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God Because of Evil: A Pragmatic Argument from Evil for Belief in God

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The Argument

I want to mount an *ad hominem* argument from evil for belief in God. My principal targets are *atheists* and *agnostics* who are *optimistic* and *purpose driven*, but who nevertheless insist that our worldviews and life projects should be *realistic*, most especially that they should reckon with empirical facts. Some such atheists and agnostics insist that realism rules out religious belief as irrational, because modern science has closed the explanatory gaps that a deity was supposed to fill. With others, realism focuses on evil to ground the familiar theoretical argument against the existence of God.[1] My response is that the latter are hoist on their own petard, because realism about evil is incompatible with such purpose-driven optimism unless it is undergirded by belief in God.

Entrenched Practices and Attitudes

My argument takes off from purpose-driven optimism, from *the entrenched practice* of trying to organize one's activities and efforts around worthwhile goals and experiences so as to make a life for oneself that is rich in positive meaning, and from *an entrenched attitude*

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1 Roughly speaking, the theoretical atheological argument goes as follows: God is essentially omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good. If God existed and were omnipotent, God would be able to prevent or eliminate any and all evils if God wanted to. If God existed and were omniscient, God would have the knowledge required to prevent or eliminate any and all evils. If God existed and were perfectly good, God would want to prevent or eliminate any and all evils that God could. Therefore, if God existed and were omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good, God would prevent or eliminate all evils. But evils exist. Therefore, God does not. Note: the claim that God is essentially omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good is taken to mean that it is impossible for God to exist and lack those perfections. So the existence of evil is taken to prove not that God exists but lacks those perfections, but that God does not exist at all.

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of hopefulness that expects a sufficient measure of success to make life – if not highly satisfying – at least decidedly worth living. Meaning-making, trying to make positive sense out of life, is an *entrenched* activity for all human beings, because it is an *essential* function of persons. Because human beings are by nature *personal* animals, normal human beings have a strong propensity to adopt goals and pursue them, as well as a naturally and culturally fostered tendency to integrate these into some sort of life plan. Human beings also have a natural bias toward hopefulness ("hope springs eternal!"). Once we emerge from infancy enough to be aware of what our natural functions are, other things being equal, we come to expect them "always or for the most part" to work. Of course, other things are not always equal. Human natural propensities and tendencies can be obstructed by physiological damage or biochemical imbalances within the organism, as well as by external factors. As persons, human beings also have varying powers deliberately to suppress or control natural propensities and tendencies (as when an ascetic denies himself food or sleep or sexual gratification, or when a soldier in battle overcomes her fear and stays on the front line). Native human optimism and drive for meaning find different degrees of expression in different individuals. My principal targets are people who pursue purposeful lives with gusto, who persevere in the face of obstacles, who do so with zeal and commitment that expects a good measure of success. But my aim is broader, at anyone who keeps on trying. A sunny disposition is not required!

Realism

When atheists and agnostics urge fellow humans to be realistic, what they mean is not always clear. Some (e.g., Dawkins 2006) insist that the scientific method (with its empirical observations and repeatable experiments) is the gold standard for theorizing. Forwarding the controversial thesis that scientific and philosophical explanations must be of the same type, they argue that scientific estimates of reality make no room for God. When it comes to meaning-making, however, theory interacts with practice. One doubts very much that scientific method has guided, that it could or should direct all of their life choices and projects (say, of whom to marry or whether to immigrate to a foreign land).

My argument gives targeted atheists and agnostics the benefit of the doubt and takes them to be subscribing to a more modest "folk realism," which rigorously prioritizes forming beliefs, framing life policies and projects in the face of the facts. Such realism is meant to govern attitudes and practices, from the trivial to the momentous. If we do not want to get wet, we should heed the weather forecast and take an umbrella. If the music teacher diagnoses us as tone-deaf, we should not attempt to become a concert pianist. If the doctor gives us a month to live, we should not spend it detailing our personal five-year plan. If fossil fuels are going to run out soon, we (collectively) should not delay the development of alternative energy sources.

When I propose to argue *ad hominem*, I do not mean that I plan to take as premises propositions that the atheist takes as true but that I – for my own part – reject as false. I am not arguing, "even your own false beliefs entail the existence of God." Instead, I am targeting people with certain entrenched practices, attitudes, and commitments. I expect my argument to have effect (if any) only among people who strike a certain life posture. For the record, I, too, am realistic yet optimistic and purpose driven. My contention is that – given the way the world really is – it makes no sense to meet life this way apart from belief in God.

