The Paradox of New Atheism: A Critique of Meaning, Belief, and Scientific Persuasion

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Statement of Originality

This is to certify that the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any other degree or purpose.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work, and that all assistance received in preparing this thesis and all sources have been acknowledged.

AI Statement:

This thesis was written and edited by the author. Standard academic tools, including reference management software and Grammarly for grammar and style checking, were used to support clarity and consistency. No generative text was employed in the preparation of the final document.

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I confirm that no chapters of this thesis have been published or submitted for publication. However, ideas developed in Chapter 10 informed my article *"Science communicators need to stop telling everybody the universe is a meaningless void,"* published in *The Conversation* (2024), and later discussed in an interview on *ABC Triple J Hack*.

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Introduction

0.1 The Rise and Limits of Neoatheist Persuasion

In the early twenty-first century, the public face of atheism experienced a dramatic change. What was previously a private philosophical stance or marginal intellectual position suddenly became, in the wake of 9/11, a highly visible and polarising cultural force. Sam Harris arrived on the scene first, with his book *The End of Faith* (2004), and he was then followed by Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens. They not only became combative critics of religion's influence in political, educational and ethical life, but also defenders of secular reason more generally. Religion was presented as being both intellectually indefensible and socially harmful, and their works draw on arguments from the fields of evolutionary biology, neuroscience, cognitive psychology, and Enlightenment rationalism (Dawkins, 2006; Harris, 2004; Hitchens, 2007; Dennett, 2006). They positioned themselves as public intellectuals and as a necessary response to global terrorism, religious fundamentalism, and perceived declines in scientific literacy. They also presented as scholars, seeking to revive the ideals of secular rationalism and empirical inquiry. Although the initial wave of New Atheism has passed, its claims still circulate through social media. The continuing creation and re-circulation of algorithm-driven posts, as well as podcasts and online forums, ensure that its rhetoric remains present in contemporary debates about religion and science. For this reason, online videos and their critiques form an important focus of this thesis, as the most visible afterlife of neoatheist persuasion in the public sphere.

New Atheism was not a philosophical school, and it was not even a renewed form of unbelief. It was more of a moment in time when cultural anxieties and geopolitical shock converged, and this presented itself somewhat as a renewed confidence in scientific authority. Atheists had long been part of intellectual life, but between 2004 and 2007 the New Atheist movement crystallised when four prominent authors and intellectuals came to the forefront. During this time, Sam Harris (2004) published *The End of Faith*, Richard Dawkins (2006) released *The God Delusion*, Daniel Dennett (2006) wrote *Breaking the Spell*, and Christopher Hitchens (2007) followed with *God Is Not Great*. These books were all bestsellers, which was unusual for the genre, and atheism moved from being a private conviction to a public campaign. The authors were quickly grouped together and labelled "the Four Horsemen". This was a term used partly in jest, but it aimed to capture their self-presentation as cultural critics who entered a landscape shaped by fear of extremism and distrust of institutions with new digital forms of attention.

There were several reasons why the movement gained traction. The atmosphere after the shock of 9/11 was one in which religious belief, especially in its political forms, was viewed with suspicion. There had already been advances in cognitive science, evolutionary psychology, and neuroscience, which appeared to offer better naturalistic accounts for religious phenomena. However, the early web, with its emerging social platforms, created an audience for these ideas. This audience was ready-made, technically literate, sceptical, and attracted to sharp, polemical argument. The style in which New Atheism spoke to its audience was not only confident and confrontational but also suited

to the moment and enabled the rapid transition of their arguments from scientific to cultural authority.

The aims of the movement were never fully codified, but several themes emerged and appeared consistently. New Atheism aimed to promote a moral framework that was secular and grounded in reason rather than revelation, and it tried to achieve this through dismantling the intellectual legitimacy of religion, challenging the social privileges afforded to religion, and defending science from what it saw as an irrational encroachment.

The movement was unable to persist as a cultural force. Although it had early momentum, its public influence waned by about the mid-2010s, despite its content persisting online. There are no simple reasons for this decline. Internal fractures emerged, especially in the areas of politics, gender, and the limits of free speech, and the rhetorical style that initially attracted attention, which included aggression, impatience, and dismissiveness, began to become misaligned with shifting cultural norms. Additionally, as social media evolved, the movement's message became fragmented into shorter, sharper, and less reflective content. The most widely circulated arguments were not sustained, but rather were small moments of confrontation, algorithmically selected for outrage rather than insight.

Whether New Atheism "failed" depends on the criteria used. If the goal was to produce a lasting philosophical school, it did not. If the aim was to persuade large inumbers of religious adherents to abandon belief, there is little evidence that it succeeded. Where it perhaps did succeed was in shaping online discourse and providing a shared identity and vocabulary for sceptics and secular communities. In this area, it has left a considerable

afterlife that lives primarily on digital platforms, awaiting encounter by younger audiences. Multiple clips, debates, and algorithmically curated fragments lie dormant and are ready to be reactivated by the next terror incident, immigration debate, or religious overreach.

New Atheism is prominent in digital culture, from long-form YouTube debates to short-form TikTok snippets. But despite this, the movement has largely failed to persuade the audiences it most hoped to reach. Whether considered demographically or psychologically, religious belief remains resilient. The religious population is projected to grow globally into the mid-twenty-first century, outpacing secular affiliation. Public trust in science has become more divided, especially in the United States. Attitudes toward topics like climate change, vaccination, and evolution often split along ideological lines and spark cultural debates. This growing division has many causes, not just based on facts but also rooted in philosophy, rhetoric, and history. Past conflicts between science and society still influence these issues, and the gap is widening as people's worldviews and ways of communicating continue to diverge. Since the Enlightenment, a mainly European 18th-century intellectual movement that emphasised science, reason, and individualism, many assumed that scientific advances would naturally erode religious belief and authority. This expectation was later codified in nineteenth-century "conflict" narratives. Yet there is a far more complex and entangled history of science and religion than the conflict models can explain, one in which religion and science have not only coexisted and adapted, but also co-evolved. Religion has played important cultural, historical, and social roles that cannot be fully explained by secular critique or rational analysis. While religion

offers narrative depth and moral meaning, secularism often provides only mechanism, criticism, or disapproval in its place. There has been little by way of existential replacement.

