be evaluated objectively provides inspiration even today. By rejecting prevailing views, and by relying instead on careful collection and analysis of data, Galileo helped revolutionize scientific inquiry to a profound degree still felt four centuries later.

Galileo, however, was not infallible, nor are the methods he introduced without flaws. His extreme confidence in his power of observation led him to mischaracterize Saturn's rings, with great authority. He later revised his views based on observations made more than two years later, but never did properly describe the rings. Rings were simply not in his world view, and his mind was constrained to interpret what he saw in context of what he thought was possible. Galileo's failure to recognize the Saturnian ring system teaches each of us that even our most deeply embedded assumptions must be questioned as we examine the foundations of morality.

In spite of his fallibility, Galileo's example illustrates the great potential of the human mind and the greatness of the human spirit when freed from the tyranny of dogma. His understandable capitulation to the forces of the Inquisition also serves to remind us of ever-present and often intense pressures to accept prevailing views simply because such views are widely held.

Introduction

An Urgent Need for a New Moral Code

D'ou venons nous? Que sommes-nous? Ou allons-nous? (From where do we come? What are we? Where are we going?). Paul Gauguin 1897

As a minor branch on a vast evolutionary bush, modern humans have been roaming the earth for no more than a few hundred thousand years of the earth's 4.5 billion-year history. Ours has been a brief presence, with too little time to demonstrate if the evolution of large brains is a successful strategy for long-term survival of the species.

Human beings are not inevitable, and our brief existence is not preordained to be extended into the distant future. If *Homo sapiens* is to have a continued presence on earth, humankind will reevaluate its sense of place in the world and modify its strong species-centric stewardship of the planet. Our collective concepts of morality and ethics

have a direct impact on our species' ultimate fate. *We will adopt a new moral code if we are to survive.*

As are all creatures, humans are a genetic experiment resulting from selective pressure, random mutations, and pure chance that our ancestors avoided extinction from catastrophic events, such as meteorite impacts. Our ancestors made it far enough to yield us, but the prospects for our future survival are not particularly bright. In *Extinct Humans*, authors Ian Tattersall and Jeffrey H. Schwartz note that extinction is the biological norm; so far at least the pattern of evolution for humans is no different from the rest of the earth's fauna.

Humans are certainly unique, with our combined abilities to reason, to communicate with complex language, and to modify our environment on a global scale. But cheetahs are unique, too, in their ability to run over 100 km per hour (60 mph). Sperm whales alone can dive to 2000 meters (nearly 6100 feet) on a single breath, and hummingbirds are the only aviators that can hover in mid-air, shift sideways and fly backward by flapping their wings up to 200 times per second while precisely controlling the wing's angle of attack. Specialized bugs live in deep-sea volcanic thermal springs in temperatures up to 113 °C (235 °F), where no other creatures on earth could survive.

Each species, including humans, occupies a special place on the evolutionary bush according to its unique characteristics. Humans happen to possess a well-developed central nervous system as one of our defining traits, and this evolutionary development has provided us with the ability to contemplate ourselves and our future. But large, complex brains are simply another extreme in the development of animal traits, just as speed and strength are found in extremes in other animals. Our large

brains do not confer upon us any special status among our living cousins, and it is the height of folly to claim that evolution was driven toward humans as the pinnacle of achievement. One could claim with equal validity that evolution advances toward a pinnacle of speed, or that bacteria are the perfect creation because only they can occupy extreme conditions of temperature, salinity, pressure and acidity. The evolution of large brains confers no exalted status on the human race.

But unlike cheetahs or bacteria, our particularly notable evolutionary achievement enables us to reason and communicate, and we therefore have a monopoly on making any claims about our status in the world. This monopoly has led to the self-serving and comforting conclusion that humans are somehow separate from, and superior to, the rest of the animal kingdom. The long-term survival of our species may require that we change this perspective.

In an often-told story, a group of ministers asked the famous scientist, J.B.S. Haldane, to characterize god based on Haldane's knowledge of the natural world. He replied that god apparently has an “inordinate fondness for beetles.”¹ He had this opinion because about 20 percent of all known species of animals in the world are beetles. But even in his great wisdom, Haldane was wrong. God apparently has a greater propensity for prokaryotes, organisms comprised of just one cell, so small they can be seen only in powerful microscopes.

