

**THE MEANING OF LIFE**  
**REFLECTIONS ON GOD, IMMORTALITY, AND FREE WILL**

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**Three metaphysical questions.**

Philosophers, and other thinking people, have long pondered three grand questions about the nature of reality and our status and significance within it.

First: Does reality include a supernatural realm, inhabited by spiritual beings such as gods? Or is the familiar natural world all there is to it?

Second: If there is indeed a supernatural world, how do we relate to it? Are we composite creatures with a foot in both camps, so to speak; creatures with souls as well as bodies? If the latter, is it possible that our souls should live on after our bodies are no more? Or is physical death the end for all of us?

Third: What is the nature of the free will that we commonly suppose ourselves to enjoy during our sojourn here on earth? Do we in fact have free will? Or are our lives little more than pointless scribbles on the fabric of the universe, as devoid of real significance as scratches on a piece of glaciated rock?

**Their pertinence to the meaning of life.**

Each of these questions is apt to come up in any discussion of the more general one: "What is the meaning of life, if indeed life does have a meaning?" So I'll say a little about each.

**A: GOD AND THE MEANING OF LIFE.**

How, for a start, might the existence of a god or gods affect the meaningfulness of our lives here on earth?

Among the plausible answers that might be given are these:

- \* that if there is deity to whose existence - as is often supposed - we owe both our own existence and that of the physical universe, then surely we should live our lives in accordance with any plans that deity might have for us;
- \* that it is therefore incumbent on us to find out what those intentions are; and
- \* that our lives will be most meaningful if we fulfill that deity's purposes.

In short, some would say that the real meaning of life is to be found in service to such a god, and in living according to his or her dictates.

But which god are we talking about? And which of his or her commands are we to obey?

### **Which god?**

First: To whom does the term "god" refer?

Obviously not to some New Age god or other construct of man's imagination. Few would suppose that such gods communicate with us at all, let alone about how we should live.

And obviously not to the Aztec god, Huitzilopochtli, who - only about 600 years ago - supposedly commanded the sacrifice of 50,000 youths and maidens in a single year. Nor to his brother, Tezcatilpoca, who supposedly consumed 25,000 virgins annually. Nor, presumably, to any of the other 189 gods whose "death" was celebrated by H. L. Mencken in his 1922 essay "Memorial Service".<sup>1</sup> There is no good evidence for their existence. And no enlightened person could countenance the idea that their commands were moral.

These gods deserve the oblivion to which thinking men and women have consigned them.

But, by the same token, so does the God of our much vaunted Judeo-Christian tradition. After all, this is the God who, according to the *Old Testament*, is said to have drowned every member of the human race, not just wicked men and women, but innocent children, suckling infants, and the unborn, with the sole exceptions of the drunkard, Noah, and his incestuous family.<sup>2</sup> This is the God who himself slaughters hundreds of thousands, if not millions, by means of his angels, serpents, hailstones, windstorm, earthquake, fire, and plague.<sup>3</sup> This is a God who: gives 32,000 Midianite virgins to the soldiers who had killed their families<sup>4</sup>; who allows his hero, Jephthah, to demonstrate his devotion by sacrificing his daughter "as a burnt offering" <sup>5</sup>; who punishes the Babylonians by having "their little ones . . . dashed to pieces before their eyes . . . and their wives ravished"<sup>6</sup>; who declares "I will cause them [members of his own chosen people] to eat the flesh of their sons and the flesh of their daughters, and they shall eat everyone the flesh of his friend"<sup>7</sup>; and who commands His chosen people to slay "both man and woman, infant and suckling" in 31 kingdoms while directing the Israelites in their policy of ethnic cleansing of the land that orthodox Jews now call Greater Israel.<sup>8</sup> And this is the very same God<sup>9</sup> who, in the *New Testament*, repeatedly promises eternal torment in the fires of Hell<sup>10</sup> for all those - the majority of the human race - who haven't believed in Jesus (an obscure figure whose dates of birth and death no-one knows and whose historical status may fairly be likened to that of Hercules, Mithra, King Arthur or William Tell)<sup>11</sup>.