New Atheism emerged with the ambition of shifting public attitudes toward both religion and science. Its actual influence, however, appears narrower than the movement expected. A series of high-profile books in the mid-2000s gave New Atheism exceptional visibility. Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* (2006) reached the top of bestseller lists in the United Kingdom and the United States and sold at a rate more commonly associated with mainstream popular writing than with science titles (Doward, 2006). Dawkins later noted that global sales had passed three million copies by 2014 (Dawkins, 2014). Sam Harris's *The End of Faith* (2004) and Christopher Hitchens's *God Is Not Great* (2007) enjoyed similar success, and together these books helped bring atheism into public conversation in a way that had not been typical for some time.

Even so, sociological studies suggest that this visibility did not translate into a broad demographic footprint. In the United States, those who most closely identify with New Atheism—typically people who emphasise science and openly critique religion—form a relatively distinct sub-group within the larger nonreligious population. They tend to be male, university-educated, financially comfortable, and politically liberal (Cragun, 2015, pp. 195–211). Survey data also show that the rise in the religiously unaffiliated began before New Atheism gained momentum and continued after its peak, indicating that the

trend reflects wider secularising movements rather than the impact of New Atheist arguments alone (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Patterns of online engagement point in the same direction. Public debates and video clips featuring Dawkins, Harris, or Hitchens regularly attracted large audiences, especially on YouTube, but their reach appears to have been shaped as much by platform dynamics as by broad public appeal. Research on digital media suggests that adversarial or argumentative material is more likely to be promoted by recommendation systems because it keeps viewers watching, particularly in areas of cultural tension (Nicas, 2018; Larson, 2020, pp. 143–144). This meant that New Atheist content circulated widely in Western online spaces, yet such circulation rarely translated into deeper engagement or a stable collective identity. The movement ultimately displayed a combination of high visibility and limited demographic breadth, with little evidence of sustained influence outside audiences already inclined to agree.

The New Atheists aim to enlighten. They mainly rely on rational persuasion, but this approach rarely leads to real conversations with their audiences. This paradox is central to this thesis. The challenge for the New Atheists is not about logic, accuracy, or method. Instead, it is about narrative, identity, and relationships. They often align with science popularisers and thus have arguments that are empirically coherent, yet they tend to be more rhetorically forceful. This rhetorical approach overlooks certain dimensions of belief, particularly those that are symbolic, affective, and communal. As Kahan (2015)

notes, survey responses on evolution or climate change often register “who one is” rather than “what one knows” (p. 5). Beliefs cannot be dislodged by data alone, as they are embedded within moral intuitions, cultural allegiances and identity-laden worldviews. Therefore, the use of empirical reasoning often triggers cognitive defences rather than reflection, and produces polarisation rather than persuasion.

The neoatheist project seeks to extend the myths of the Enlightenment era while still having faith in a rationalist model of the mind. It assumes that its subjects are rational and autonomous, and that they will evaluate all claims dispassionately and update their beliefs accordingly. But the human mind does not usually work this way. Narrative psychologists have found that our thinking is shaped more by stories and patterns of cause, meaning, and identity than by pure logic. As Bruner (1990) notes, stories have a narratorial voice and act as “viable instruments for social negotiation" (pp. 54–55). McAdams (1993) likewise writes, “if you want to know me, then you must know my story, for my story defines who I am” (p. 11). These views demonstrate a human identity that is not fixed, but continually revised through narrative. Religion also functions as a moral and narrative ecology, and is not simply a set of falsifiable propositions about the cosmos. It offers orientation in suffering, community through ritual, and identity through tradition, so to attack religion purely on evidentiary grounds is to misunderstand its function. It is to mistake poetry for hypothesis and myth for error.

When the rhetoric of New Atheism conflates religion with all forms of extremism, this tends to narrow the public imagination in terms of what religion actually does. Regardless of the diversity of the traditions, complexity of the histories, or depth of the philosophies, New Atheism attempts to collapse these completely into a caricature of fundamentalism. While this approach may galvanise the neoatheist base, it also risks reproducing the very tribalism it claims to oppose. Additionally, it overlooks the development of ideas and theories in communication, particularly in science communication, which has progressed significantly in recent decades. Such communication is now a dialogical, culturally situated practice that requires respect for audiences' values, contexts, and experiences rather than simple correction or dismissal (Davies & Horst, 2016, p. 2). Bucchi and Trench (2021) go further, describing science communication itself as cultural in nature (p. 183).

The definitions of science and religion need to be conceptually grounded. The terms "science" and "religion" are often treated as broad cultural forces, but greater clarity is required with regard to how the New Atheist movement positions itself in relation to each. New Atheists often refer to religion as a set of erroneous propositions, and usually only use as examples those groups that follow doctrines with great rigidity. Less attention is paid to those other communities that use religion as a symbolic and communal language through which meaning is negotiated, whose constellation of practices and narrative traditions has varied across different historical and cultural settings. Additionally, in Western contexts, there has been a long interaction between colonial encounters, the rise of science, and changing assumptions about belief (Cantwell Smith, 1962; Asad, 1993;

Harrison, 2007). Religion may therefore be best understood as a hybrid phenomenon within this specific context. While it contains truth-claims, practices, and symbolic systems, it also shapes identity and orients individuals both narratively and communally within moral and cosmic frameworks. A broader definition of religion integrates metaphysical claims with narrative world-making, ritual practices, and moral formation. This broader definition of religion allows room for variation across traditions and helps identify where neoatheist critiques succeed and where they overreach.

The category of "science" also requires clarification. The rhetoric used by New Atheists generally implies that science is a unified, culture-free method that naturally displaces older forms of meaning as knowledge advances. However, this assumption reflects a specific Enlightenment narrative of progress rather than an uncontested account of scientific practice. Historians and philosophers of science have long demonstrated that scientific knowledge emerges from particular intellectual traditions and institutional contexts (Taylor, 1991; Harrison, 2015). When science is framed not only as a means of explaining the world but also as a solvent of inherited meaning, it comes to function as a form of cultural authority rather than a purely epistemic one.