While our sensitivities may be offended, we are living not in the Age of Man, but in the Age of Bacteria and Archea, or “bugs” as they are generically known. These single-celled germs are the most successful of all life forms, and have been dividing

¹ Multiple versions of this quote have proliferated over the years. The original quote is probably closer to the following: “The Creator, if He exists, has a special preference for beetles....”

away for more than 3 billion years. Bacteria have been found to live in virtually every conceivable environment at extremes of pressure, temperature, salinity, radiation, alkalinity and acidity. A spoonful of good quality soil may contain *ten trillion* bacteria representing more than *ten thousand different species*. More than 1 million bacteria are found in 1 milliliter of seawater, and these constitute most of the ocean's biomass. The ocean holds many drops. Even more abundant by number in the ocean's waters are viruses, packing in roughly 10 million per milliliter. That means that viruses lock up as much as 270 million tons of carbon, more than 20 times the estimate for the amount stored in the earth's supply of whales.

Unwittingly referring to bacteria, Mathew 5:5 says that "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth," and indeed they shall. For regardless of the fate of humanity, bacteria will likely survive. The urgent question becomes: for how long can we delay or prevent that fateful day when humans, and perhaps all mammals, are just another extinct evolutionary experiment, while bacteria continue their unparalleled dominance?

Even acknowledging the obvious success of bacteria, changing our perspective toward a more humble understanding of the status of humans in the living world will be difficult. For millennia, peoples of nearly all cultures have been taught that humans are special in the eyes of their god or gods, and that the world is made for their benefit and use. This is made clear in Genesis 1:1, which states:

God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, over all the creatures that move along the ground."

So God created man in his own image, in the image of god he created him; male and female he created them.

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

We should pause here to raise three important points. *First*, citing passages from Genesis does not mean to imply that all religions everywhere support a species-centric viewpoint, or suppose that humankind occupies an exalted status. However, the focus is on the Judeo-Christian world view because of its pervasive and widespread practice in the western world. *Second*, the goal of this Introduction is not to attack or to denigrate religion. The point is to illustrate beyond any doubt the *fallibility* of religious doctrine, and from that, demonstrate the fallibility of religious morality. By necessity, the foundation of morality as practiced today must be questioned if we are challenging the validity of that moral code, with the goal of demonstrating that morality must ultimately be divorced from religion and god. *Third*, as we explore further the impact of religious morality on society, we will focus much of the discussion on the Catholic Church, but only as a representative of religion, not as the only problem. With over 1 billion followers baptized globally, the Church's version of religious morality remains a powerful force in societies around the world. But by no means is the Church alone in promoting a false and dangerous moral code.

Evangelical Protestants in the United States pursue a moral agenda that attacks gays, women, and minorities. Now firmly established in power in all branches of government, and in the majority of state capitals, Evangelicals work hard to limit a woman's right to choose her own reproductive destiny. They support the death penalty even when DNA evidence has, since 1989, exonerated 172 prisoners condemned on

death row. Apparently the sanctity of life has its limits. Evangelical Protestants deny the reality of climate change, and allow industry to dump more poisons into the air and water, perhaps in hopes of accelerating the arrival of the Apocalypse. They relentlessly insert their particular brand of religion into public life, fighting for school prayer and the teaching of Intelligent Design in public schools. The religious right wing willingly erodes the separation of church and state, supporting the display of the Ten Commandments on government property, and promoting government-funded faith-based initiatives. The inmates have taken over the asylum.

Radical Islam is certainly no better, relegating women to nothing but chattel while spreading terror globally. The consequences of religious fervor were seen clearly on September 11, 2001. Those 3,000 people died a horrible death in the name of religious morality imposed by extremists. The hijackers objected to western moral decadence, and the infiltration of horrible ideas like equality for women into their medieval societies. Exhibit A on the list of Islamic countries that institutionalize the degradation of women is Pakistan, our stalwart ally in the fight on terror. Citing Islamic Law, General Zia ul Haq mandated in 1979 that the responsibility for proving rape rests with the victim, who will otherwise be punished by death for adultery. To prove rape, the victim must produce 4 male or 8 female witnesses to the crime. In 2002, in Chorlaki, Pakistan, Zaafran Bibi was repeatedly raped by her brother-in-law, and from that bore his child. For her crime, she was sentenced to death by stoning. For being raped.

Any disagreement with Islamic doctrine can mean death. In Afghanistan, Abdul Rahman was sentenced to die for the crime of converting to Christianity. This example of extreme intolerance is mainstream thought in the Islamic world: the Shari'a (Islamic

Law) states that a Muslim who abandons his faith can receive the death penalty. The Afghan constitution, based on Islamic law, embraces that concept. International pressure forced the Afghan government to exile rather than execute Rahman.

We are not picking on the Catholic Church; the ideas we discuss next using the Church as an example apply broadly across all monotheistic religions.