Horrendous Evils

Atheological arguments from evil (such as that offered by Mackie 1955) are out to compel theists to "get real" about the evils in our world and their implications. My countercontention is that most parties to that dispute have not been realistic enough (M.M. Adams 1999, 1–55). Robust realism requires more than the observation that our world is full of evils many and great (as well as trivial and minuscule); that pain and suffering may be instrumentally ordered to individual or species goods; that they are regularly consequent on natural causes and human choices and the (accidental or purposeful) intersection of the two; that in human life, "you have to take the bitter with the sweet." *Robust realism demands confrontation with the horrendous, with the fact that our world is incessantly productive of evils of the* prima facie *life-ruining kind.*

For the sake of argument, let me define "horrors" as "evils participation in the doing or suffering of which constitutes *prima facie* reason to doubt whether the participant's life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to him/her on the whole." Dramatic examples include the rape of a woman and axing off of her arms, psychophysical torture whose ultimate goal is the disintegration of personality, child abuse of the sort described by Ivan Karamazov, cannibalizing one's own offspring, participation in the Nazi death camps, and the explosion of nuclear bombs over populated areas. More "domestic" horrors are found in corporate cultures of dishonesty co-opting workers into betraying their deepest values, parental incest, school-ground bullying, being the accidental and/or unwitting agent in the disfigurement or death of those one loves the most, schizophrenia and severe clinical depression, and degenerative conditions such as Alzheimer's and multiple sclerosis that unravel and/or imprison the person we once knew.

Participation in horrors furnishes reason to doubt whether the participant's life can be worth living, because it engulfs the positive value of her/his life and penetrates into his/her meaning-making structures seemingly to defeat and degrade her/his value as a person. The father who non-negligently and accidentally runs over the little son who has been the light of his life, reasonably wonders who he can be now, how he can go on, do anything more than survive. Incest socially disorients its victims, covers them with shame and self-loathing, torments them with doubts about what they did wrong to bring on such treatment, or why they are so worthless that others did not step in to protect them. Depression robs life of its flavor, prevents those who suffer it from *experiencing* anything around them as good. Soldiers and civilians traumatized by war lose their ability to order their lives into a coherent narrative, as the horrors interrupt to terrorize and terrify them again and again.

Unlike trivial, small, medium, and large evils, horrors are disproportioned to human agency. (1) *Horrendous evils unavoidably exceed our powers of conception.* Where evils are concerned, our capacity to conceive follows our capacity to experience. But human propensity to be salient members of causal chains leading to horrors outruns our capacity for experiencing them: *quantitatively,* Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot did not live long enough to experience *seriatim* suffering of the sort they caused; *qualitatively,* hardened soldiers and teenage youths cannot experience anything like enough to a mother's anguish at seeing her child thrown into a burning ditch or tossed on bayonets. It follows that horror producers usually do not fully appreciate *what is bad about the horrors or how bad they are, and so in some residual sense "know not what they do."*

(2) *No amount of prudence and caution guarantees we will avoid them.* It is comparatively easy to be salient members in causal chains leading to horrors. Contributing to horror perpetration is not tightly correlated with moral guilt or innocence. In a world such as this, not only do bad things happen to good people, morally innocent people sometimes perpetrate horrors on others, even those they love the most. Often accidents, ignorance, and/or (what would otherwise be) minor negligence spawn unanticipated horrors (as when a moment's inattention behind the wheel turns an Olympic trial athlete into a paraplegic). Just being in the wrong place at the wrong time can make us horror participants (like the shoppers who dashed into the supermarket moments before the suicide bomber blew herself up, like Americans who happened to be visiting relatives in Hiroshima when the A-bomb fell).

(3) *Horrors are so bad that there is nothing we can do to set them right.* If a stunning museum exhibit can balance off an awkward and uncomfortable medical test, there is no package of merely created goods that can compensate for horror participation. How many holocaust survivor stories tell of ingenuity to escape, resourcefulness to build a successful career, initiative to remarry and reproduce children, all swallowed up in emptiness because of an incapacity to trust enough to forge real personal attachments? (See William Styron's (1979) *Sophie's Choice* and Aharon Appelfeld's (1988) *The Immortal Bartfuss* – true-to-life fictions that vividly portray the real-life experience of thousands.)

Horrors cannot be made meaningful by structures of *retributive justice*, because justice is a matter of proportion. Horror for horror (e.g., torturing and beheading those who have tortured and beheaded) might fit the crime, but it does not fit the agent whose capacity for personal integrity it *prima facie* destroys. Horrors are too bad to be used in moral education, to teach someone a lesson. What *prima facie* ruins a person's life by stalemating his/her meaning-making capacities brings positive moral development to a halt. In any event, horror for horror only multiplies the horrors and so fails to make the world a better place.

Robust realism demands that we face horrors and their consequences. For present purposes, it is not necessary to "get technical," although physical and social scientific studies in academic books and journals should sober professionals. For my *ad hominem* argument, a popularized sketch will be sufficient to show how – in the world as we know it – horrors infest human lives.