The God of the Judaism, Christianity, and Islam - as supposedly revealed in the *Old Testament*, the *New Testament*, and the *Koran* - is depicted as a spiritual being who commits, causes, commands, or condones violations of almost all the moral precepts that we hold dear. He is a moral monster, infinitely more evil than the moral monsters of human history: the Ghenghis Khans, Hitlers, Stalins, Pol Pots from whom we shrink in horror. And the world he supposedly created for us to live in is one in which we - and his other creatures - are constantly being assailed by his chosen weapons of mass destruction: natural disasters such as tsunamis that kill hundreds of thousands, not

just the 3,000 odd of September 11, 2001; radiological bombardments from outer space; chemical and biological minefields that await our blundering mis-steps because he has not deigned to reveal them to us; and diseases such as cancer, filariasis, hookworm, malaria, and schistosoma that cripple or kill countless millions each year.<sup>12</sup>

Compared to Him, the Aztec gods were paragons of virtue. So, too, is Satan - the mythical personification of evil - who is portrayed as being guilty of nothing much worse than tempting Eve with a piece of fruit or, with God's permission, giving Job a bad case of boils.

Is this the God on whose behavior we ought to model our own in order to give a meaning to our lives? If so, we have a moral license for mayhem.

Or are we to say that what is good enough for God is *not* good enough for us?

### **Which commands?**

Second: If it were the Judeo-Christian-Islamic God in obedience to whom we are to find life's meaning, which of his commands should we obey? All of them? Or just those that now satisfy our moral scruples?

One problem is that this God prescribes the death penalty for over thirty offenses. These include: being a stubborn and rebellious son; cursing or hitting one's parents; owning an ox that happens to kill a man; blaspheming; committing adultery; committing homosexual acts; picking up sticks or working on the Sabbath; preaching other religions; and so on. If we were to obey this God's dictates, we would have a quick solution to the world's population problem. Are we really obliged to kill all who are guilty of these offenses? Or is it up to us to decide which laws to obey?

Clearly, there are grave difficulties with the belief that the meaning of life is to be found in service to any revealed god: the the Yaweh of Judaism, the God Christianity, or the Allah of Islam.

### **Do any gods exist?**

There are grave difficulties, for that matter, in the supposition that any sort of god exists. If a god exists who does not reveal himself, then we have no clear evidence for the existence of that god. At best we can produce abstract philosophical arguments for the existence of some sort of vaguely conceived deity, or supreme being.

But such arguments - the arguments of so-called natural theology (as opposed to revealed theology) - are notoriously feeble. The argument from design, when viewed in the light of the disasters and diseases in the universe such a deity supposedly designed, leads to the conclusion that the Great Watchmaker is either incompetent or malevolent. And it raises the further question, "Who designed God?" Likewise, the argument from the alleged need for a cause of existence gets us nowhere. If we postulate an existing God as an answer to the question "Why does anything exist?" we merely add to the list of existing entities. That only adds to the burden of explanation by raising the question "What caused God?". We do better to avoid the regress by accepting the existence of the universe as a brute fact.

There are no sound reasons, I would argue, for supposing that there are any gods at all, either revealed or hidden from view. A fortiori, there is no good reason for believing that we should order our lives so as to take account of their alleged existence and purposes for us.

### **B: SURVIVAL AND THE MEANING OF LIFE.**

How about the supposition that the meaning of this life lies in one that is to follow?

This wide-spread belief is implicit in the view that if all came to an end at the grave, then life itself would be devoid of meaning.

Now it is clear that the question whether we are composite creatures having spirits or souls that might survive our bodily deaths is independent of the question whether other spiritual beings such as gods, angels, or devils, exist. As for the latter, we may well believe - and, for the reasons just given, also hope - that they do not. Nevertheless, we might well embrace the idea of ghosts while rejecting that of gods.

But is survival of our bodily deaths a real possibility? And would having a second life confer meaning on the present one?

### **Is the concept of survival conceptually coherent?**

I'll deal with these questions in turn.

Ask yourself, first, what it would be like for you yourself to survive your bodily death? What do you envisage yourself surviving *as*? I suspect it would give you little comfort to know that the molecules, atoms, or subatomic particles of which your physical body is composed are virtually immortal in so far as they will probably survive as long as does the physical universe. These are not the parts of you that you think of when you think of your *self* surviving the death and dissolution of your physical body. So - once more - what do you survive *as*?

One hypothesis is that it is your soul that survives? But what is your soul? We commonly invoke the trilogy "body, mind, and soul". But are these three things or just two? If three, then it would be nice to have some sort of guarantee that when your soul survives it will at least be accompanied by your mind. Otherwise, the survival of your soul as some sort of mindless, unthinking, unconscious entity, would carry as little significance as would the survival of your appendix in a test-tube of nutrient fluid.

The soul is nothing more than a hypothetical entity, invented by theologians and metaphysicians as the bearer of mental properties in much the same way as the ether was invented to be the bearer of light waves. We have no more

warrant for believing in the soul than we do for believing in ectoplasm, the faked emissions of spiritualist mediums.