Now, let's return to Genesis. The Biblical passage above gives humans the special status of being made in god's image, unlike any other creature on earth, and clearly implies human dominance over all other living things. Humans are told to "subdue" the earth and "rule over" the air, land and sea. These religious teachings not only condone but actively encourage humans to view the environment as separate from them, put here for their pleasure. In this world view, no deep moral obligation exists to preserve resources for future generations.

The explicit religious mandate to exploit natural resources remains clear and unambiguous, in spite of recent efforts to harmonize religion and environmental sciences by numerous academic and international organizations, including The Forum on Religion and Ecology, the largest international multi-religious project of its kind, and the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, founded in 1936 by the Vatican to promote scientific progress compatible with the Church's teachings.

The argument used by those seeking reconciliation between religion and environmental protection point to the integrity of all creation, or reverence for all things created by god, insisting that religion and concern for the environment are not only compatible, but have been so all along. Those are welcomed sentiments. In fact, as is frequently the case, the Bible contains contradictory passages about the natural world,

reasonably allowing for such an interpretation. Old passages can also simply be reinterpreted to fit the facts or to be compatible with newly adopted ideas. Pope John Paul XXIII said in 1961:

Genesis relates how God gave two commandments to our first parents: to transmit human life—'Increase and multiply'—and to bring nature into their service—'Fill the Earth, and subdue it.' These two commandments are complementary. Nothing is said in the second of these commandments about destroying nature. On the contrary, it must be brought into the services of human life.

But the harsh facts of human history belie this benign revisionist interpretation of the meaning of “subdue”. The preponderance of unambiguous passages in the Bible giving mankind dominion over nature’s bounty argues against any idea that religion is environmentalism in disguise. As Renaissance scholar Lynn White famously wrote in 1967, “We shall continue to have a worsening ecologic crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man.” His words remain true 40 years later, when religious conservatives in the United States view resource extraction as an inalienable right. Our natural resources are under growing threat from a torrent of new laws that encourage mining on federal land, weaken protection for species, habitat and wetlands, accelerate deforestation, and promote drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, one of earth’s few remaining pristine areas.

Then there is the Biblical admonition to increase in number to fill the earth. When written, in times when death rates were high, the population small and resources abundant, this mandate was easily justified. With over 6 billion people now calling earth

home, the divine mandate to multiply might now be viewed in a different light from when promulgated millennia ago. Yet the Church remains unyielding. The official Church position was reaffirmed in 1995 by Pope John Paul II, who condemned all artificial contraception as a “conspiracy against life.” To their credit, 80% of Catholic couples in their reproductive years ignore the Pope on this issue; sex provides a powerful incentive to discount the ramblings of a celibate old man. But the Church’s position has real and tragic consequences, even if the laity rebel.

In Latin America and Africa, Bishops officially object to the use of condoms, instead recommending abstinence to prevent AIDS. The Bishops steadfastly hold this view even in Sub-Saharan Africa, where 26 million people are infected with AIDS, and more than 3 million more new infections occur each year. In Zambia, nearly 20% of the adult population is infected. Still, the Bishops loyally follow the Pope’s mandate.

But a rapidly-spreading AIDS epidemic is certainly not the only consequence of religious morality imposed on the question of family planning. Unwanted pregnancies in poor countries condemn women to an unrelenting cycle of poverty. Only when women gain control over their reproductive destiny and have access to education can the cycle be broken. But the Church, with a concerted campaign against condom distribution, actively seeks to prevent women from gaining such control. This policy contributes directly to the suffering of millions of people relegated to hunger, disease and illiteracy. The war against contraception, without concern for short-term suffering and the long-term consequences for human survival, is another sign that religious morality is deeply and tragically flawed.

Beyond "policy" errors such as obsolete ideas of family planning, scientific discoveries over the past 2000 years have proven many Biblical assertions to be factually in error. Let us come back to the Church's insistence that the earth was the center of the universe as another example of how the supposedly infallible and eternal teachings of the Holy Scriptures are not. Three hundred and fifty-nine years after Galileo's conviction, the Pope issued in 1992 a statement acknowledging that the Church's prosecutors did not "interpret with great circumspection the Biblical passages that declare the earth immobile." This linguistic contortion attempts to show that the Bible was not wrong, but simply that the Bible was not interpreted with appropriate clarity during the Inquisition.

But the Bible was and is utterly clear in stating that the earth is immobile, and that the sun revolves around the earth. Referring to the sun, Psalm 19:6 says, "His going forth is from the end of the heaven, and his circuit unto the ends of it; and there is nothing hidden from the heat thereof." Psalms also say (104:5) that "He established the earth upon its foundations, so that it will not totter, forever and ever." Solomon, speaking from divine inspiration in Ecclesiastes 1: 5,6 claims, "The sun riseth and goeth down, and hasteth to his place: and there rising again, maketh his round by the south, and turneth again to the north." Joshua 10:13 states the following:

And the sun stood still, and the moon stayed, until the people had avenged themselves upon their enemies. Is not this written in the book of Jasher? So the sun stood still in the midst of heaven, and hasted not to go down about a whole day.