(1) *Human beings in this world are radically vulnerable to and inevitably complicit in horrors.* Horrors are not unusual. The holocaust in Nazi Germany was horrendous, *and* it was all-too-quickly followed by genocide in Serbo-Croatia, Rwanda, and Darfur. The slaughter bench of history is riddled with horrors. The books of Joshua and Ezra show how genocide and ethnic cleansing have been standard *modus operandi* among competing groups at least since biblical times.

(2) *Horrors attack on the inside when they traumatize, distort, or destroy the individual's psychological capacities for meaning-making.* In conversation, one leading psychologist said of Cambodian refugees from the killing fields, "Oh, we don't try to get them to remember and integrate their experiences into a coherent narrative. We are only trying to teach them techniques and strategies that will help them get through the day!" Other horror participants may be able to analyze, scan, and try on different interpretations and scenarios. But brain chemistry skews their calculations to turn their life-strategies bizarre (as with the paranoid schizophrenic who sees conspiracies around every corner and behind every face). Or cost–benefit analyses become pointless, because depression keeps them from experiencing anything as good or worth having.

(3) *Horrors attack on the outside when they threaten or destroy the social framework within whose roles we find much of our reason for being, and/or when they significantly change the material environment presupposed by those ways of being in the world.* Think of Amazon-dwellers whose way of life is destroyed when American companies clear the jungle to get possession of its natural resources. What about white southerners in the wake of reconstruction (cf. *Gone with the Wind*), their genteel way of being in the world forever destroyed? Or party-line Marxist philosophers in East German universities, when the Berlin wall came down and the Soviet Union fell apart? Those professors were not simply out of a job. Like the past regime, their whole creative output was discredited as not only mistaken but pernicious.

Quite apart from revolutions and political upheaval, social systems double-bind us for horrors, because all humanly devised social systems spawn systemic evils (e.g., racism, classism, xenophobia, and homophobia), preferential structures of cruelty which privilege some while degrading others. Either we successfully perform the roles assigned to us and so become complicit in systemic horrors by defining who we are (I am a lawyer, a doctor, a stockbroker, a policeman, a cattle rancher, a strawberry grower) partly in terms of unjust social structures. Or our lives acquire negative meaning (society counts us "no good" or "traitorous") because we fail to live into those social roles and contribute what society expects of us (e.g., sixties hippy dropouts, the homeless on our streets, repeat-offender drug-dealing felons, or terrorists).

Robust realism requires us to face the fact that human radical vulnerability to horrors in this world is not superficial or accidental, but to be expected given what human beings are and what the material world is.

Popular science tells us that the universe began as a material "soup," which over millions of years interacted to evolve material structures that could host life, eventually macro plant and animal life, even human life. But *the life thus hosted is neither permanent nor self-sustaining.* Life-hosting material structures are vulnerable to destruction by a variety of natural forces. Just as complex material structures evolve by cannibalizing simpler ones, so – while they last – plants and animals live by consuming (and hence destroying) something else.

Because human beings are personal animals, material persons, *humans inherit (what we may call for short) "Darwinian" motivational tendencies.* Animal nature builds in an instinct for life that drives the animal to do anything to secure it. Animal nature also builds in the inevitability of death, which makes the drive for individual and species preservation desperate. Played out in an environment of scarcity, these spawn the proverbial struggle for existence in which only the fittest survive.

Moreover, *psyche mirrors biology. Human psychological capacities are neither permanent nor self-sustaining.* Human being ties personality to an animal developmental life cycle. If prolonged dependence on adult caretakers is what it takes to grow our superior human brains, it also leaves us for years at the mercy of at best neurotic adults who evoke and decisively shape our personalities. The process of psychological developmental is extremely fragile and can be easily interrupted and distorted in ways that mark us for life. *Human psychic capacities are insufficient to personify material structures permanently*, as death and *ante-mortem* dementia show.

Importantly, *humans are also socially Darwinian. Humanly devised social systems are not permanent or self-sustaining either.* Civilizations and empires rise, go through periods of energy and creativity, but eventually wear out, crumble, and/or succumb to conquest. Limited intelligence combines with Darwinian drives to mean that all humanly devised

social systems spawn systemic evils, give rise to structures that are insidiously preferential and degrade human beings. To be sure, ethics and mores attempt to mold individuals into useful citizens by fostering cardinal and other virtues. But these turn out to be *only localized virtues* that hedge against tendencies to "in-group" harms in ordinary time, that bias us against unwanted interference with preferred fellow citizens on whose cooperation we depend. Such virtues do not reliably hold people back when governments urge ethnic cleansing (as in Nazi Germany, Serbia, Rwanda, and Darfur). Nor are localized ordinary-time virtues usually strong enough to keep citizens from defaulting to "everyone for them-selves" in natural disasters (remember armed vigilantes at the bridge, keeping people from crossing out of New Orleans in the wake of hurricane Katrina) (R.M. Adams 2006; Waller 2007; Taylor 2009).

