



THE TYRANNY OF BEING

Religion and the Human Condition

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The Tyranny of Being: Religion and the Human Condition

Introduction

It took me forty years of life on this planet to figure out this thing we call being human. That is not to say that I was particularly slow in understanding, for deep down most of us would have to admit that we have not fully grasped the essence of it. We are born in darkness and ignorance, and left to figure things out for ourselves. There is no shortage of different systems of religious belief to attract us, each claiming that it knows – and in some cases, has a monopoly on knowing – the truth. There is no shortage of philosophical and political beliefs, scientific and pseudoscientific theories, and thousands of other voices each clamoring to hold the keys to enlightenment. That is what we all, deep down, want: to understand--our role in the universe, and the meaning and purpose of our lives. Deep down we have an aching need to *know* that our lives have meaning and purpose, and it is primarily the awareness yet unacceptance of our own mortality that distinguishes us from animals. That it what spurs us on in the search for scientific knowledge and philosophical truth, and in artistic expression.

As I said, it took me forty years to struggle through the babble of voices and figure out a few things about being human. My own religious journey began, as with so many of us, in the formal teachings of the church of my parents. I was raised in a non-sectarian and undenominational Protestant church, the distinctive beliefs of which included adherence to the Jewish dietary laws and observation of the Sabbath. We also observed feast days such as the Day of Atonement, Feast of Tabernacles, and, above all, the Lord's Passover. Religion was a daily part of our lives and our home was filled with religious music and Bibles as a result of my mother being our church's organist and one of its Sabbath School teachers. This gave me a unique perspective on the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. It also taught me that the search for religious truth is an individual one, as ours was a recently minted church, and thus still in the throes of discussion and debate over doctrinal issues. And it also impressed on me the pervasiveness of religious practice on daily life, for every time we eschewed meat from animals that did not chew the cud or have a split hoof, or from sea creatures without fins or scales, it was an act of worship. But the ethic was also rather sternly Puritan in nature, though that may have been due more to the temperament of my stern Yankee forebears than any specific doctrine. Either way, a strict and demanding moral code in which misfortune was attributed to the judgment of an austere and holy God was a keystone of my religious heritage.

Then came some years of wandering as college and the distractions of the world came calling, and there was no established body with which to continue practicing my faith in a strange city. During the next few years, my attention was firmly focused first on my studies and then on beginning a family. But then after entering adulthood and embarking on a career, there was the need to return to God. My children needed guidance. And though I had attained a high measure of achievement—a doctorate from a prestigious institution, a respectable career, a decent paying job—there was still something missing. While you are on the journey of building your life, you expect there to be something missing, but when you

arrive at your destination you expect to find fulfillment and satisfaction. Despite my worldly accomplishments, I found neither. There were occasional visits to churches of various stripes—Baptist, Presbyterian, Catholic along with my wife’s family, and so forth. But none of these resonated with me. We attended a Southern Baptist church for several years after embarking on my career, but then something happened in my mid-Thirties.

I decided first to read through the entire Bible. This is no small feat, and though it can be done in a single year, it will be at a very superficial level. It took me two years, during the course of which an uncomfortable awareness gradually began to dawn on me. After reading the Bible, I read through other religious works—the Apocrypha, Talmudic and Hassidic writings, the Analects of Confucius, and numerous books on world religions including Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Islam. Gradually the awareness dawned on me that there was a problem with the genuineness of most religions, that there was a huge gap between the *theory* of religion and the *experience* thereof. Since Christianity is the religion in which I was raised, let us illustrate with that faith, though the problem is most likely common to all systems of belief. The reason that I decided to read through the entire Bible was simply that we Christians call the Holy Bible *The Good Book*, the greatest work in all of literature. We, most of us, treat it as the very Word of God. And yet hardly any Christians have bothered to read it. Most of us in the West read a lot—we read newspapers, magazines, cereal boxes, self-help books, romance novels, horror stories, you name it. Yet we do not read the Holy Bible. I decided that the demands of being a Christian were sufficiently rigorous that, if I was going to profess these beliefs and commit a large portion of my life to trying to follow them, then there had to be some integrity to the process. I had a radical thought—it was not sufficient to give lip service to my supposed beliefs: *I had to act as though I actually believed them.* Besides just reading the Holy Bible—an arduous task to get through with the genealogy and the regulations—there were other ramifications of having to live the faith with integrity. There could be no more being a Sunday Christian. Every day was holy. Every word, deed, or thought had religious significance. And I finally began to think.