Hence, since it is the thinking, feeling, you - your conscious mind - that you want to survive, let's drop the term "soul" from our discussion and concentrate instead on the ideas of minds and consciousness.

What exactly do you envisage when you think of your mind surviving the death of your physical body and brain?

You think of it, I submit, as some sort of non-physical object that can be detached from the body and its brain and go on existing in the absence of either.

But is this really the right way to think of it? Certainly language encourages to think so. After all, the word "mind" is a noun; and nouns - we have been taught - are naming words, and names stand for things or objects. Hence, we conclude, the noun "mind" must be the name of an object; and if not the name of a physical object, then surely of a non-physical one.

### **Problems for dualism.**

But this idea raises a host of problematic questions. When, in the embryological story of the development of a human being from the union of sperm and ovum does this object, the mind, get "injected", as it were, into the growing embryo? When, in the evolutionary story of the development of Homo Sapiens from more primitive primates, does this object, mind, enter the picture? More pertinently, if it is your mind that you identify with the "you" that is to survive your death, will it be the mind you had as a child, as a teenager, as an adult, or the mind you have in your dotage? And what of the minds of paranoid schizophrenics, imbeciles, still-borns, or aborted fetuses? Is the meaning of their lives to be found in the continuance of the minds they have at death?

When questions, like these, are so clearly imponderable - admitting only of arbitrary answers if any at all - we would do well to examine their presuppositions: in this case the

presupposition that the mind really is some kind of substance or object.

But what might the mind be if it *isn't* a substance, thing, or object?

### **A non-dualistic conception of the mind.**

The answer I would give is that when we talk about the mind we are simply talking of a cluster of mental attributes or properties: various dispositions, abilities, and activities; intellectual properties like being rational, emotional properties like being loving, artistic ones like being musical, and moral ones like being honest.

Now if the mind is not itself an object but rather a set of properties of an object, namely a set of properties of a physical body with a properly functioning brain, then the mind can no more continue to exist after the death of the physical body and brain than can a grin continue to exist after the disappearance of the face that does the grinning. To suppose otherwise is to commit what I call the "Cheshire Cat fallacy". You may remember the wonderful passage in which Alice, while in Wonderland, chides the cat who keeps doing disappearing tricks:

". . . I wish you wouldn't keep appearing and vanishing so suddenly: you make one quite giddy."

"All right," said the Cat; and this time it vanished quite slowly, beginning with the end of the tail, and ending with the grin, which remained some time after the rest of it had gone.

"Well! I've often seen a cat without a grin," thought Alice; "but a grin without a cat! It's the most curious thing I ever saw in my life!"

Curious indeed. In fact, conceptually absurd.

If I am right, the idea that we - our minds, our souls, or our consciousnesses - might survive our bodily deaths in any

meaningful way is a philosophical fiction as little deserving of rational belief as Lewis Carroll's story of the Cheshire Cat in *Alice in Wonderland* (Chapter VI).

I have a general piece of advice to offer here: In thinking about such allegedly deep and intractable questions as "What is the mind?", "What is intelligence?", or "What is consciousness?" - any question involving the name of some non-physical abstraction - we do well to avoid the noun and concentrate instead on the corresponding verb, adverb, or adjective.

The question "What is consciousness?", for instance, about which so many neuro-scientists and philosophers currently seem so deeply puzzled, is better replaced by questions like "What is it to be conscious?" [the verb], "What is it to do something consciously?" [the adverb], or "What is it for someone to be in a conscious state?" [the adjective]. It then becomes clear that the abstract noun "consciousness" isn't the name of some elusive thing; it isn't the name of a thing at all. To be conscious is to be aware; to do something consciously is to do it while being aware of what one is doing; to be in a conscious state is to be in a general state of awareness of one's self or surroundings.

### **The fallacy of reification.**

It is so easy, you see, for us to fall into the trap of reification: the tendency to think of an abstract noun as if it were the name of a real thing, object, or substance that is capable of independent existence. The fallacy of reification is epitomized for us in a passage from another of Lewis Carroll's works, this time from *Through the Looking Glass*, ch. VII:

"[The two Messengers have] both gone to the town. Just look along the road, and tell me if you can see either of them."

"I see nobody on the road," said Alice.

"I only wish *I* had such eyes," the King remarked in a fretful tone. "To be able to see Nobody! And at that

distance too! Why, it's as much as *I* can do to see real people, by this light!"