Since societies are always in a position of competing with one another for scarce resources, *high cultural goals and achievements are built on the underbelly readiness to go to war to defend our way of life, on the willingness to perpetrate horrors on enemies.* Mili-tary codes of conduct and "just" war theory can be accurately redescribed as instru-ments of *bestiality containment*: war guarantees that we will engage in, or demand our soldiers to perpetrate horrors on other human beings. We rise above the beasts in their Darwinian struggle, when we resolve to commit atrocities only as allowed by the Geneva conventions.

Millions of human beings participate in horrors as individual perpetrators or victims. The millions more who manage to avoid such individual participation otherwise by with-drawing from society to become hermits are socially complicit in horrors twice over.

People who identify themselves in terms of their social roles, who devise goals and purposes within their social frame, are complicit in the systemic evils to which their social system gives rise. The positive meaning I have struggled to win through professional success is undermined by the horror of privileged access that degrades other people by counting them unworthy of such opportunities. The positive meaning that middle-class Americans work so hard for – the enjoyment of a comfortable life with lovely homes and fine clothes and excellent schools, two kids and a dog, the means to buy gourmet coffees and ice creams, chocolates and peanut butters – is eroded by the horrendous conditions of brutally treated farm laborers who harvest our food and sweatshop workers who make our clothes.

Even minimalists, who so much as live in society and accept the advantages of its infra-structures (e.g., working utilities, police, and fire protection), are complicit in the systemic injustice that *de facto* counts some people within the society as not worth protecting.

However much citizens work for a just society, to whatever extent they turn social resources toward economic prosperity and high cultural achievements, human societies persistently fall short of universal human sympathy. To the extent that society is willing to go to war to defend its way of life and so to perpetrate and to require their soldiers to perpetrate horrors on others, all of these meaning-making attempts by citizens are sub-verted by their complicity in the horrors of war and in society's failure to honor the per-sonal worth of every human being.

Ad Hominem Argument, Asserted

Robust realism requires us to face up to the fact that humans are radically vulnerable to and inevitably complicit in horrors. But horrors are *prima facie* life ruinous: participation

in them *prima facie* defeats the possibility of positive meaning within the participant's life. Universal human horror-participation makes optimism irrational, and the attempt to secure lives of positive meaning futile, unless our horror-infested world includes a horror defeater, an agency powerful and resourceful, ready, willing, and able enough to make good on horrors, not only in the world as a whole but within the context of the individual horror participants' lives. There is much more to be said about what could fill the horror-defeating role (some of which I defer to the penultimate section). For now, I indicate the direction of my argument by echoing Aquinas in the Five Ways: "and this is what everyone calls 'God'!" (*Summa Theologica* I, q.2, a.3 c.)

Horrors force atheists and agnostics who are purpose-driven optimists yet committed to being realistic, to make some life-posture choices. They can either try to uproot entrenched practices (of meaning-making), attitudes (of hopefulness), and commitments (to forming policies in the face of the facts). Or they can conclude that a horror defeater is necessary to make sense of their entrenched way of life.

Nontheistic Alternatives

Doubtless, the optimistic yet realistic, purpose-driven atheist will respond, "not so fast!" Surely, a realistic estimate of horrors leaves atheists and agnostics with more life-posture alternatives than converting to theism or giving up in despair.

To be honest, I have to agree. Earlier (in the second section), I identified meaning-making as an entrenched, even natural function of personal animals, and hope as an entrenched attitude. Evolutionary theory suggests that such propensities are natural, because they have survival value. Where humans are concerned, organizing life around goals and purposes, attempting to make sense of situations, confidence in the possibility of doing so, promotes longevity. Track records of effective coping are plausible good-making features in candidate mates.

Evolutionary roots should caution us against exaggeration. The kind of realism that has survival value is not Cliffordian. That is, it does not require the discipline of never believing anything on insufficient evidence. It is not even necessary that our picture of the world be true. What is required is cognitive modeling that fits our neighborhood well enough to enable us to negotiate its obstacles successfully and secure what we need. Limited cognitive capacity means that *our attention is necessarily selective.* Human meaning-making cannot help working with incomplete information. Call the realism that has survival value "Darwinian" realism. Darwinian realism falls short of robust realism that requires us to look horrors in the face.