Thinking can be a dangerous occupation. Thinking requires one to ruthlessly examine oneself, which means risking coming face-to-face with what you do not want to see. For me, there was the realization that the *reality* of my life—and those of other Christians in my surroundings—was seriously out of synch with the *theory*. If we are honest with ourselves, we have to acknowledge that our lives lack the fruits that are supposed to be present in the lives of believers. Some Christians profess holiness and reverence, and are continually talking about how their lives have been transformed by the indwelling power of the Holy Ghost. But I looked at the lives of these Christians and saw that they did not exhibit any evidence of love, peace, joy, and all the other hallmarks of a human spirit that is in communion with God. Rather, the lives of the most zealous Christians that I knew were offensive and repugnant. It took a while to dawn on me just why they were so offensive, and then I realized. It was because these Christians were continually preaching and trying to proselytize everyone else, yet their lives were marked by malice, spite, pettiness, worrying, complaining, and most of all blindness to their own character flaws. Equally problematic was the undeniable fact that many non-Christians I knew were kinder and more loving people than the Christians. *How could this be? How could it be that we, who were supposed to be*

indwelt with the Holy Ghost, could remain so deeply flawed? This dichotomy between what I had been taught and what my own experiences were telling me began to gnaw away at my faith.

Then in my late Thirties something else had happened. I underwent several years of a deep depression; some might call it the proverbial midlife crisis. My life was seriously off-track. I'd lost my moorings and had allowed myself to gain weight until I weighed nearly three hundred pounds. I loathed my body and hated what I'd allowed myself to become, which ran contrary to my whole life's ethic. I began to drink excessively, and my temper was out of control. There was conflict in our family and serious health problems in the home. We were not prospering as we should have after I'd sacrificed and worked hard in school, and it began to demoralize me. I looked at my life and saw that it was not what I'd envisioned and dreamed about and worked for all those years. I looked for answers in religion and did not find them, feeling abandoned by God. I hated my life and everything that it had become, grew seriously disillusioned, and turned inward, lashing out in anger at those around me.

Then in the midst of this I found the way back, learning how to control and eventually harness my anger, learning how to lose all the weight that had imprisoned me, and learning the truth that set me free from the guilt and shame that had been holding me down. Things have turned around—I have gained control of my legendary temper and have lost over a hundred pounds and a full foot off my waistline. And my trials have made me more tolerant and forgiving, both of others and—far more difficult to someone from such a stoic and Puritan background—myself. We think of humiliation as a bad thing. But having come through the valley of humiliation, I look back thankfully and now realize that the purpose of my *humiliation* was to make me *humble*.

Standing here at the age of forty, I look back from these lofty heights into the dark valley and see that the journey was for my own good; the old had to be torn down before the new could be built in its place. Like so many of us, I'd accumulated a lifetime of ideas and attitudes that appeared true in my younger days but which now seem to be false or at least not the whole story. Forty is something of a landmark in life, because that is about the age where we tend to look back on our lives and question where we've been and whether we're on the right track. We have, hopefully, accumulated enough wisdom to begin to think deeply about things we took for granted in our younger days. The distractions of schooling and building a career and family are behind us, yet we are still young enough that we can make meaningful changes in our lives. That's why some say that life begins at forty. That's why the ancients had to wait till the age of forty before they were eligible to study the mysteries. Like the phoenix, I had to be torn down and burned to ashes, before I could rise again. I had to be shown my own imperfections and had to be broken on the wheel of humility before I could see clearly the purpose and mission of my life. Like King Solomon and the Buddha, I had to endure a crisis of being overcome with the futility of life before I could find the true path.



After much soul-searching, I arrived at the following set of core beliefs and attitudes that have shaped my view of the world. They are listed at the end of this section for convenience,

though this is just the barest skeleton of a system of thought that had yet to be named.¹ The remainder of the book will discuss each of these and their corollary concepts in greater detail.