If any doubt remains, the Church claimed the following in Galileo's abjuration: "...a doctrine that is false and contrary to the divine and Holy Scripture: namely that Sun is the center of the world and does not move from east to west..."

For more than 1,600 years, the Church denied any ambiguity in this view, vigorously defending as *indisputable, divine fact* the notion that the earth was the immobile center of the universe. Galileo was to burn at the stake for questioning this divine fact. The Church held onto geocentrism tenaciously until contrary evidence became irrefutable. The solution to this glaring discrepancy between fact and scripture was to suddenly declare that nothing in Scripture requires the earth to be the center of the universe, thereby sweeping 1,600 years of violently-enforced dogma under the rug. That is quite a broom and a mighty big rug!

Even today in the 21st century, the Church claims that Galileo shares blame because he made unproven assertions. The best the Pope could muster was that he regretted the "tragic mutual incomprehension" that had caused Galileo to suffer. As the new millennium settles in, the Church still claims that Galileo was wrong! The dissonance between Scripture and fact is not a problem relegated to earlier centuries, but remains relevant today.

The Bible's clear statement about age of the earth, off by more than 4 billion years, is another example of an important factual error. This error, of course, has implications for creation. Also related to the Church's view on creation, the Pope in 1996 was able to admit only that evolution is "more than just a theory." With each new

discovery proving a Biblical assertion wrong, the Church retreats to the safety of errors in interpretation or dismissing the discrepancy as unimportant. Yet these accumulating factual mistakes must call into question the certainty with which the Church claims the Bible is infallible, since their previous insistence has proven unsubstantiated. *These doubts about infallibility apply, too, to the Church's teachings on morality.*

That religious morality has failed is made clear by humanity's current fate, and the sad state of the planet. Religion has had 2000 years to prove itself worthy as a guiding moral force. Yet the result of that 2000-year experiment is war, poverty, hunger and suffering across the globe as humanity consumes itself; in addition, after two millennia, we see over-population, depletion of non-renewable resources, and accelerated degradation of the environment because our current moral foundation is not suited to guide us away from that destruction.

Long-term survival of humankind may depend on our ability to define a new moral code that adapts the human species to the demands of the future, completely independent of god and religion. (A distinction must be made here that is explored in greater detail later: long-term survival of the species is not a *motivation* for adopting a new code, but a possible *consequence* of doing so). If humankind's welcome on earth is to prove sustainable, and if large brains are indeed adaptive, we will re-examine our responsibilities toward each other and understand better our dependencies on the physical world around us and the resources that support our existence. Just like all other beings, humans follow the rules of nature. Now, if we are to take another path, one unique to our species, we must decide for ourselves on the basis of a deliberately chosen model, within the constraints of nature.

What is that other path? All species exploit the environment to the maximum extent possible, until competition, predation, resource depletion, disease or other constraints limit growth and expansion. Social animals, from insects to mammals, find equilibrium between cooperation and competition among conspecifics and potential enemies. Human survival strategies are little different from those pursued by other species, except that we have a huge technological advantage. In struggling to survive, humans have successfully co-opted a significant percentage of the planet's available resources, and alternately waged war and pursued peace within and between societies. Our reliance on technology to exploit resources, and each other, has had global effects over a short time period, unlike other species similarly striving to survive. As a result, our efforts to survive and prosper may have the paradoxical consequence of causing our extinction, either directly through the use of weapons of mass destruction, or through the degradation of the resources on which we depend.

Fortunately, the large brains that gave us technology and war also give us the ability to choose, personally and collectively, to behave for the greater good, and to be concerned with the fate of distant generations. Humans have a unique capability, even if not always fully realized, to worry about the fate of the planet.

With our large brains, we find ourselves contemplating an important crossroad in our evolutionary history. Do we continue plodding along like all other species, exploiting resources and each other to the maximum extent possible, blindly marching toward our own extinction? Or do we rise to the occasion, and grab the opportunity unique to our species? Humans are special, not because we are made in god's image, and told to rule over the earth, but because we have the amazing potential to choose a future in

which we thrive and develop in a just society while coexisting with a healthy natural world. If we fail to seize our opportunity to create such a future, we will be no more than bacteria with library cards. The choice is in our hands, not god's. We are special if we choose to be, if we ourselves decide to use our big brains to manage wisely our relationships with one another and with our environment. That is the essence of a new moral code, and that is the new path. We can choose to rise above the common destiny and course of other species, and realize the full potential of being human.