Likewise, the kind of meaning-making that enables us to survive, reproduce, and rear offspring, is contextual. Working to become an excellent carpenter or skilled hunter may become an organizing principle of human life, give people a sense of positive meaning insofar as they contribute to communal welfare, even if they are complicit in the horrors that their clan perpetrates on the neighbors when defending and seizing turf. *Local and surface meanings* are what have survival value, and this will be true even if the meaning-making schemes float on a cesspool of horrors and/or lack a solid metaphysical foundation.

Taking the evolutionary perspective seems to widen the range of options. Convinced atheists and genuine agnostics might carry on with a less-than-robust qualified realism,

might get on with life by not uprooting but dampening hopes and curtailing meaning-making objectives.

Many good and decent people have fruitful and enjoyable lives because they "abstract" from the possibility of horrors happening to them. They adopt a policy of "avoiding unpleasantness." They need not be Pollyanna's ("God's in his heaven! All's right with the world!"). They may roll up their sleeves and work their way around small, medium, even largish obstacles. They may even know about horrors in the abstract. But their effort is to avoid engaging horrors concretely, even from a second- or third-person perspective. Whenever there are rumors of horrors, they do not pursue them. They are careful about what they read and which movies they see. Their European vacations do not include tours of Nazi death camps. They never ask returning soldiers what it was really like in Abu Ghraib. They do not inquire under what conditions their clothes were made in Indonesia. In general, they do not ponder their complicity in the systemic horrors to which their society and economy give rise. Overall, they simply do not take horrors into account in their meaning-making calculations. If they are lucky, horrors may not appear to impinge on their individual lives, and they are the happier for it. Could not convinced atheists and genuine agnostics also hope to be lucky? Would not qualified realism, one that lowers its aim to local and surface meanings, allow them to get on with their purpose-driven lives?

For many other atheists and agnostics, commitment to a more nearly robust realism, one that outruns Darwinian realism, may be too entrenched. Horrors – once pointed out – may be too obvious for "denial" or abstracted meanings to work for them. Certainly, horrors without a horror defeater undermine hope. But several famous unbelievers have insisted, it would not have to bring meaning-making to an end altogether.

Rebelling with Camus

In *The Rebel* and other novels and plays (Camus 1956; 1970; 1972; 1991), Albert Camus reckons on a world without God and urges us to rebel against the basic conditions of our existence. The world is hostile. Nature is inhospitable. History is a slaughter bench. By living in society, we are all complicit in the death of other human beings. Robust realism demands that we abandon hope that these could ever change. Nevertheless, rebels are not to conclude that all is *absurd,* that there are no values, or that human life is meaningless. By their very rebellion, they insist on the sacred worth – in Camus' estimate, the immeasurable value – of persons. Rebels protest the basic conditions of our existence, not only in words and symbolic action, but by spending themselves to the point of exhaustion, fighting to protect human life, to prevent death and horrors, even though they know in advance that they will gain scant ground before they succumb themselves (like Dr. Rieux in *The Plague*). Incessant acted protest against death and horrors is also the most we can do in life to atone for our complicity in the destruction of other human beings, a debt that we pay in full only by dying ourselves. For Camus, the rebel's life can be purpose driven, because it is organized around genuine values. Camus' rallying call can even stir a flicker of hope to be a faithful witness and to win some small and local, temporary and transient victories.

Russell's stoicism

In his essay "A Free Man's Worship" (Russell 1957), Bertrand Russell also begins with what he takes to be robust realism. Human existence is imbedded in an impersonal and purposeless

material world that gave rise to humankind by accident and will ultimately destroy human-kind and all of its achievements. Russell declares that the appropriate response to this is "unyielding despair" (Russell 1957, 45–46). Nevertheless, we – robust realism about horrors would qualify, "some of us" – have the brief span of our lives to work with, and we have a certain freedom about how to conduct ourselves, a freedom that allows us briefly to tran-scend the impersonal and purposeless world. The way forward is to "preserve our respect for truth, beauty, for the ideal of perfection which life does not permit us to attain" and "to live constantly with that vision before us" (Russell 1957, 48). According to Russell, Promethean defiance or rebellion is not a wholesome response to a world in which our ideals cannot be realized. The posture of defiance, he warns, "keeps evil always in view and always actively hated." As a result, rebellion puts our thoughts in bondage by compelling them "to be occupied with an evil world" (Russell 1957, 48). Moreover, "in the fierceness of desire from which rebellion springs" – namely, the demand that goods should be secured and ideals realized – "there is a kind of self-assertion which it is necessary for the wise to overcome" (Russell 1957, 49–50). By contrast, stoic freedom comes from renunciation of such desires and demands: Russell even speaks of a death of the soul as the subject of such hopes. "[R]esigning ourselves to the outward rule of Fate" frees our thoughts to find beauty in human tragedy (Russell 1957, 50–51). Detachment plus recognition of our "common doom" disposes us to regard our fellow human beings with tolerance and understanding, to relate to them with sympathetic encouragement and the resolve – so far as possible – to do them no harm (Russell 1957, 53–54). Thus, for Russell, realism and renunciation make room for the dignity of freed thinking, for creative meaning-making and benevolence. Russell's hope that we might achieve this, despite the way the world is, abstracts from human complicity in systemic horror. Perhaps he counts that among the externals to which we must resign ourselves.