I struggled with the problem of *naming* the philosophy that has evolved out of my world experiences, not an easy task. Putting a name on something is an act of power—it says to everyone that we have grasped the essence of the thing, that we have defined it. But in naming something we also limit it, because we not only assert what it *is*, but what it is *not*. I was hesitant to name my philosophy because of this, because it is a fundamental belief of mine that *all* systems of belief are, at best, incomplete descriptions of reality. To name it meant making it into another fixed and rigid system, which runs antithetical to my philosophy itself. The immediate practical problem was which feature of my system of thought to emphasize—should it be the existence of God, the rational nature of the universe, the empowering vision of mankind, the ethic of self-reliance, the freedom from guilt? It meant making my system susceptible to the all too human tendency to become over-zealous and try to explain everything in terms of the eponymous concept. But it was undeniable that we needed *some* kind of label, if for no other reason than for the convenience of those who might wish to take up its study.

Finally I settled on the following label, for lack of a better term—we will call this new philosophical system *transformationalism*, because it embodies several crucial concepts.

There are two completely distinct senses in which this term is intended. First is the underlying concept that man is capable of self-transformation. Moreover, we not only have the *ability* to transform our lives, but we have the *duty* to do so; life is about growth and continuous self-improvement. Second is the concept that all systems of belief are inherently imperfect and incomplete, and that the search for truth means embracing all sides of reality. Thus, we must move beyond formalized systems of dogma and take a more balanced view if we are to grasp the true nature of reality. This rejection of dogmatism (all the *-isms and -ologies* that have led mankind astray) is embodied in the name—literally, *transformationalism* means moving *beyond* the *formalism* of dogmatic belief systems. This name seems fitting, in two distinct senses—the first refers to ethical, the second epistemological and metaphysical. It may seem now that these two concepts are totally unrelated, but we will show in what follows that one in fact flows naturally from the other.

¹ I hesitate to call it a “belief system” because *belief* implies an uncritical acceptance of a fixed and rigid dogma, which is the very antithesis of our system. We must be critical of the ideas presented to us, as part of the burden of being human is to have to distinguish between the wheat and the chaff. Thus we call it a *system of thought*.

CORE BELIEFS OF TRANSFORMALISM



Religious and Metaphysical

The world was created by, and is sustained through, rational laws generated by a sovereign Supreme Being, whom we call God.

God is holy, almighty, transcendent, and good. We as human beings can have a relationship with but cannot fully grasp the nature and will of God.

Human beings were created for a higher purpose than gratifying their own selfish desires. Our *general purpose* is to enjoy the gifts of creation, to love and serve our fellow man, and to continually learn and grow in ourselves and in our relationship with God. All of us are also created with a *specific purpose* towards which it is our duty to strive.

Human beings have free will and have an inalienable and God-given right to determine their own destiny. Freedom and human dignity are sacred and inviolable.

There is a universal moral law that distinguishes between right and wrong. We are responsible for the consequences of our decisions, both good and bad. Our freedom and responsibility are inseparable.





Political

The world is a dangerous place, and human beings, being social animals, must band together in societies for their mutual benefit. The needs of society, however, are subservient to those of the individual – individuals have rights; groups do not.

Every human being has a duty to make the world a better place, and to be industrious, to live up to his or her full potential, and to contribute more to the world than he or she takes from it.

The purpose of government is to mediate human relationships so as to foster an environment in which all can be as free as practicable to fulfill their destiny. Government exists solely to promote justice in those relationships, and has a duty to protect human beings from each other, not from themselves. Individual freedom should be subject only to those limitations that are necessary to fulfill those obligations.



Personal

While we have a political right to be moral or immoral, we have a moral responsibility to be the best that we can be. We should therefore conduct ourselves with dignity, self-discipline, humility, stoicism, equanimity, generosity, benevolence, tolerance...

We all fall short of perfection. There is good and bad in everyone. Rising above this condition requires both the working of God's power in our lives and our active participation. We should be engaged in continual self-improvement. We should recognize our shortcomings with humility but should not because of them put ourselves in bondage to guilt or shame.



BOOK ONE

Foundations of Pure and Undefined Religion

Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.