As Peter Heath, in *The Philosopher's Alice*,<sup>13</sup> comments:

Because *nobody* functions grammatically very like *somebody*, there is a temptation to believe that it is the name of a peculiar, diaphanous sort of somebody, who is then unnecessarily added to the world's inhabitants. In such a way does the language of abstraction darken counsel, corrupt communications, and beget bad philosophy, a theme much insisted on by Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, and their many modern successors.

Properly conceived, consciousness or awareness is a property of a living organism. It is a property that we human beings share - though to a different degree - with members of various other species such as alligators, bats, cats, dogs, elephants, frogs and gorillas (to list just a few in alphabetical order). Likewise with other mental properties like intellect, will, and emotion. Like the properties of having temperature and being fluid, all are emergent properties: properties possessed by complex objects though not by their simplest constituents, the molecules, atoms, subatomic particles from which they are constructed. All these mental properties are designed by what Richard Dawkins has called "The Blind Watchmaker": they have emerged in the natural course of evolution.

The term "mind" is just a compendious way of referring to all such properties. None of them can exist in the absence of the organism that has them. It follows that none of them can continue to exist when the organism that had them is dead. When the organism dies, so does the mind, and so does consciousness.

**Why survival wouldn't give meaning to life.**

There is another grave problem facing the hypothesis that our lives here on earth wouldn't have any significance if all came

to an end at the grave, that it would be meaningless unless we could look forward to life in another world. This hypothesis leads to the kind of absurdity that philosophers call an infinite regress. For in what would the meaning of this second life lie? In its sequel? And in what would lie the meaning of that sequel? Still another sequel? And the meaning of that? The answer gets postponed ad infinitum.

Once more, the question admits of no non-arbitrary answer. If any of the unending hypothetical series of "other" lives can have a meaning, surely this one - the one we have here on earth - can too.

For reasons like these, my answer to the question "What is the meaning of life?" is akin to the answer I would give to the question "What is the meaning of such and such a book?" The meaning of a book is to be found in the words, the sentences, the paragraphs, and the chapters it contains. Likewise, the meaning of life is to be found in the meaningful moments, episodes, and achievements that occur within our brief appearance here on earth. A book doesn't lack meaning because it comes to an end on the last page. Nor do our lives lack meaning because they come to an end when all neural activity ceases.

To be sure, some lives are lived in meaningless fashion. Some lives are lived in pursuit of goals which we can only deplore. But the lives of still others, gifted by nature or favored by circumstance, will have value not just for themselves but for others. And some - by virtue of their physical, intellectual, artistic, moral, or social achievements - may even achieve a different kind of "immortality": they may live on in the memories of those who follow them.

No gods are needed to give our lives meaning. No future life is needed to give meaning to the present life. We ourselves can *choose* to give our lives meaning, purpose, and value right here and now.

Or can we?

Opinions differ on the matter.

**C: FREE WILL, FATALISM AND OTHER THREATS TO THE MEANING OF LIFE.**

On the one hand, it is indisputable that we do, at least in many circumstances, believe ourselves able to exercise freedom of choice and freedom of action. The concept of free will is entrenched in our commonsense beliefs and ordinary language. We can and do distinguish between the freedom conferred on some by virtue of economic status, education, and good health, for instance, and the relative powerlessness of others who are handicapped by poverty, ignorance, or disease. The choices open to one may not be open to another. The freedoms enjoyed by the master are not enjoyed by the slave. The freedoms of the jailer are not enjoyed by the prisoner. The freedoms of oppressors are not enjoyed by those who are their victims. These differences do in fact exist. We recognize them in practice as well as in theory. And we mark them, in language, by talk of various kinds and degrees of freedom, or its absence.

Yet, on the other hand, many philosophical arguments have been advanced to show that commonsense and ordinary language are fallible guides to truth. The truth of the matter, it has been argued, is that free will is an illusion since we are all in fact mere slaves of fate, products of and subject to the constraints of laws that rule our lives.

Two main arguments have been advanced in support of this fatalistic conclusion. One has to do with the laws of logic; the other with laws of nature.

**The threat from Logical Determinism.**

The first is an argument from the doctrine that all of reality - whether past, present, or future - is subject to the laws of logic. These are laws, theologians have usually conceded, that even an almighty God cannot violate.

One of these laws is the Law of Excluded Middle which says that every statement must be either true or, if not true, false

(there being no "middle" possibilities). Another is the Law of Identity which says that if a statement is true then it is true, and if false, then false. Applied to statements about future events, these yield the obvious conclusions:

Either it is true that such and such an event will occur or it is false;

If it is true that it is going to occur then - of necessity - it is going to occur;

If it is false that it is going to occur then - of necessity - it is not going to occur.