Placed within this lineage, New Atheism can be understood as inheriting a nineteenth-century conflict narrative in which scientific insight is framed as liberation from superstition and ignorance (Draper, 1874; White, 1896). These narratives are emotionally satisfying, culturally portable, and well suited to popular media, which helps explain their persistence and online appeal. Rather than adjudicating the truth of New Atheist arguments, this thesis is concerned with the conditions under which those arguments fail

to persuade. Two limitations are identified. First, the movement struggled to replace the narrative and existential meanings it sought to dismantle. Second, its rhetorical conception of reason was too narrow, neglecting the cultural and psychological dimensions through which belief is formed and sustained.

The home of this thesis is in the History and Philosophy of Science. Drawing on the theories of philosophy, science communication, religious studies, narrative psychology, and sociocultural theory, this thesis argues that the most public forms of atheism have misjudged the nature of belief and underestimated the cultural and psychological functions of religion. This thesis does not try to defend religion's metaphysical claims, and despite being primarily a critique of New Atheism, it will at times extend this critique to certain religious functions. However, its overall aim is to defend a more humane rationality that goes beyond deduction or demystification. It must therefore recognise how the architecture of cognition has evolved and how identity is framed by narrative. As Charles Taylor (2007) argues, secularism must offer moral sources and not simply subtraction stories. Frameworks need to exist from within which individuals can locate themselves in a cosmos that is not indifferent to meaning (pp. 22, 157, 291).

This thesis develops these ideas through ongoing critique. The first chapters look at how New Atheism struggles to offer strong narrative alternatives to religion, copies the hero's journey, and connects with transhumanist ideas about the future. Later chapters discuss the limits of scientific authority, how neoatheist figures shape their identities

through performance, and why determinism can seem appealing in a simplified way. The final movement shifts from critique to construction, outlining the ethical and rhetorical principles needed to reclaim science popularisation as a relational and meaning-sensitive endeavour.

What's at risk is more than just the reputation of science or the appeal of secularism. It's also our ability to find common ground in a world where people's ways of understanding are growing further apart. For rational arguments to work, we need to see them as a way to connect with others, not as the dismantling of illusion alone, but as the telling of stories in which truth and meaning can coexist.

0.2 Aims and Scope

This thesis begins by asking a difficult question: why do rational arguments so often fail to persuade people about religion, science, and identity? It then suggests better, ethically sound ways to communicate in secular settings. Although the focus is occasionally on the claims themselves, it is more on how those claims are delivered, interpreted, and even simply heard across different cultural and ideological settings. It further argues how these arguments might be reframed to honour both epistemic integrity and existential meaning.

Recent debates in science and religion have been heavily influenced by New Atheism. Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett have adopted a combative style. They highly prize scientific evidence and reasoned arguments

and often take a confrontational approach, describing religious belief as lacking intellectual value or even being harmful to society. Inside some circles, this rhetoric persuades; more broadly, it has tended to widen cultural divides rather than build understanding. This thesis examines the narrative forms, rhetorical postures, and communication strategies used by these figures, and considers both their appeal and their limits, including unintended consequences.

A fundamental theme of this thesis is what Charles Taylor describes as the "subtraction story". In this view, religious and mythic stories are peeled away to leave behind a secular and rational core. This thesis challenges this view. Human knowledge is not based on reason alone, but also has a cognitive and psychological basis. The concept of beliefs, as developed within the frameworks of narrative psychology (Bruner, 1990; McAdams, 1997), cultural cognition (Kahan, 2012), and science communication (Davies & Horst, 2016), involves both cognitive and personal dimensions. Many secular arguments fail not because of weak logic, but because they fail to resonate with the symbols and patterns that people use to make sense of the world.

The scope is deliberately interdisciplinary. The thesis draws on philosophy of religion, science communication, cognitive psychology, cultural anthropology, and sociology. There are four domains within this analysis:

- How New Atheism has used rhetorical strategies and appeals to scientific authority to paint a picture of reductive materialism through oppositional identity formation.

- The narrative vacuum that secularism can leave, including the failure of many secular outlooks to offer existential orientation, communal practices, or mythic structures comparable to religion.

- Insights from science communication and cognitive science, especially motivated reasoning, identity-protective cognition, and the social dynamics of belief revision.

- The functions of religion, from both an anthropological and psychological perspective. How religion forms moral grounding, social cohesion and symbolic world-building across cultures and histories.

Together, these domains support both scholarly contribution and practical guidance for those working at the intersection of science and belief. The thesis supports a secular approach that values both intellectual rigor and emotional intelligence. It encourages telling the truth in ways that help people understand each other, respect one another, and find common ground. This is about more than truth and technique. The shape of our cultural future is also at stake. New Atheists have often acted as though removing religion is the route to saving the world. This study suggests the opposite may be closer to the truth: the world's fate may depend on narrowing divides, building trust between science and religion, and recognising the moral and symbolic power of belief when it is lived with love, humility, and compassion. A faith that accepts stronger scientific explanations, sometimes called the "God of the gaps," is not a sign of weakness. Instead, it shows intellectual humility and a willingness to coexist. Asking for more than this, such as trying to remove religious meaning entirely, often reflects personal pride rather than a true commitment to science. This approach can replace myth with ideology and wonder with a

sense of superiority. If we want to keep both truth and meaning, we need a new way to communicate. This approach should value connection instead of just winning arguments, stories instead of mockery, and a shared future instead of simply being right.

0.3 Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The thesis employs an interpretive-critical research design, combining close reading and rhetorical analysis of texts, arguments, social media, and cultural practices with evaluative analysis of their presuppositions and consequences. It has its disciplinary home in the History and Philosophy of Science, but also draws on narrative psychology, anthropology, and science communication. The principal corpus consists of three New Atheists - Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris, plus science popularisers Neil deGrasse Tyson, Brian Greene, and Brian Cox, and Christian apologists John Lennox and Frank Turek. Major monographs are studies, along with a systematic sample of YouTube outputs (lectures, debates, interviews) located by structured searches (name + "debate"/"lecture"/"talk") and a survey of official channels and widely distributed uploads. Outputs for analysis are chosen by analysing their prevalence in public discourse, circulation metrics, and thematic relevance to the thesis aims.