James 1:27

PART I - KNOWLEDGE

§1. The Fundamentals of Knowledge

Knowledge is power. First we need to understand how it is that we know about the world around us. There are several approaches that have been taken throughout history to answering this question, which belong to the philosophical realm of *epistemology* (the theory of knowledge). The ancients tended to think of knowledge as something handed down by the gods to mankind—knowledge of the great boon of fire was brought to man by Prometheus. Knowledge was not always a good thing. Prometheus was punished by being bound to a rock and having his bowels eaten by a giant vulture. Mankind was ejected from the Garden of Eden for giving in to the temptation to obtain the knowledge of good and evil for himself, and later confounded for reaching towards the heavens at Babel. There were oracles of Delphi and messages were handed down from God on the stone tablets at Mount Sinai, and later in the Tabernacle and Temple with its distinctive oracular *urim* and *thummim*. Knowledge was tightly controlled by the ancients as well, as they forbade man from reading books—especially the Scriptures—for himself, and maps, mathematics, and secrets of trades such as building and navigation were closely guarded by ancient rulers and preserved for the privileged few. They recognized that knowledge really is power.

Thus the first and oldest way in which we obtained knowledge was through divine revelation—through *mysticism*. Mysticism has taken on negative connotations lately, in becoming associated with tarot, astrology, crystals, and all sorts of other superstitious tomfoolery. But in ancient times it meant simply acquiring knowledge through the means of communication between human beings and the mind of God. It included the acquisition of divine knowledge—or *gnosis*—through prayer, meditation, fasting and other ascetic disciplines, and the study of divinely inspired Scriptures. In the East, there has been more emphasis on meditation; in the West, on prayer. Both have their sacred writings. The concept of inspiration itself is mystical, for *inspiration* involves the idea of the spirit of God being *breathed into us* (in fact, spirit means *breath*). The first man was created by having the breath of life breathed into him. At first, the idea was that all human beings could have this direct mystical experience of God. (Witness in Genesis how God walks in the garden with Adam and Eve, and talks directly with Cain and Abel, Enoch, Noah). But later, this became the preserve of the chosen few, and as man learned the art of writing, those few who were in direct communication with God would write down the sacred writings that became known as the Word of God. Those who wanted to know the will of God had to get their truth distilled through the priesthood, and had to visit specific places—such as the Tabernacle, the Temple, and Oracles—at the set time and under the watchful gaze of the priests in order to

find it. Thus, they were twice removed from the direct knowledge of God: first, because now God spoke onto to a chosen few, who recorded the sacred words in the Scriptures, and second, because they could not, in general, read it, and had to have it interpreted through the priesthood. The reasons this happened are complex, and are outside the scope of what we're talking about here, so we will not discuss it here further.

Later, other ideas came about in reaction to the abuses of the established theocracy. The idea that people should not have to go through the clergy to come into the presence of God revolutionized man's religious experience. The Christian idea that man could come directly into God's presence, without intermediary, by means of having been justified by the atonement of Jesus Christ, was a dire threat to the Pharisaical establishment. Later the same emancipation from a corrupt and pharisaical clergy would give rise to the Reformation. With the development of the printing press, people became able to read the Scriptures for themselves, and those who can *read* for themselves soon learn to *think* for themselves. People began to once again—as in the earliest days of Christianity—develop their own interpretations of what it all meant. The printing press and access to the Scriptures led to the ramification of Christianity. Still, however, it took the rise of science before the search for knowledge became bifurcated from the religious path.

With the rise of science came other ideas about the search for knowledge. Taking up the mantle of the classical philosophers, the scientists conceived of the idea of the search for knowledge based on *reason*. Reason was a faculty given to man by God, many of these scientists believed. Later scientists would come to believe that reason came about as a part of natural evolutionary development. Whatever the source, science was based on reason as the guide to man's knowledge of the universe. But pure reason, as lionized by mathematicians and logicians such as Descartes (*cogito ergo sum*), can easily lead one astray. It has its limitations, because the human mind has limitations, weaknesses, and blind spots.

The Aristotelians struggled with the creation of a universe—they reasoned that there had to be a *prime mover*, that gave rise to all the varied phenomena we see in creation. But this just moves the dilemma of explaining the origin of the universe back another step; there is still the problem of the origin of this prime mover, what gave rise to this *first cause*. It is like the ancient problem of what supports the world—the world must rest on something, our reason and experience tells us, and we can envision it being held aloft on Atlas' shoulders. But then there's the problem of what Atlas stands on. He may stand on the back of a giant turtle, but what does the turtle stand on? The turtle may swim in an immense ocean, but where does the water come from? And so on. Everywhere we turn, we are faced with questions that the exercise of our reason alone cannot answer. There is Zeno's Paradox, in which movement was thought to be impossible because first one has to move half the distance towards one's destination, then half of the remaining distance, then half....Yet the most casual observation shows us that *things do move*.