Generalizing, we infer:

The future will be what it will be.

And from this we infer, in turn:

You can't change the future from what it is going to be any more than you can change the past from what it was.

At this point, the dark clouds of fatalism seem to threaten our cherished belief in free will. We may well be tempted to start thinking of our lives as mere pawns of fate. Hence the famous stanza from Fitzgerald's *The Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam:

'Tis all a Chequer-board of Nights and Days  
Where Destiny with Men for Pieces plays:  
Hither and thither moves, and mates, and slays,  
And one by one back in the closet lays.

Each of these statements is an expression of the doctrine that I once christened as "Logical Determinism", a doctrine which - even expressed in these general terms - seems to imply that the future is fated and that we are powerless to do anything about it.

Over forty-five years ago, I tried to illustrate how easy it is to draw fatalistic conclusions from Logical Determinism by writing an article entitled "Must the Future Be What It Is Going to Be?"<sup>14</sup>, in which I predicted that a fellow doctoral student at the Australian National University - Bob Hawke - would one day be Prime Minister of Australia. Now obviously, if my prediction was true at the time when I made it, then Bob was indeed going to become Prime Minister, and there was nothing that anyone could do to prevent this since otherwise my statement would have been false. Equally obviously, if my prediction was false, then Bob

would never become Prime Minister, and there was nothing that anyone could do to make him Prime Minister, since otherwise my statement would have been true. No matter what final outcome the future held, in neither case could anyone do anything to change it from what it was going to be.

But - I asked - does this imply that Bob's future was fixed or fated in advance, irrespective of his own choices in the matter?

### **The fatalist fallacy.**

My answer, now as then, is "No." To conclude that it does is to suppose that what the future is going to be owes nothing to an individual's goals, ambitions, or choices. It is to suppose that our wills are causally inefficacious, that none of our efforts or strivings can have any effect.

Bob Hawke did indeed become Prime Minister of Australia. But not because of blind fate or string-pulling deities, let alone because of my predictions. He became what he became with the help of others, no doubt, but at least in part because of his *own* ambitions, his own efforts, and his own political will. No-one who knew him - as I did in his capacity as neighbor, friend, and occasional baby-sitter - could ever deny him that. True, nature and nurture may have given him those ambitions and political will. And political circumstances may have fostered his plans. But they operated, as it were, *through* him, not *despite* him.

It wasn't my prediction's being true that made him Prime Minister. It was his becoming Prime Minister that made my prediction true. Bob Hawke gave his own life meaning by aiming for, and achieving, - among other things - his status as political leader of Australia.

The laws of logic don't imply fatalism. The answer to the factual question as to whether someone's choices and actions will make a difference to the future cannot be deduced from the logical truth that the future will be what it will be. True, we can't

change the future from what it is going to be. But the fact remains that what it is going to be may - to some extent - be a consequence of what we do in the present.

### **The threat from Causal Determinism.**

A second argument for the illusoriness of free will is derived from what we call Causal Determinism: the belief that there are exceptionless causal laws connecting states of affairs and events such that, for any system governed by such laws, the state of the system at any given time determines a unique state of the system for any later time. This doctrine is implicit in such claims as "Everything has a cause", "Things don't just happen", and "Nature is law-governed". It holds that the past determines the present, and the present determines the future.

Now, according to the arguments I've advanced so far, reality has no place for a supernatural domain, either one inhabited by gods or one inhabited by ghosts. The only world that exists is the natural one, the material one, the world that we can best learn about by observation and experiment, the methods of scientific inquiry.

Man, so conceived, is a wholly natural being: and, like any other natural being, is subject to the laws of nature.

But, once more, there is an apparent problem with this conception. If we, like other natural entities, are products of nature, then what account are we to give of free will? To what extent, if at all, do we have control over our own destinies? What meaning or significance could our lives have if we are designed to be what we are by the "blind" processes of evolution?

The plausibility of Causal Determinism stems largely from the success of the various sciences in providing causal explanations of why things behave as they do: things like the motions of the heavenly bodies; the rise and fall of the tides; the rising and setting of the sun; the recurrence of the seasons; the workings of machines; the incidence of disease. Thus it used to

be said that every scientific inquiry presupposes the truth of the Causal Principle, "Every event has a cause", (i.e., the existence of causal laws "governing" the phenomena under investigation), and that every success of science confirms its truth.