This book sets out to define a moral code based on a fundamental shift in our perception of place in the world, and to contrast this new philosophy to extant beliefs and practices. This new moral code, what we call ***a natural ethic***, which can be defined briefly as *the freedom to discover within ourselves our inherent good, and then to act on that better instinct, because we can*. A natural ethic is pursued without ulterior motive for personal gain in this life or in the hereafter. This new moral code is sought not in fear of punishment nor in search of reward, but is sought for no reason other than it is what makes us human.

The first important step is to demonstrate that a new moral code *must* be divorced from god and religion. The notion that morality and ethics do not derive from religion is not new. Over 200 years ago, the English philosopher David Hume dedicated himself to showing that moral life can be lived and fully explained without the resources of religion, and free of any reliance on divine authority. This view is uplifting, positive and above all, human. It may also be essential to the survival of our species. But separating ethics from religion is just the first step in pursuit of a new moral code, albeit an extremely important one. We must go further and remove any motive for self-reward

in moral behavior, and we must reevaluate the place of humanity in our physical world as a moral imperative.

All of these elements, and their interrelationships, will be explored in depth in the following chapters.

Chapter 1

Motivations for Moral Behavior

I believe in Spinoza's God. Albert Einstein

We are taught from an early age that moral behavior is desirable as a ticket to heaven, and as a means of avoiding the agony of eternal damnation. Morality, according to these teachings, is not an obligation or a characteristic inherent to humankind, but something to be cynically manipulated for other gains or bartered in exchange for bad behavior. This concept of morality for sale is now so deeply embedded into the fabric of our society that the underlying premise is rarely challenged, and only at great risk to those who dare. Along with that unquestioning acceptance comes the notion that the bible is the primary, if not sole, source for this moral guidance. Yet the bible is nothing of the sort. Only the most selective reading of the text could ignore the preponderance of jealous, hateful, wrathful, bloody, murderous, spiteful, mean-spirited and vengeful

proclamations from god. *He is not a good role model.* That statement requires some explanation and background.

Religious morality is based on the idea that god reveals to humankind how to live through his word as laid down in the Holy Book. The bible is the instruction manual to life. Just as one would expect the captain of a Boeing 747 to have read the operations manual for his airplane before departing with 300 passengers in tow, one would assume that most Jews and Christians would have read cover to cover the source document on how to live a good life. Not so. Surprisingly, few people professing a belief in god have read the entire collection of 66 books constituting the bible. Anecdotally the number is well under 10%, although the actual number is notoriously difficult to pin down.

That ignorance of the actual text might explain why a 2006 Gallup poll revealed that more than 30% of Americans believe the bible to be the literal word of god. Only by *not reading* the document could the glaring inconsistencies and incongruities be readily ignored, which they must be if god is to remain an infallible moral counselor. Nevertheless, whether based on reading the bible or not, a substantial number of the faithful believe the book to be literally true. So let's look at what the god of Abraham has to say about morality, in his own words.

Perhaps most striking is that slavery, incest, rape, polygamy and misogyny are fully condoned and encouraged by god. Literally. In *Genesis 4:19*, we are told that Jacob had two wives; Solomon was busier with 700. In *Genesis 16:2*, Sarah gave permission to Abraham, her husband, to have sex with her maid, Hagar. Of course since Hagar was a maid, she did not need to consent to this relationship; so Sarah gave Abraham permission to rape Hagar so that she could act as a surrogate egg source.

Genesis 19:8 tells the story of how some friends of Lot, men from Sodom, were sitting around his house, when those friends decided they would like to gang rape two female guests that Lot was hosting. But no, having a sense of decorum, Lot instead offered up his two daughters for the evening's activities: "I have two daughters which have not known man; let me I pray you, bring them unto you, and do ye to them as is good in your eyes." Such an action was perfectly acceptable because women were nothing but property to be used at will. Note that Lot said "which" and not "who" in reference to his daughters. *Genesis 19:30* goes on to tell us more about Lot, who was not satisfied with serving up his daughters for rape. Lot himself subsequently had sex with both. Each became pregnant as a result, each giving birth to a son. None of this is condemned in any way by god.

God makes clear throughout the bible his view that women are unclean and the source of man's biggest woes. God's brutal treatment of women must bring into question His judgment if the bible is the direct word of the Almighty. *Ecclesiastes 25:18* claims that, "Sin began with a woman and thanks to her we all must die."