At its core, this thesis is a work of philosophical critique. It uses conceptual analysis, narrative hermeneutics, and pragmatic reasoning. It runs in agreement with the claim made by Charles Taylor (2007), that belief is not simply a propositional assent but an orientation of oneself within moral and symbolic frameworks. From this vantage point, it

examines how New Atheist writers lean on rationalism and scientific authority while giving less attention to the cultural and existential roles that belief plays. Although New Atheists are not, strictly speaking, science communicators or science popularisers, a distinctive contribution of this thesis is to interpret their public rhetoric through the lens of science communication theory, given their recurrent appeals to scientific authority and their uptake of communicative strategies associated with science popularisation. The analysis draws particularly on Mary Midgley's critique of scientism (1992) and is also guided by Susan Haack's pluralist epistemology (2007). Both assist in questioning the scope of scientific explanation and the peril of pushing the authority of science into matters of meaning, identity, and moral discernment.

This approach follows the broader hermeneutic tradition described by Gadamer (1989), which holds that our understanding is always shaped by history and culture. Rather than claiming a neutral perspective, this thesis looks at how religious and secular stories shape and test truth within specific cultural settings.

Much of this thesis draws on narrative psychology and anthropological theories of meaning. Scholars like Jerome Bruner (1990), Dan P. McAdams (1993), Jonathan Gottschall (2012), and William Storr (2019) suggest that people are natural storytellers who build their identities through narrative. Religious worldviews often act as mythic narratives, offering metaphysical beliefs, moral guidance, a sense of community, and ways to make sense of suffering and mortality. This thesis uses narrative theory to explore why rational critiques of religion often do not persuade when they overlook these symbolic aspects.

From an anthropological perspective, this thesis draws on the work of Pascal Boyer (2001), David Lewis-Williams (2002), Sosis and Alcorta (2003), and David Sloan Wilson (2010). They examine the ritual, evolutionary, and cognitive aspects of religion, and according to these scholars, religion persists not because of the failure of reason, but because of the adaptive practices and ideas it contains, which address social and existential needs. These needs are not addressed by the common neoatheist perspective, which often sees religion mainly as a set of false beliefs that science should correct.

From the field of science communication, the thesis examines how messages are presented, how people defend their beliefs, and how the public trusts science. It builds on criticism of the "deficit model" (Bucchi & Trench, 2021) and on ideas about identity from Kahan et al. (2012), Kahan (2015), and S. R. Davies and M. Horst (2016). This research demonstrates that people evaluate scientific claims based on their existing values, group identities, and cultural affiliations. Still, many well-known science popularisers rely on instinctive and confrontational methods that ignore these findings. The gap between evidence and practice is a central concern of this thesis.

This argument also shows how public trust in science is built, using ideas from the sociology of knowledge, especially those described by Bruno Latour (2004). Latour's idea of the "factish," which is part fact and part fetish, shows how public knowledge in diverse societies depends on culture and context (p. 274). Thus, the question is not only whether claims are true, but how they function symbolically and socially across different groups within society.

Because the thesis is within the school of the History and Philosophy of Science, it situates the rise of New Atheism in its historical context. It revisits the Draper–White conflict thesis and its critiques, which suggest that the supposed science–religion "warfare" is largely a historiographical construct (Brooke, 1991; Numbers, 2009). Contemporary secular writers have adapted this conflict narrative, connecting neoatheist discourse to the broader history of Enlightenment rationalism, secular reform, and scientific triumphalism. This perspective also makes sense of transhumanism, determinism, and reductionism as modern myths. Sections on free will, cosmic narrative, and the "science of the gaps" follow these lineages across physics, psychology, and religious thought.

Instead of just situating itself within a single academic field, this thesis takes an integrative approach. It brings together ideas from psychology, anthropology, philosophy, history, religious studies, and communication theory to explain why the success of rational persuasion is often limited. It offers a look at more human-focused, culturally aware methods and argues how these may succeed where critique and deconstruction fail. The goal is to offer a broad framework for secular engagement that is informed by science, is sensitive to culture, and mindful of ethics.

0.4 Contribution to Knowledge

This thesis offers four linked contributions to science communication, religious studies, and the philosophy of science, all centred on identity, persuasion, and meaning in secular discourse.

1) Recasting New Atheism as an incomplete cultural project.

This thesis explores New Atheism as both a critique of religion and as a movement that does not fully meet existential human needs. While Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens challenge religious metaphysics, they rarely provide real alternatives to the narrative, communal, and symbolic roles that religion plays. In the context of Enlightenment rationalism, this gap seems to be less of an oversight and more like a structural limitation. There is a clear paradox here: even though New Atheism seeks to remove religious meaning, its arguments often use similar narrative forms, including the idea of a hero's journey toward rational freedom. By examining these aesthetic and ethical issues, this thesis offers a new perspective on the cultural role and rhetorical style of New Atheism.

2) Moving beyond the deficit model by foregrounding identity.

This thesis uses ideas from identity-protective cognition, motivated reasoning, and social intuitionism to show that beliefs about science, religion, and morality are closely linked to feelings of belonging, social status, and group stories. Seen this way, science denial is more about protecting cultural identity than about being irrational. This observation may clarify why neoatheist and secular arguments frequently do not resonate

with individuals from diverse cultural or religious backgrounds. The way messages are delivered, and the signals they send about identity, can matter more than the facts themselves. The contribution is to consolidate a view of science communication as a relational, context-sensitive practice rather than information transfer.

3) Reading secular grand narratives as modern myth.

Transhumanism, Big History, and cosmic evolution are seen as achievements of scientific thinking. Although these stories use familiar mythic themes such as heroism, salvation, and destiny, they do not have the rituals, moral significance, or emotional depth that help traditional myths last. By treating these stories as modern myths, this thesis shows why they inspire some people but do not meet everyone's deeper existential needs. Even in secular times, the desire for meaning remains and often shifts into scientific worldviews that struggle to carry the same meaning.