Nagel's irony

In his essay "The Absurd" (Nagel 1979, 11–23), Thomas Nagel relocates our sometime sense of the absurdity of human life by tracing it to three facts. First, human beings engage in belief-forming and meaning-making practices that are entrenched. Both practices involve giving justifications for why we think a claim is credible or goals and activities worth pur-suing. In both, justifications come to an end: there are points at which we press our "why-should-we?" demands, and we routinely reach points at which we pursue them no further (Nagel 1979, 12–13, 18–19). Second, viewed *sub specie aeternitatis*, these stopping points are arbitrary. The practices in which we engage are not susceptible of noncircular justifica-tion, and so are open to skeptical doubts: are our belief-forming practices truth-producing? Do our purposes and projects, the concrete lives that we take so seriously, really matter? Where our ultimate concerns and standards are concerned, "[w]e adhere to them because of the way we are put together: what seems to us important or serious or valuable would not seem so if we were differently constituted" (Nagel 1979, 17–18). Third, human beings have a special capacity not shared by mice and bats to step back and survey ourselves and the lives to which we are committed "with that detached amazement which comes from watching an ant struggle up a heap of sand" and to recognize what we do as "arbitrary" and "open to doubt" (Nagel 1979, 15). Nagel concludes, we sense the absurdity of our predicament when we take the *sub specie aeternitatis* perspective "without ceasing to be the persons whose ultimate concerns are so coolly regarded" (Nagel 1979, 15). For Nagel, the

collision is not between human practices and some feature of the world that we might wish otherwise, because "[t]here does not appear to be any conceivable world (containing us) about which unsettlable doubts could not arise" (Nagel 1979, 17). Rather, the clash is "between the seriousness with which we take our lives and the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary or open to doubt" (Nagel 1979, 13–14).

> These two inescapable view-points collide in us, and that is what makes life absurd. It is absurd because we ignore the doubts that we know cannot be settled, continuing to live with nearly undiminished seriousness in spite of them. (Nagel 1979, 14)

What should be our response to this bifocal take on human life? Nagel thinks we should not resent or try to escape it, because it "results from the ability to understand our human limitations." Nor should we indulge ourselves in "a defiant contempt of fate" because such "dramatics" "betray a failure to appreciate the cosmic unimportance of the situation." "If *sub specie aeternitatis* there is no reason to believe that anything matters, then that does not matter either" (Nagel 1979, 23). Instead, Nagel finds our double take on human life both "sobering and comical" (Nagel 1979, 15). Regarding our belief-forming practices, Nagel wryly comments,

> we return to our familiar convictions with a certain irony and resignation. Unable to abandon the natural responses on which they depend, we take them back, like a spouse who has run off with someone else and then decided to return; but we regard them differently (not that the new attitude is necessarily inferior to the old in either case). (Nagel 1979, 19–20)

Likewise, with our meaning-making practices:

> after we have put in question the seriousness with which we take our lives and human life in general and have looked at ourselves without presuppositions. We then return to our lives, as we must, but our seriousness is laced with irony. (Nagel 1979, 20)

In Nagel's cool and urbane estimate, realism ought to infuse purpose-driven optimism with irony. Recalling Russell, Nagel might have further concluded that omnipresent and irrefutable skeptical doubts ought to foster humility about our beliefs and life projects, as well as tolerance towards others.

I have been arguing *ad hominem* that robust realism about horrors should maneuver optimistic purpose-driven atheists and agnostics into a life posture shift. Which shift would depend on life situations and patterns of entrenchment. The atheist or agnostic who is only complicit in horrors, whose concrete engagement of horrors is only second or third person, can afford to be philosophical, take time to try on for size and test the feasibility of the reviewed options.

By contrast, individual horror-participation crashes through to create a posture-shifting emergency – one that (at least temporarily) takes the four atheistic options off the table. Individual horror participation would make it too late to avoid unpleasantness and – in most cases – impossible simply to bracket horrors in practical calculations. Camus' rebellion, Russell's stoicism, and Nagel's irony all assume that the individual's meaning-making faculties are intact, capable of robust and subtle maneuvers. But individual horror participation not only dampens, but dashes hopes. It shatters meaning-making faculties or at least

stalemates attempts to make positive sense of the participant's life. Individual horror participants would find it hard to manage the calm of Nagel's irony and would see life as more nearly tragic than comical. In all but the spiritually advanced, individual horror participation would undo Russellian resignation. The vast majority of individual horror participants would find their own personal ruin, not beautiful, but ghastly.