With the arguable exception of events in the microphysical world of quantum physics, causal laws seem to apply quite universally throughout the universe, not just to inanimate objects but animate ones as well. Even human beings and their behaviour seem to lend themselves to causal explanations by various life sciences. Consider the biological sciences such as genetics, endocrinology, molecular biology, etc. They abound in causal explanations for why we do what we do. So do the behavioural sciences of psychology, sociology, etc. That much human behaviour is determined by an interplay between nature and nurture - not to be identified with heredity and environment, respectively - seems clear. Couldn't all of it be?

In the minds of some thinkers, the answer must be "No". For Causal Determinism, like Logical Determinism, seems to have fatalistic implications that would render the notions of free will, responsibility, and the meaningfulness of life itself totally illusory.

The great physicist Sir Arthur Eddington - an early promoter of Einstein's Relativity Theory - voiced this objection when he asked:

What significance is there in my mental struggle tonight whether I shall or shall not give up smoking, if the laws which govern the physical universe already preordain for the morrow a configuration of matter constituted of pipe, tobacco, and smoke connected with my lips? (*Philosophy*, 1933)

According to Eddington, the concepts of significance and freedom can be rescued only by denying the universality of Causal

Determinism and embracing the so-called indeterminacy of quantum physics.

Yet this conclusion is fraught with difficulties. The argument is that we can't really have significant freedom if what we do is determined by what we are, and what we are is itself determined by factors over which we have no control.

But by the same token it is hard to see how our acts can be free if what we do is determined by what we are and what we are is *undetermined* in the sense of being the outcome of mere chance.

We seem to be faced with a dilemma: Either what we are is the outcome of causal factors in the past or it is the outcome of sheer indeterministic chance. Yet in neither case can we really be in control of what we are, or - it is further argued - of what we do.

How might one escape from the horns of this dilemma; the so-called "Determinism or Chance Dilemma"?

One option, countenanced by Eddington and numerous other thinkers, is to take recourse to a dualistic conception of the human being: the supposition that our immaterial minds, or souls, stand outside the material world and interpose themselves in the causal breaks postulated by quantum indeterminacy. As he put it:

. . . we must attribute to the mind power not only to decide the behaviour of atoms individually but to affect systematically large groups - in fact to tamper with the odds on atomic behaviour.<sup>15</sup>

Likewise, Nobel Prize laureate Sir John Eccles speculated that the mind or soul can intervene in the otherwise orderly flow of deterministic laws by virtue of indeterminacy at the microphysical level. He even suggested that free will may be located between the synapses in the brain

But this hypothesis will not do, for two main reasons.

First, it presupposes the kind of dualism that we have already seen reason to reject: a dualism that sees reality as comprising two sorts of realms, the natural and the supernatural, the physical and the spiritual, the material and the immaterial. It thinks of the mind or soul as a mysterious entity that can violate the laws of nature. In short, it thinks of mind or soul as an entity that transcends the world of nature, one whose acts - designated acts of free will - are nothing short of miracles.

Second, this conception of free will offers only a temporary respite from the difficulties posed by the Determinism or Chance dilemma. For the dilemma arises again with respect to the postulated mind or soul. How did we come to have it? Was it preordained for us, by God perhaps, or by other causal factors in the spiritual domain? Or did we get it just by chance? In either case we seem to have no choice in the matter. After all, it is not up to us to choose the nature of our immaterial minds or souls any more than it is up to us to choose what genes we inherit from our parents or what chance mutations our genes may have undergone. Clearly, there is no escaping this dilemma.

The conclusions we are forced to if we accept the presuppositions of this dilemma are stark ones. No-one ever does, or even can, make genuine choices or act freely. No-one is really free in a deep sense of the word, any beliefs to the contrary being shallowly conceived. No-one is ever truly responsible for his or her actions since there is no possible circumstance - whether in a deterministic world or in an indeterministic one, whether in a natural world or a supernatural one - in which we choose, or have control over, the self that is "given" to us. Ultimately, we are puppets of the fates of causality or chance, living lives that are meaningless.

According to this line of reasoning, there are no conceivable circumstances, no possible worlds, in which the concepts of freedom, responsibility, or meaningfulness have any application. These conclusions, if correct, would have profound consequences, not only for our theoretical conception of our status in the universe, but also for our practical dealings with our

fellows: it would mean that our ordinary practices of praising and blaming, of assigning responsibility in private judgments or in courts of law, would be unfounded and without justification.

### **The fallacy of persuasive redefinition.**

But we don't have to accept these bleak and counterintuitive conclusions. The reasoning from which they are derived involves an all too common kind of fallacy: the fallacy of persuasive redefinition.