Leviticus 15:19-30 contains a series of long passages that condemn a woman as filthy while menstruating, and only clean again spiritually and physically seven days after her period started. *Leviticus 15:28* gets quite specific, noting that on the 8th day, a woman can return to society, but only after she goes to a priest and sacrifices two pigeons or two doves (or turtledoves according to the King James Version). This sacrifice is necessary to atone for her sin of being unclean. *Leviticus 20:18* and *Ezekiel 18:5* continue the obsession with vaginal bleeding, basically equating that biological function with immorality.

God also has some quaint ideas about punishment for moral backsliding.

Exodus 21:16 tells us that if a man seduces a virgin, the crime is not against the woman but instead is considered theft of the father's property. *Deuteronomy 22:13* calmly demands that if a woman presents herself as a virgin but is not, on her wedding night she is to be taken to her father's house and stoned to death. Again, *stoned to death*, for those believing the bible is the literal word of god. For all others, one must wonder what the passage is meant to signify if not literally true.

The admonition to kill morally errant women is difficult to fathom in modern times, but makes sense in the context of women as chattel. We cannot accommodate shifts in values in more modern times, however, if the bible represents His word. God's word would know no time boundaries between past and present, so his proclamations are as good now as then. God says that women are dirty property, with little commercial value. He even offers a comparative price for a female specimen. The Ten Commandments make clear that a woman has no more value than an ox or a mule. We see this in what is perhaps the most frequently misquoted phrase of all time: the commandment not to covet a neighbor's wife says nothing of the kind. The prohibition against adultery is covered elsewhere on the list. No, this commandment reads:

"Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant (male slave), nor his maidservant (female slave), nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour's."

God simply tells us here that we should not covet our neighbor's *possessions*, one of which happens to be his wife, of no greater value than his oxen. If the idea of women as property is still not clear enough, *Exodus 21:7* allows a father to sell his daughter for

cash if he needs extra income. By any standard, the sale of women is immoral, but that is exactly what the bible encourages, explicitly, not as an allegory.

Much is made in modern society about the immorality of homosexuality. But if we draw that inspiration from the Good Book, a few adjustments are needed if we accept the text as divine. Christians point to the destruction of Sodom as described in *Genesis 19* as proof that god does not condone homosexuality. But not one passage in *Genesis 19* supports that conclusion. Yes, a mob was intent on gang rape, and some interpret that to include a demand for gay sex. But Lot would hardly offer up his daughters to gay men. In fact, the bible contains only one unambiguous condemnation of homosexuality in *Leviticus 18:22*, which proffers the odd language, “and with a male you shall not lay lyings of a woman.” Note what is missing here: the passage contains no prohibition against women having sex with other women. Lesbianism is never condemned in the bible. Modern bibles have expanded the original language to state that all homosexual acts by both men and women are forbidden, but that is just a contemporary fig leaf. The original language clearly refers to males only.

While killing is said to be prohibited as immoral, god-sanctioned murder is found throughout the Good Book. Fear of god’s wrath is the main reason for the multiple dozens of ceremonies leading to animal sacrifice, which are meant to prevent god from striking down sinners. *Leviticus 16*, in chapters 1-34, describes in great procedural detail how to sacrifice bulls, rams and goats to atone for sins in order to avoid a premature death from a vengeful and jealous god. This is yet another passage where literal interpretation presents a dilemma. We do not see many churches today hosting goat sacrifices on Sunday, but that is exactly what the bible tells us to do.

Perhaps all of this blood and guts is restricted to the Old Testament? No, violence is found throughout the New Testament as well. *Matthew 10:34* declares that Jesus is no man of peace. In his own words, Jesus says, "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth; I come not to send peace but a sword." Some Christians try to explain that away as an anomaly, or to claim a meaning discordant with the words. But a violent Jesus is no fluke. In *Matthew 11:20-24*, Jesus condemns entire cities to dreadful deaths and eternal damnation because the hapless citizens did not appreciate his sermons. In *Mark 7:9-10*, Jesus makes known that he supports the idea of killing children who disobey their parents. If sacrificing goats and bulls presented a problem for literalists, the admonition to bump off rambunctious children creates an even bigger conundrum. "Kill your disobedient kid day" is not a common event at most houses of worship. And yet that is the word of god, something literalists cannot explain away. For all others, any alternative interpretation of the words from Jesus will require considerable creativity to avoid the harsh reality of his utterances.

Family values, beyond the tenuous survival of children, suffer a violent end as well upon close scrutiny of god's word. *Matthew 10:21* informs us that Jesus will tear families apart, so that brother will kill brother, father will kill child, and children will kill parents, all of which is perfectly acceptable because loving Jesus is more important than loving family. In a final blow to family values, in *Matthew 10:36*, we learn that "a man's foe shall be they of his own household." Jesus tells us here that if we love our mother and father more than him, we are not worthy of his love. This does not exactly describe the Brady Bunch.