4) Proposing a humane framework for secular communication.

This thesis uses ideas from narrative psychology (Bruner, 1990; McAdams, 1993), affective and social cognition, and health communication to offer a story-driven, relational approach to popularisation. The aim is to keep high standards of evidence while building trust through honesty. It is important to listen as much as we inform, and to connect as much as we correct. The model avoids both relativism and triumphalism. It supports a form of secular rationality that values emotional intelligence, ethical awareness, and open dialogue between people with different views.

Media ecology and method: how this work is done and why it matters now.

A further contribution lies in where and how the debate now unfolds. Social media

algorithms show religion and science content to a new generation, often grouping viewers into similar belief systems. The thesis examines how algorithms influence content by looking at popular videos and channels. It shows that factors like alignment cues, tone, and format affect persuasion even before people consider the actual evidence.

Most chapters end with a brief summary on science communication. When necessary, they also encourage a more open discussion, helping turn theory into practice. Some materials surveyed are not new; but their value here is in the reframing. When viewed through the lens of communication theory, familiar debates take on a new perspective. Instead of focusing on knowledge gaps, resistance often comes from issues of identity. Success is less about winning arguments and more about creating lasting understanding.

Design of the argument: order, tone, and reach.

The chapters in this thesis are organised to build a cumulative and compelling argument. The sequence does not follow a strict structure and is deliberately non-linear. For example, the science communication chapter (Chapter 10) is presented quite late in the thesis, and this allows for earlier analyses to be properly developed and fully appreciated before moving on to their application. The sequence is structured to progressively enhance its impact and emotional resonance by initially identifying the problem and subsequently presenting practical solutions. Although the work is framed through science communication, modern cultural aspects are considered through popular examples and audience responses. This keeps the arguments concrete and culturally relevant. When all of these ideas are considered together, a narrative unfolds that contains a core of rational

thinking but with a scope that is significantly expanded. While truth is essential, it is not the only factor. It's when rational thinking connects with human stories and personal identity that real persuasion happens.

0.5 Chapter Overview

Chapter 1 — Atheism and the Crisis of Meaning: The Narrative Vacuum in Secular Worldviews

The chapter begins by highlighting a key problem. Secular critique tends to remove religious stories but does not offer emotionally meaningful replacements, which leaves a gap. The discussion explores why people need stories and examines how New Atheism often overlooks the importance of archetypes and the sacred.

Chapter 2 — Secular Myth Making: New Atheism, the Hero's Journey, and the Rise of Transhumanist Eschatology

Explains how New Atheism uses mythic structures like the hero's journey and examines how transhumanism presents a secular version of salvation. It suggests that these stories resemble religious narratives but often miss the deeper sense of redemption.

Chapter 3 — The "God of the Gaps" Reversed: Science, Ego, and Epistemic Overreach

Looks at how some science popularisers and New Atheists extend scientific ideas beyond their proper limits, as though scientific explanations are totalising. It then sketches possibilities for coexistence and mutual enrichment between science and religion.

Chapter 4 — Argument and Counterargument: The Existence of God in Contemporary Debate

Analyses the Turek–Hitchens debate as a case study. Instead of looking at claims separately, it explains how cosmological, moral, and metaphysical arguments are shaped by identity, attitude, and narrative framing.

Chapter 5 — Between Silence and Friendship — Truth, Comfort, and the Human Condition

Explores truth and comfort through the Dawkins–Lennox exchange. It contends that truth and meaning are not opposed, and that some truths may comfort precisely because they align with the deep structure of human existence.

Chapter 6 — Contingency, Credibility, and the Challenge of Religious Particularism

Addresses the "what if you're wrong?" challenge and the cultural location of faith. It considers both pluralism and particularism, reviews how people have responded to uncertainty in the past, and suggests finding a balance between arrogance and humility.

Chapter 7 — Beyond the Myth: Reassessing the Science—Religion Conflict Thesis.

Looks back at Draper and White, clarifies the difference between recording conflict and actually creating it, and explores tensions that existed before the modern conflict thesis. It also discusses Sagan's idea of secular awe and how New Atheism has brought the conflict story back into focus, showing why a simple version of this narrative remains so compelling.

Chapter 8 — Rethinking Religion through Biology.

Presents religion as something rooted in biology and cognition, with strong evolutionary and neural foundations. It questions the idea that faith exists only because of ignorance and ends by suggesting ways to have a more open and honest discussion.

Chapter 9 — Religion, Violence, and the Myth of Inherent Conflict.

Argues that violence is a human issue shaped not only by beliefs, but also by circumstances. It looks at how scapegoating happens in both religious and secular groups and explores how identity and ideology can drive group conflict.

Chapter 10 — Beyond the Facts: New Atheism, Science Popularisation, and the Ethics of Communication

Critiques "fact-bombing" and deficit-model approaches, especially when they overlook people's identities. It encourages a focus on voice, vulnerability, and understanding the audience, and considers why common ground in climate communication is breaking down.

Chapter 11 — Consolation and Cruelty: New Atheism, Afterlife, and the Ethics of Unbelief

Examines how neoatheist and popular writers discuss belief in the afterlife, focusing on figures like Hawking, Harris, and Porco. It also draws on popular examples, such as Ricky Gervais's *After Life*, to ask whether rejecting consolation is necessary, ethical, or effective.

Chapter 12 — Climate Change and Identity: Why Facts Alone Fail

Discusses why simply presenting facts is not always effective. It explains that people's beliefs are influenced by their desire to protect their identity, their distrust of certain groups, and past resentments. It examines how certain neoatheist arguments can exacerbate divisions and suggests employing communication strategies from the health field.

Chapter 13 — The Limits of Rational Persuasion: Free Will, Determinism, and the Ethics of Scientific Discourse

Treats free will as a limit case for rational debate. Examines how not believing in free will can affect behaviour, questions whether determinism is truly certain, and points out the irony in some neoatheist views. It calls for a more compassionate way of discussing these topics.

Chapter 14 — Conclusion: Beyond Critique, Toward a More Humane Rationality

Gathers the threads into principles and practices for secular communication that pair truth with meaning. Describes approaches used by popularisers and neoatheist thinkers, and presents a vision where storytelling, rituals, and the arts help make reason more accessible.