Put otherwise, individual horror participation draws people down deeper into their attachments, making it at least temporarily impossible for them to take the *sub specie aeternitatis* point of view. The father who accidentally and non-negligently runs over his little son, will be consumed by his sense of having betrayed personal loyalties, will reject as obscene attempts to portray the event as a beautiful tragedy. Eventually, the father might imitate Camus' rebellion with its workaholic efforts to atone for our complicity in horrors. Likewise, the posttraumatic-stressed soldier who watched his buddies get blown to smithereens. His ability to narrate his life has been exploded, not only because of his particular attachment to his comrades, but also because of his primal identification with them as human beings. PTS victims experience life, not as comical, but as nightmarish, cruel, and dangerous. Individual horror participation might also make belief in God psychologically impossible. Atheists and agnostics who remain only complicit in horrors still have options. Part of what makes individual horror participation so awful is that it puts all of these alternatives *prima facie* out of reach.

Someone might agree with this, but protest that to bring up individual horror participants is to change the subject. They are not optimistic. They are no longer in a position to organize their whole lives around a positive purpose. Therefore, they do not number among my announced targets. Of course, my *ad hominem* argument will get no purchase with them!

My reason for reminding the reader of the individual horror participants' predicament is not to insist that realists should *adopt* their viewpoint. We all know how personal crises can monopolize attention and shatter perspective. Rather, my first point is that robust realism requires the purpose-driven optimist to enter into their way of experiencing the situation sympathetically long enough to get a feel for what it is, because this is an important second-hand measure of how bad horrors are for individual horror participants.

My second point is that the realistic purpose-driven optimist dampens hope, if s/he restricts its scope to people fortunate enough to escape individual horror-participation. Darwinian optimism holds out hope only for the lucky and fittest. But even Darwinians agree that nature builds in a weak tendency to sympathize with all members of the human species. Some realistic purpose-driven optimists may find this tendency strengthened in themselves and realize that their entrenched hope has wider scope, verging on robust optimism. Robust optimism demands a picture that holds out hope even, indeed especially, for people whose lives have been twisted or shattered by horrors. Robust optimism requires an outlook that allows the fortunate to hope on behalf of horror participants, even when that posture is not psychologically possible for the horror participants themselves.

Personality, How Fundamental?

Robust realism forces us to face the incongruities of human meaning-making. For Nagel, absurdity lies in the fact that entrenched cognitive and meaning-making practices are, and are ever recognizable by us as being open to skeptical doubts. Without disagreeing, I join

Russell and Camus in focusing on the misfit between human personality and a hostile world. For Russell, the cosmos is not personal and purposeful. The material world has given rise to us by accident and will eventually destroy not only human individuals, but the whole human race. For Camus, the sacred value of human life is given, but equally given are the cosmic forces that violate the sacred and our own unavoidable complicity in homicide. My own diagnosis is that the misfit runs right through us as material persons, and is worsened by our situation in a material world of real and apparent scarcity. All four of the nontheistic approaches try to face up to the basic conditions of human existence while salvaging something of the personal at the same time.

A fifth life posture proposal charges that this is a mistake. What could be more obvious? Our world without a horror defeater is a world in which personal functioning is self-defeating. Our conclusion should be that personality is not something to be preserved, but something to get beyond. Suffering occurs because of our personal attachments to and entanglements with the material world. So far as spiritual exercises are concerned, Russellian detachment is a good first step. Some forms of Buddhism and Hinduism urge us to go further. If we insist on having a life-purpose, we should aim at the dissolution of the individual ego, which is the personal center of thought and desire (cf. Nagel 1979, 22). As we let go of the illusion that we are something really distinct from everything else, we will find ourselves swelling with compassion towards all things, and filled, not so much with hope (which remains personal purpose driven), but with peace.

This brings us to a fundamental issue to be faced in adjusting life postures to grapple with horrors. Is our world impersonal at bottom, exhausted by "atoms and the void" and electrical ooze? Or are persons fundamental, as well or instead? Russell references a naturalistic viewpoint according to which the world is material and impersonal at bottom, while human being is only accidental and human life fleeing and ephemeral. Philosophical Hinduisms count the world of our experience, with its multiplicity of things and changes, as an illusion, and maintain that everything is at bottom One. Some Buddhisms think that nothing at all lies behind the illusion and urge that it is into nothing that we should dissolve.