Let me illustrate in terms of a different example: the concept of solidity. Just as we ordinarily distinguish between circumstances in which we are free and ones in which we are not, so we also distinguish between objects that are solid and ones that are not. A concrete floor and a thick plank of sound wood are solid; marshy ground and rotten planks are not. As Aristotle pointed out: "it is the business of the language of 'properties', as also of definitions, to distinguish."<sup>16</sup>

Now consider an argument which purports to conjure this distinction away. Arthur Eddington once claimed that if we were able to inspect a block of concrete at the sub-microscopic level we would see that the molecules and atoms of which it is composed are at least as distant from one another as the planets in our solar system. At the "deep" level of atomic physics, he pointed out, our block of solid concrete and our solid plank are full of empty space. He even went to so far as to suggest that this profound discovery had radical practical consequences: stepping on a concrete floor or a solid plank, he concluded, is as risky as stepping on a swarm of flies. We ordinary folk, he claimed, are shallow folk who don't understand what "solid" really means. Its real meaning is such that nothing ever has the property of being solid.

But this is preposterous. Eddington seems ignorant of Aristotle's point about the function of language. It is not we who don't understand the meaning of "solid"; it is Eddington. He<sup>17</sup> has used seemingly subtle and sophisticated reasoning to try to persuade us that our commonsensical beliefs are mistaken. But

in fact all he has done is to try to persuade us to forget the ordinary criteria for the use of the word "solid" and adopt new ones. He is trying to persuade us to redefine the word "solid". Yet if we were to accept his redefinition of the term, we'd not have learned a new fact about the world; we'd merely have fallen victim to his word-play. The old distinction between what one can safely rely on to support one's tread would now have to be marked by a new pair of words. Instead of saying that the concrete is solid whereas the marshy ground is not, we'd have to say something like "The concrete is dolid but the marshy ground is not dolid". We'd have changed our language but made no advance in our understanding of how the world works.

Much the same needs to be said, I submit, about the reasoning of those who would try to persuade us - on the grounds given above - that no-one is ever "genuinely", "really", "truly", or "ultimately" free in the allegedly "deep" sense of the word "free". The weasel-words ("genuinely", "really", "truly", or "ultimately" and "deep") are the give-away. They are sure signs that a linguistic conjuring job is taking place. We are being subjected to an attempt to persuade us to abandon what we ordinarily mean by the words "free" and "not free", and to adopt new - allegedly "deeper" - criteria for their application. But we make no advance if we go along with these persuasive arguments. We would still need to find words to distinguish between the master and the slave, the warden and the prisoner, the cases where we make choices and those in which we don't, and so on. All that will have changed is that we will have had to invent new words for the old distinction, new bottles for the old wine.

Those who have tried to persuade us that we are never "really" free have subjected us to nothing more than semantic sophistry.

This should become clear when we step back and take a closer look at one of the presuppositions relied on by both horns of the dilemma with which they try to confront us: the presupposition that if I have no control over what I am, because -

in the final analysis - I don't choose what I am<sup>18</sup>, then I have no control over which acts I will perform.

Is this presupposition true?

I think not. From the indisputable fact that - ultimately - we don't choose, and hence aren't responsible for, what we are, it does not follow that we don't choose, or aren't responsible for, what we do. In other words, from the fact that nature, nurture - and perhaps even sheer chance - make us what we are, it doesn't follow that we ourselves don't play a role in determining what actions we will perform. Equally, from the fact that neither the master nor the slave chose their parents or the circumstances in which they would be born, it doesn't follow that the master can't make choices and exercise freedoms that are unavailable to the slave. We all know that he can.

The doctrine of Causal Determinism is consistent with the view that Eddington's morrow is determined in part by what he does today. It does not commit us to saying that his tomorrow is determined independently of what he does today.<sup>19</sup> Causal Determinism says that the future is determined by the present and the present by the past. It certainly does not say that the future is determined irrespective of what happens in the present.

Causal Determinism, in short, no more implies Fatalism than does Logical Determinism. As I put it earlier with respect to Bob Hawke's political ambitions and machinations, his nature and nurture may well have given him these. But they operated through him, not despite him. Likewise with Arthur Eddington. The laws of nature, both those of nature and those of nurture, may well have determined what decision he would make about whether or not to smoke the next day. But these, once more, operate through him, not despite him. Both were free agents to the extent that they were neither compelled to do what they did nor prevented from doing what they chose to do.

The notions of free will and responsibility, and the sort of significance we attach to both, are in no way compromised by our conception of man as a wholly natural being.

Nor are they in any way compromised by the supposition that what we are is a consequence of factors - deterministic or indeterministic - over which we have no control. The kind of freedom that is required if we are to live our lives in meaningful fashion isn't threatened either by determinism as such, or by indeterminism as such. It is threatened only by causes and accidents that prevent us from acting in ways we choose or that compel us to act in ways we do not choose.