Chapter 1: Atheism and the Crisis of Meaning: The Narrative Vacuum in Secular Worldviews

1.1 The Human Need for Story: Why Meaning Still Matters

Humanity is a species of storytellers. From ancient mythologies to modern science, narratives have shaped how we understand ourselves and our place in the cosmos. Storytelling, as Jonathan Gottschall (2012, p. 103) argues, is not just entertainment; it is the framework through which humans make sense of our existence. Will Storr (2019) describes how stories are essential to the formation of personal and social identity, while Harari (2014) notes that large-scale human coordination is enabled through shared "imagined realities" or social constructs which involve communal belief (p. 32). These constructs offer meaning and purpose through the transformation of randomness into coherence. Religious traditions have often addressed existential questions through storytelling, and these stories not only provide adherents with moral frameworks but they allow them to become part of the grand arc of transformation and transcendence.

By contrast, worldviews within atheism and those that are science-based have often struggled to produce narratives that are comparably emotionally resonant. While scientific frameworks are often grand and intellectually satisfying, they rarely fulfil the deeper

existential roles that religion plays. David Christian's *Origin Story* (2018) is an example of a modern grand narrative that attempts to convey a unified history of humanity and its place within the cosmos, describing the journey from the Big Bang to modern society (pp. 9–12). Carl Sagan also used narrative to evoke cosmic wonder. In *Cosmos*, he famously asserted that "the nitrogen in our DNA, the calcium in our teeth, the iron in our blood, the carbon in our apple pies were made in the interiors of collapsing stars. We are made of starstuff" (Sagan, 1995, p. 233) and this frames humanity not as insignificant, but as deeply connected to the universe. However, he also paradoxically reinforced the "conflict thesis" between science and religion, which was popularised by John William Draper and Andrew Dickson White in the 19th century. He warned that "the suppression of uncomfortable ideas may be common in religion and politics, but it is not the path to knowledge; it has no place in the endeavour of science" (Sagan, 1995, p. 91). This statement echoed the view that intellectual progress has historically been held back by religious authority. Though he was not the last person to argue the conflict thesis, as a public intellectual, he popularised it widely. He also contributed to secular education through his teaching at Cornell University, a secular institution that was ironically co-founded by Andrew Dickson White.

This chapter does not argue that science or atheism is a religion, which is a claim that rattles many New Atheists and is often rebutted. For instance, Paul Tillich (1957) claimed that any worldview involving "ultimate concern" could be considered religious (pp. 1–2), while critics such as Steve Fuller (2007) argue that scientific materialism functions as a continuation of Western religious frameworks by secular means (p. 15). However, as

Stephen Fry notes in his Foreword to The Four Horsemen (2019), it is merely a rhetorical move to frame atheism as religion, which only attempts to discredit it rather than engage in serious analysis (p. 5). This chapter instead explores how similar storytelling frameworks and narrative arcs are employed in both neoatheist and religious discourse. Figures such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens present their arguments through narrative devices that mirror moral and mythic storytelling.

These narrative devices often draw on the hero's journey (the monomyth), an archetypal structure first described by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). As Campbell writes, "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered […] and the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man" (p. 23). This structure is widely applied across cultures, despite being mythic in formation, and neoatheist thinkers often present themselves within this frame. They are solitary, rational protagonists opposing dogma and returning with "enlightenment" for the public.

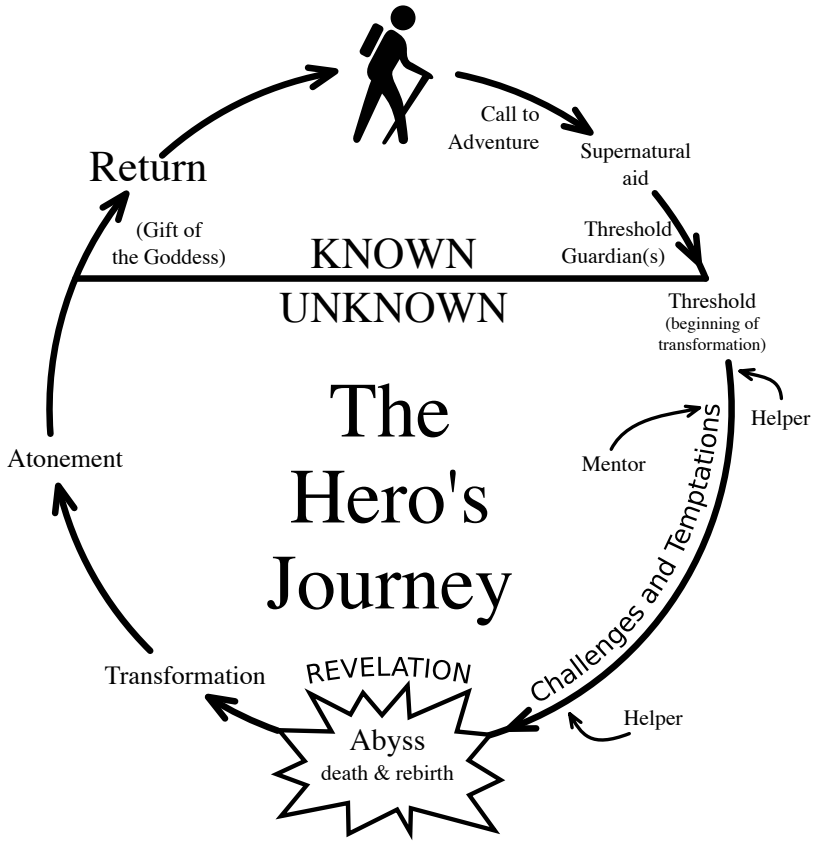

Figure 1. Visual schematic of the hero's journey (Departure, Initiation, Return).
Note. Author's illustration, adapted from a public-domain source. Public domain.