God does not offer himself up as a moral guiding light, but instead presents himself as wrathful and mean, a force to be feared rather than respected. That point is made repeatedly in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. *Luke 12:5* admonishes us to fear god specifically because he has the power to kill and torture us. *John 3:36* emphasizes the point further, noting that if you do not believe in god, you will feel his wrath forever in hell.

Any document from which we derive moral guidance should at least be internally consistent, but the bible is replete with contradictory statements. Obvious problems such as “an eye for an eye” and “turn the other cheek” are often explained away as being a difference between Old and New Testament. But that fails completely as a clarification if the bible is the word of god, unless we now want to claim that only the New Testament is his word. That is not tenable though because Genesis would be left hanging in the breeze, and we cannot excise the story of origin from god’s narrative.

But “coming in peace” in one passage, and then “not coming in peace but with a sword” in another is not even the most egregious type of inconsistency. The facts of the underlying story do not align. The bible cannot even get straight when Jesus was born. *Matthew 2:1* and *Luke 2:1-5* tell stories with completely different timelines about the birth of Jesus. If the bible were the word of god, would he not know the story of his own son’s birth?

This religious narrative of murder, rape, incest, fratricide, polygamy and sacrifice provides the rationale for moral behavior in modern society. We can do better. Myths of a primitive nomadic society piled on empty threats and false promise, and then piled further atop crude fables are no basis for human morality in the 21st century. *Whether*

the literal word of god, some form of allegory or a type of metaphor, the bible offers no credible advice on daily life and how to live our lives well. The bible is not a viable source document for moral teachings. Even the most cursory reading of the text reveals the bible to be nothing but a badly written story full of factual errors, inconsistencies and incongruities. The foundation on which religious morality is built is obviously fundamentally and fatally flawed. But religious leaders have a clever ploy to prevent close scrutiny by claiming blasphemy for any dissent or, in modern times, accusing doubters of intolerance. They must do so because the edifice will crumble if the founding document is examined too closely.

We are fortunate that these tactics did not stop the great inquiring minds emerging from the Dark Ages, who knew well that the bible, and religion more broadly, offered no useful advice on human behavior. Those times did not tolerate heresy well, so the pioneers of enlightenment had to tread carefully. Those who did not paid the ultimate price. In 1619 the Italian philosopher Lucilio Vanini was burned at the stake for merely suggesting that humans derived from apes, 250 years ahead of this time.

Leading the charge to redefine human morality in this dangerous environment of the seventeenth century was Baruch de Spinoza. In spite of the obvious risk, he denounced religion and its moral philosophy as a fraud perpetrated on the superstitious by exploiting fear and ignorance.

Spinoza's primary contribution, among many, was to explain what being human means in a world without purpose or divine design, and in which humans hold no special place. He created a viable and robust alternative to religion to explain the motivation for moral behavior.

His contributions deserve close study as an effective push against the tyranny of religious thought in defining human goodness. Others such as René Descartes and Frans van den Enden came before and influenced Spinoza, but all had considerably less impact on redefining western philosophy.

Early on Spinoza rejected Descartes' philosophy based on the French philosopher's own famous words. "That nothing ought to be admitted as True, but that which has been proven by good and solid reasons." Spinoza took this sentiment to heart, and felt that Descartes had not met his own test of validity. Unlike Descartes, Spinoza believed the bible to be nothing but a tale told by man, and that the soul dies with the body.

Spinoza was excommunicated from his religious community, a predictable outcome, because religion offers absolute truth about life, about morality, brooking no dissent. In dismissing that, Spinoza looked for truth from within, using only his internal resources. He reached all the way back to Socrates in his belief that "knowledge of the union that the mind has with the whole of Nature" is the primary basis for understanding the human condition. The mind and brain are one, and god plays no role in life, or death.

In publishing his seminal work, the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, in 1670, Spinoza established himself as the first modern philosopher. He further developed his philosophy in his five-part *Ethics*, published three years later in 1673. The Church quickly denounced *Tractatus* as "the most vile and sacrilegious book the world has ever seen." The battle was joined, and today we still fight.

Spinoza's primary offense in the eyes of the Church was confusing god with Nature. That "confusion" becomes most alarmingly evident in Spinoza's view of the resurrection. "The passion, death and burial of Christ I accept literally, but his resurrection I understand in an allegorical sense." Church officials reacted in horror, rebutting that anything but literal belief in the rebirth of Jesus would call into question the validity and truth of the canonical Gospels. That in fact was Spinoza's explicit intent, couched in terms appropriate to the 1600s.