Thus if Bob Hawke had chosen to pursue a political career and had been prevented from doing so by ill health or accidental incapacitation, for instance, then to that extent he would not have been free. And if Arthur Eddington had chosen to give up smoking but had been in the grip of an addiction to continue, then to that extent he too would not have been free to act otherwise. But in the absence of such compulsions or impediments to action both were free to act as they chose. And the lives of both men, politician and physicist respectively, had a significance that was in no way impaired by the fact that they were products of evolution, nature's blind designer.

As it was with them, so it can be with us.

To repeat what I said earlier: "No gods are needed to give our lives meaning. No future life is needed to give meaning to the present life. We ourselves can choose to give our lives meaning, purpose, and value right here and now." In short, life can have meaning in the natural, purely material, world - the one with which we are all familiar.

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\* Based on a talk to the NZ Association of Rationalists and Humanists (Auckland, New Zealand, 2002).

<sup>1</sup> H. L. Mencken, "Memorial Service", copyright 1922 by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., and renewed 1950 by H. L. Mencken.

<sup>2</sup> *Genesis* 7:23.

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<sup>3</sup> For instance, he punished King David for carrying out a census that he himself had ordered and then complied with David's request that others be punished instead of him by sending a plague to kill 70,000 people [II *Samuel* 24:1-15]

<sup>4</sup> *Numbers* 31:17-18.

<sup>5</sup> *Judges* 11:34-39.

<sup>6</sup> *Isaiah* 13:16.

<sup>7</sup> *Jeremiah* 19:9. For other instances in which God causes, commands, or concurs with cannibalism see *Leviticus* 26:29, *Deuteronomy* 28:53-58, *Ezekiel* 5:10.

<sup>8</sup> *I Samuel*, 15:3 and *Joshua* 10. And by way of explanation of why only one of the indigenous peoples made peace with the invaders, we are told "For it was of the Lord to harden their hearts, to meet Israel in battle that he might utterly destroy them, that they might receive no mercy, . . . ." [*Joshua* 11:20]. The occasion for killing was contrived by God himself.

<sup>9</sup> To suppose that the New Testament God is different from the God of the Old Testament is to dissent from Jesus's reported view of the matter: it is to be guilty of the Marcionite heresy.

<sup>10</sup> The book of *Revelation* tells us that "everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who has been slain" [*Revelation* 13:8] will go to Hell where they "will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb; and the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever: and they have no rest day or night." [*Revelation* 14:10-11].

<sup>11</sup> As is acknowledged by many liberal biblical scholars including the less conservative members of the Jesus Seminar.

<sup>12</sup> Reflecting on his own list of God-generated disasters and diseases, Mark Twain [in *Letters from the Earth*, posthumously published in 1938] commented:

It is curious - the way the human mind works. The Christian begins with this straight proposition . . . : God is all-knowing, and all-powerful.

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This being the case, nothing can happen without his knowing beforehand that it is going to happen; nothing happens without his permission; nothing can happen that he chooses to prevent.

That is definite enough, isn't it? It makes the Creator distinctly responsible for everything that happens, doesn't it? . . .

[Man] equips the Creator with every trait that goes to the making of a fiend, and then arrives at the conclusion that a fiend and a father are the same thing! . . . What do you think of the human mind? I mean, in case you think there is a human mind.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Heath, *The Philosopher's Alice*, [London, Academy Editions, 1974, p. 201]

<sup>14</sup> Raymond D. Bradley, "Must the Future Be What It Is Going to Be?" *Mind*, April, 1959.

<sup>15</sup> Sir Arthur Eddington, *The Nature of the Physical World*, p.313; quoted by L. Susan Stebbing, *Philosophy and the Physicists*, p.163.

<sup>16</sup> Aristotle, *Topics*, Bk. V, para. 2, 130b.

<sup>18</sup> It is obvious that, in the final analysis, I don't choose what I am. Let us use the term "self" as an abbreviation for the expression "what I am". Then, unless my self has existed for all eternity along with God (a supposition that nobody would seriously entertain) then it is obvious that there must have been a temporal beginning to my self, to what I am. And this original self cannot - without contradiction - be supposed to have been chosen by an earlier stage of my self. This conclusion holds no matter what metaphysical status we assign to the self: whether we conceive it as a spiritual entity, or a material one, or as a composite of two such entities.

<sup>19</sup> Raymond D. Bradley, "Causality, Fatalism, and Morality", *Mind*, October, 1963.