More recently, some science popularisers have moved away from describing the universe as devoid of meaning. Figures such as Neil deGrasse Tyson and Katie Mack argue that purpose can be derived from scientific understanding. In *The End of Everything* (2020), Mack reflects on humanity's place in the cosmos, writing, "We are a species poised between an awareness of our ultimate insignificance and an ability to reach far beyond our mundane lives, into the void, to solve the most fundamental mysteries of the cosmos" (p. 5). While emotionally resonant, such narratives still don't reach the heights of the more comprehensive meaning structures that are often offered by religion, which explain existence and also promise transformation and hope.

There is a parallel story presented in neoatheist discourse: the progress myth. This myth suggests that metaphysics will eventually become redundant, as science will eventually answer all existential questions. This idea is more of a cultural story about knowledge than a proven scientific fact, and many historians and philosophers of science warn against seeing it as a simple, straight path. For example, in The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, Kuhn describes scientific progress as a series of paradigm shifts, where changes happen suddenly instead of gradually (1962, p. 150). The paradigms shape what problems and solutions are possible (p. 135). Thus, the recognition that science both periodically and appreciably revises its own narrative undercuts the expectation that method alone can resolve questions of purpose, value, and existence.

Secular storytelling should not just critique religion alone. The stories need to offer frameworks that resonate on multiple levels, including emotional, social, and philosophical ones. Although science is good at describing the universe, it cannot impart meaning to it. If science can tap into the enduring human need for stories, it can inspire broader cultural engagement and clarify identities without compromising epistemic standards.

1.2 New Atheism's Critiques and Neglect of Meaning

When New Atheism emerged, it attempted to deconstruct the truth claims and social implications of religion. Religious beliefs were often criticised as false and harmful by their prominent advocates, and a strictly naturalistic worldview was promoted. Debunking the supernatural and denouncing dogma were the focus of their works, for example, belief in God was likened to a "delusion" by Dawkins (2006), and the God of the Old Testament was called "arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction" (p. 51). Religion was described by Hitchens (2007), in *God Is Not Great*, as "violent, irrational, intolerant, allied to racism, tribalism, and bigotry, invested in ignorance and hostile to free inquiry, contemptuous of women and coercive toward children" (p. 56). Yet, amid this fervour to discredit religion, comparatively little attention was given in neoatheist writing to what might replace the existential roles religion has played. It has been pointed out by critics that, when traditional faith narratives were dismantled, the deep human need for meaning, purpose, and story was often left unaddressed.

At times, New Atheist authors acknowledge that atheism must still contend with questions of meaning. For instance, Dawkins (2006) argued that science can inspire awe and that secular pursuits are not devoid of purpose. He quotes Carl Sagan's suggestion that a religion "that stressed the magnificence of the Universe as revealed by modern science might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths" (Dawkins, 2006, p. 33). However, these suggestions remain

fragmented and individualistic, far from a cohesive narrative able to unite communities or guide a culture. The movement often projected the message that life has whatever meaning we choose, a sentiment that was popularised by the 2009 atheist bus campaign led by the British Humanist Association: "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life" (British Humanist Association, 2009). As uplifting as they try to be, such slogans sidestep the harder philosophical problem: humans need structures of meaning that are not wholly arbitrary. Psychology researchers consistently find that a coherent meaning framework is associated with psychological well-being and resilience (Park, 2010). Conversely, a lack of meaning in life, often termed an "existential vacuum", is linked to boredom, depression, and maladaptive behaviours (Frankl, 1985, pp. 128–129, 166).

Psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl, writing after the calamities of World War II, introduces the concept of an "existential vacuum." He notes that many modern individuals feel an inner emptiness, a pervasive sense that life is meaningless. He traces this condition to a twofold loss: first, humans are no longer guided by instinct as animals are, and second, the traditional values and narratives that once guided behaviour (often rooted in religion) have largely broken down. "No instinct tells him what he has to do, and no tradition tells him what he ought to do," Frankl writes of "modern man"; as a result, "he either wishes to do what other people do (conformism) or he does what other people wish him to do (totalitarianism)" (p. 128). In other words, people either drift with the crowd or submit to authoritarian ideologies when deprived of an inner compass. They do this in order to fill the void with meaning. Frankl's description of the existential vacuum is

based on his clinical experience and cultural observations (pp. 122, 128); he argues that it manifests chiefly as boredom and can precipitate neuroses, addiction, and aggression (p. 166). It can also be "masked" by a desire for power or pleasure; for example, the obsessive pursuit of wealth, status, or sensual indulgence may stem from a frustrated will to meaning (p. 129). It is therefore unsurprising that this lack of meaning creates fertile ground for the excesses of consumerism, which offers shallow substitutes for deeper existential fulfilment. Frankl's warning, which is empirically grounded, is clear: if people do not find constructive sources of meaning, they will seek fulfilment in substitute gratifications or fanaticism.

Applied to New Atheism, Frankl's insights suggest that there is little solace for existential emptiness to be found in simply telling people what not to believe (e.g., rejecting God). Indeed, some atheists even recognised this deficit toward the end of the New Atheists' peak period. An atheist himself, philosopher Alain de Botton (2012) argued that secular society should learn from religion by deliberately fostering sources of consolation to fill the cultural gap left by the decline of faith, such as communities and rituals. As he put it, "The error of modern atheism has been to overlook how many aspects of religion remain relevant even after its central tenets have been dismissed" (de Botton, 2012, p. 12). Sociologist Phil Zuckerman (2015) argues, in a similar vein, that many nonreligious people pursue meaning through awe and community, from secular forms of belonging and service to existential wonder at the cosmos. These observations show that people require belonging, purpose, and narrative, and that nonbelief does not abolish the desire for belief.

But by framing itself in mostly negative terms, i.e., by what it opposed (superstition, dogma, etc.), New Atheism paid relatively little attention to constructing an affirmative narrative to live by. Justin Brierley (2023), a commentator on religion and atheism, reflects: "What could a movement that was built on tearing down God erect in his place? Science was the obvious alternative—surely that was an objective truth to which all people could aspire? But science turned out to be a poor substitute for a savior" (p. 27). Although Brierley writes from a Christian perspective, he captures a reality that is broadly acknowledged: humans are meaning-seeking creatures, and when one narrative fades, such as an overarching Christian story, people look for meaning elsewhere. A surge in alternative sources of meaning accompanied the waning of New Atheism in the 2010s, from mindfulness meditation and secular spirituality to nationalism and online social-justice activism, indicating that the narrative vacuum would be filled one way or another. As narrative psychologist Dan McAdams (2001) explains, "People selectively appropriate aspects of their experience and imaginatively construe both past and future to construct stories that make sense to them and to their audiences, that vivify and integrate life and make it more or less meaningful" (p. 101). So when dominant cultural stories fall away, people seek new frameworks to structure identity, community, and existential orientation.