Biblical religion takes the polar opposite position: God is the heart of reality, and God is personal. Because God is personal, God is a meaning-maker. When God makes the material world, God wants it to mean something and so fashions it toward a purpose. But God is not satisfied for creation to mean something "from the outside" by virtue of meanings imposed by Divine providence. God wants it to mean something from the inside. That's one reason God allows material stuff to evolve structures that can support personal life. God wants human beings to make sense of God's world, of material stuff, not least by trying to give positive meaning to themselves as material persons, to make good sense of their individual and social lives. More than that, the God of biblical religion wants to collaborate with human persons to endow human life and its cosmic setting with positive meaning.

Thus, for biblical religion, persons are metaphysically fundamental, and human meaning-making figures centrally in God's plans for creation. If God created human beings to exercise their central function, God must want human meaning-making to be successful. An All-Wise God would anticipate the obstacles – notably, would see how horrors *prima facie* defeat the possibility of positive meaning for material persons in a world such as this. Supreme Wisdom would not start anything It could not finish, and Omnipotence can finish anything It starts. Divine follow-through would require God's becoming a horror defeater. From the viewpoint of biblical religion, personhood is fundamental because God is personal, and horror defeat is in the hands of a personal God.

The God of biblical religion is poised to do the work of horror defeat. For starters, the God of biblical religion has the capital. God *is* incommensurate goodness. Intimate personal relationship with God, the Incommensurate Good, is incommensurately *good for* created persons. One way to defeat the ruinous disvalue of horror participation for created persons is to re-contextualize by imbedding it in the horror participant's on the whole and in the end beatific intimate personal relationship with God. The first step is Divine solidarity with us, ever present to us, recognized or unrecognized, through thick and thin. (Christian scenarios feature a more radical form of Divine solidarity: God's becoming human to take the "hard knocks" of individual horror participation by dying on a cross.) The second step is for God to heal our personal meaning-making capacities, to make us aware of Divine presence with us all the time, and to coach us in how to make positive sense of our experiences. The third step is for God to remodel our context, and that twice over. Because we are *material* persons, the final solution will involve a remodel of the material world, a domestication of the material into the household of the personal, a curtailing or altering of its causal interactions so that we are no longer radically vulnerable to horrors. Because we are *social*, because we define who we are and what we mean partly in terms of our social role, God must establish utopia, organize us into a society that does not spawn systemic evils.

So mainstream biblical religion puts a personal God at the heart of reality, material persons and Divine–human personal collaboration at the heart of Divine purposes for creation. If horrors are an inevitable by-product of material persons in a world such as this, the God of biblical religion plans from the beginning to be the horror defeater, who defeats the ruinous power of horrors by integrating them into something incommensurately good for the created person: namely, the created person's personal relationship with God. The God of biblical religion demands more of us than we can take, but the All-Wise God also knows that we can take only so much. The personal God of biblical religion eventually brings horrors to an end by remodeling material creation and by organizing utopia (cf. M.M. Adams 2006 for an expansion on these themes).

God Because of Evils?

I set out to argue that realistic, purpose-driven optimism does not make sense in a world with horrors if there is no horror defeater. But we have seen that where realism and/or optimism are only Darwinian, the purpose-driven optimist has other options. The "less radical" involve qualified realism, dampened or dashed hopes, and/or curtailed meaning-making. Robust realism might drive a more "radical" conversion to a way of life that does not salvage but attempts to get beyond the personal.

For many if not most realistic purpose-driven optimists, giving up on personality will not be a live option. My *ad hominem* argument should have its maximum force with purpose-driven people who are both robustly realistic and robustly optimistic. Before they protest that conversion to theism is too radical, and put their trowels away in favor of a more superficial and disappointing solution, I want to remind them how much of their entrenched life posture biblical religion allows them to retain.

Biblical religion allows them to be at once robustly realistic about horrors and robustly optimistic about human prospects. Psychologically, the more confident we are of a horror defeater, the more we can afford to face up to just how bad things would be without one. Not only does biblical religion make persons metaphysically fundamental. Biblical religion

posits God, a realistic purpose-driven optimist at the heart of reality, a God who is robustly realistic and robustly optimistic, a God who creates us to be enterprising. Not only can robustly realistic optimists remain purpose-driven go-getters, the God of biblical religion offers them wider scope by inviting them into partnership with God!

My argument can be turned on its head to challenge believers. Biblical religion underwrites robust realism and robust optimism. Many theists would hold as an entrenched belief that God calls believers to what biblical religion underwrites. Such believers should find my argument a provocation to self-examination. Has their optimism been based on a blindered picture of reality? Has their purposiveness narrowed focus to local and surface meanings for the "lucky" and the "fit"? If my argument has force, it should pressure such believers into a life-posture shift out of timidity into boldness, into an embrace of a robust realism and robust optimism that labors purposefully within the expanded horizons toward which the God of biblical religion calls.

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