The principles of a new moral code have a lineage that traces back directly to this moment when Spinoza drew "first blood" in 1670 upon publication of *Tractatus*. Spinoza turned to rationality instead of miracles to understand the world's mysteries, the first modern philosopher to do so. He believed that with sufficient time and study, the universe could be fully understood as a "self-sufficient machine" with no role, place or room for god. Through objective study man could comprehend the ultimate mechanical principles of the universe without invoking the mysterious powers of an unknowable god. Knowledge would relegate the Almighty to the sidelines, unemployed. Spinoza boldly demoted the god of Abraham, who would finally join the venerable pantheon of discarded deities from the Incas, Mayans, Egyptians, Romans and Greeks, leaving none in his place.

Great modern thinkers like Richard Dawkins, Richard Feynman and Steven Weinberg continue that tradition by further strengthening the argument against purpose and design. Feynman in his usual understatement notes that, "the theory that [the cosmos] is arranged as a stage for God to watch man's struggle for good and evil

seems inadequate.” Like Dawkins, Weinberg notes that the more we know, the more pointless the universe is revealed to be.

Let’s summarize what we know. The bible offers no guidance on morality, and is nothing but a badly narrated story told in order to extract obedience from gullible masses. God either does not exist, or if he does, he is irrelevant. The universe is unguided, uncaring and without purpose or design.

Where does that leave us? How can we be moral in a godless, pointless world? What is our motivation to be moral if not to please the Almighty?

Those questions rest upon the false premises that morality derives from god and that something has been lost by letting go of god. Still, faith is persistent and demands an answer even if the questions are flawed. And the legitimate query remains: what guides human morality?

Morality is our biological destiny. Traits that we view as moral are deeply embedded in the human psyche. Honesty, fidelity, trustworthiness, kindness to others, and reciprocity are primeval characteristics that helped our ancestors survive. In a world of dangerous predators, early man could thrive only in cooperative groups. Good behavior strengthened the tribal bonds that were essential to survival. What we now call morality is really a suite of behaviors favored by natural selection in an animal weak alone but strong in numbers.

Our inherent good, however, has been corrupted by the false morality of religion that has manipulated us with divine carrots and sticks. If we misbehave, we are threatened with the hot flames of hell. If we please god, we are promised the comforting embrace of eternal bliss. Under the burden of religion, morality has become nothing

but a response to bribery and fear, and a cynical tool of manipulation for ministers and gurus. We have forsaken our biological heritage in exchange for coupons to heaven.

By shedding the burden of a wrathful god, we reveal the power to create our own meaning, our own sense of purpose, our own destiny. By rejecting the false premises of religion we are free to move beyond the random hand we are dealt at birth to pave our own road to a better life. Neither birth nor god defines our fate. Imagine for a moment this world in which no invisible man hangs in the sky using magical powers in “mysterious ways” to control our life. Imagine that we can toss away the crutch of false hope and bad myth to walk unhindered down the path of personal responsibility.

By walking this path, we collectively have the opportunity to enhance our humanness, to further define who and what we are, by choosing to behave morally because we can. A new moral code is based on the principle that with the ability to choose to be good comes the obligation to make that choice; *choosing* to be moral is what makes us special. The act of choosing to live a good life is the foundation for all pleasure, peace and happiness. Whereas religion claims that happiness is found from submission to a higher power, a new moral code defines happiness as the freedom to discover within ourselves our inherent good, and then to act on that better instinct, not because of any mandate from god, but simply because that choice makes us more human, more special. Happiness, virtue and morality are possible with nothing more than what is within each of us. We need not and cannot appeal to any other authority.

Virtue is its own reward, yes, but in a deeper sense than is often meant with that idea. Spinoza wrote in *Ethics*, “...men believe they are free in as much as they are conscious of their volitions and desires, yet ignorant of the causes that have determined

them to desire and will.” But we are not ignorant of those causes; we know, and we are each truly free. Our causes are our biology, our evolutionary history, our sociality. That the reward of pleasure, peace and happiness is achieved through the freedom to discover and act on our virtuous instincts is only half the story, though, the proximate half. Virtue is its own reward, too, as an essential element of humankind’s nature that allows for our survival in large groups, the ultimate half.

With this personal freedom, of course, comes also the obligation for each of us to act wisely and responsibly. We fulfill this duty first by taking a more modest view of our place in the world. When we see that humans are a natural part of the ecosystem, not above or separate from the environment, we will protect the resources that sustain us. When we reject the hubris and conceit of religion, we will redefine our relationship with each other without calling upon god to smite our enemies. When we understand that true morality is independent of religious doctrine, we will create a path toward a just society. A new moral code is our guide to a full life in which we no longer accept the arbitrary and destructive constraints of divine interference.