When applied to science, reason immediately leads us into pitfalls. Some of them we can see from the sprinkling of examples above. *Causality* teaches us that every effect has a cause, but that means there never is an ultimate cause to anything, certainly not to the universe itself. We can ask about a person's motive for committing a certain crime, and we might find some

immediate provocation, but then we might be led to his childhood. And then we'd have to acknowledge that his childhood was the way it was because of his parents, and that they were the way they were because of their parents, and so forth. Each time we go further back in search of answers, it just raises more questions, as in the search for a prime mover or the elaborate cosmology of a buoyant world ocean teeming with gigantic world-balancing turtles.

A second difficulty is also illustrated by the turtle image. It is the lack of empirical confirmation of our theories. For now of course we know that there is no gigantic man standing on even more gigantic turtles and bearing the world on his shoulders. We know about gravitation and how the earth and the sun and everything else is suspended in space. We know about this because our knowledge is based on scientific observation and experience, but the ancients were led astray by two shortcomings—the lack of a scientific method or scientific data to confirm their theories, and their erroneous extrapolation from their known experience to unknown phenomena. They simply took what they knew about the world on their small scale and applied it to phenomena on the large scale. This is reasonable, logical, and what we still do today in reasoning from the known to the unknown. But without a means of testing our extrapolated models, we have no way of knowing whether the fruits of our reasoning are in fact true. Even since the development of the scientific method, this problem is still with us. The scientific method works well enough on the human scale, when we can measure, touch, and alter reality through experimentation. But when science had understood most of the basic phenomena on the human scale and turned to the greater mysteries of what lay out there in the large scale universe and at the beginning of time, this proved difficult. We are hypothesizing about particles on such a small scale that we might never build the machines necessary to test our theories. We are forming theories about the origin of the universe under conditions that will never be reproduced in a laboratory.

A third difficulty is that illustrated by Zeno's Paradox, and that is the inherent limits of our intellect. We are human, not superhuman, and the universe is far more mysterious and vast than our minds will ever be able to fully grasp. Every time we try to apply our reason to understand some facet of creation, we're faced with new mysteries and new questions our intellect cannot answer. We can describe the masses of the whole zoo of fundamental particles, and postulate other particles supposed to give them mass (e.g., the Higgs boson), but we don't know why the electron or the lambda particle have the mass they do. Even the fact that the electron has a mass is problematic, because being a point particle that carries a charge, the electric field gets infinitely strong the closer you get to it. We say the electron has infinite self-energy, which we then deal with by conveniently ignoring it.

After pure reason, mankind discovered that it needed observation and experimentation to confirm its reasoning and ensure it was going down the right path. Experimentation is the most desirable form of confirmation, because it allows us to make changes and test their results. Often however, we are unable to perform experiments or the cost is just too high (human experimentation in medicine is a case in point). Observation is a poor substitute, but it is sometimes all we have. We can observe the distant galaxies, we can indirectly observe the effects of interactions between quarks and gluons, but we cannot reach out and touch

them. Moving beyond science, we are generally much more limited on what we can observe and experiment on. This is true in all fields such as politics, sociology, metaphysics, and the like. We can conduct social experiments, though not very effectively on a grand scale, and going back and repeating them to see how the outcome would turn out differently if we changed this or that is problematic. Once we have made some change in society, the same conditions that existed before can never be precisely reconstructed. We face a difficulty akin to the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle in quantum physics, where the act of—here experimentation rather than mere observation—changes and cloaks the system we’re looking at. The other difficulties are that human behavior is far more complex than the idealized systems we may construct in a laboratory in science, and it does not follow fixed deterministic rules.

We’ve briefly considered all the basic means that humans have to learn about the world around us—mystical revelation and authoritarian declaration, pure reason, and experimentation and observation. These all have their uses and their limitations. They all embody to varying degrees what we call *experience*—knowing about the world around us by looking at it, testing our mystical and rational beliefs in the light of our life’s experience. If experience—involving our faculties of reasoning and observation and, occasionally, experimentation—came late to the field of scientific knowledge, it has hardly come at all in the spheres of philosophy and religion.