1.3 Jung's Warning

Depth psychologist Carl Gustav Jung warns that eliminating religious narratives has psychic repercussions. While he was by no means an orthodox believer, he recognised the psychological utility of religion as a repository of symbols, myths, and moral archetypes that nourish the human psyche. In Jung's view, the decline of religion in modernity had created a spiritual crisis in the Western psyche — a development that echoed Nietzsche's pronouncement of the death of God (Nietzsche, 1887/2012, §125). But the result was not that modern people became purely rational truth-seekers as the New Atheists envisioned. Instead, Jung argued, the religious impulse went underground. Deprived of traditional outlets, it would re-emerge in fragmented and sometimes pathological forms.

In one memorable passage, Jung writes: "Since the stars have fallen from heaven and our highest symbols have paled, a secret life holds sway in the unconscious […] But the heart glows, and a secret unrest gnaws at the roots of our being" (Jung, 2014, p. 23). Here, Jung reminds us that the yearning for transcendence ("the heart glows") continues, even though the guiding "stars" of religion have been expelled from our conscious worldview. The anxiety of meaninglessness ("unrest gnaws at the roots of our being") continues to operate within the psyche. In other words, the modern mind is still haunted by an unconscious hunger for the sacred even after it professes disbelief. In ideological fanaticism and totalitarian regimes, as well as in the proliferation of occultism and New Age spiritual fads, Jung sees this inner unrest play out across the twentieth century. He

also sees this intimately in the personal neuroses of his patients. What religion once contained and channelled now erupts in unstable or extreme forms.

Jung found that, due to the loss of a guiding spiritual framework, many individuals suffered psychologically. He based this on decades of clinical practice, and he observes that "every one of them fell ill because he had lost what the living religions of every age have given to their followers, and none of them has been really healed who did not regain his religious outlook on life" (Jung, 2024, p. 334). By referring to "religious outlook," he did not necessarily mean a return to church or creed, but a more personal connection to a source of greater meaning, particularly that which is greater than the ego. This includes spirituality, a sense of purpose, or an archetypal narrative that gives life coherence. His point was that psychic wholeness was difficult to attain from a purely secular, rationalist worldview. Jung also notes that, when modern people are in a state of spiritual despair, they increasingly seek help from doctors rather than clergy, indicating that psychotherapists have to fill the void left by waning religion (Jung, 2024, p. 332). He urged psychotherapists and pastors to work together to address the spiritual task of helping individuals rediscover meaning.

Jung directly links his warnings to the turbulent events of modern history. In *The Undiscovered Self* (1957), he argues that avowedly secular ideologies in particular (with reference to Soviet Communism) produce the mass-mindedness of modern societies. He further argues that such societies, where the spiritual dimension of the psyche is neglected, foster perilous collectives. He writes that the state or the party is effectively deified when

people are no longer anchored by any religious myth, and their religious impulse is projected onto worldly ideologies and leaders (Jung, 1957, pp. 12–15). In Jung's analysis, the fanaticism of political cults in the twentieth century is a consequence of religious energy seeking an outlet in secular movements. He further supports this in his 1936 essay, "Wotan," where he interprets the rise of Nazi extremism as a resurgence of the ancient Germanic god Wotan. This is a "causal hypothesis" behind contemporary events and a mythic force reawakened in a culture no longer grounded in Christian myth (Jung, 2014, p. 15). The fact that the religious fiction of the psyche is ineradicable is one of Jung's central theses. Suppress it, and it will seek substitutes — potentially dangerous ones.

Some researchers see contemporary trends as being consistent with Jung's insights. Formal religiosity in many Western countries has declined, and this has been accompanied by a rise in alternative beliefs and intense identity-based movements. The phenomenon of "conspirituality", for example, which a fusion of New Age spirituality with conspiracy thinking, has emerged as a growing politico-spiritual worldview in secular societies, blending beliefs in paradigm shifts with suspicion of elite control (Ward & Voas, 2011, p. 103). There are also quasi-religious political movements and fandoms that some individuals have gravitated towards, investing ideological movements or public figures with a sacred fervour once reserved for religion. Jung suggested that when religion is removed from society, the public sphere becomes a battleground of surrogate faiths. This is not what New Atheism hoped for or assumed, but rather that removing religion would leave a public sphere that is neutral and rational. Voegelin observed that such ideological movements were widely interpreted "as a variety of religions," though he considered the

term “too vague” to analyse the deeper experiences of reality that underpinned them (Voegelin, 2000, pp. 50–51). Jung anticipated this — that the psyche will unconsciously latch onto substitutes to fill the mythic vacuum.

Jung did not advocate a wholesale reversion to traditional religion or a simple return to premodern dogmatism. Instead, he sought a spirituality compatible with modern psychological awareness, and encouraged conscious engagement with myth and symbol. In her introduction to *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Aniela Jaffé explains that Jung aimed to connect psychological inquiry with theological concerns, privileging reflective understanding over unquestioned faith. He saw this reflective engagement as essential to human life, describing his own thoughts as “circle[ing] around God like the planets around the sun” and declaring that to resist this inner pull toward the divine would be “the grossest sin” (Jaffé, in Jung, 2006, pp. 13–14). His concern was that the positive roles of religion were overlooked by the neoatheist-style rejection of religion as merely outdated superstition. A purely secular rationalism, from Jung’s perspective, must not be left unbalanced by the lack of any engagement with meaning or spirituality, as this would risk fostering alienation and unacknowledged spiritual pathologies.

In conclusion, Jung's warning highlights the main point about the narrative gap in New Atheism. Even when a culture leaves behind its old gods and stories, people still need meaning, purpose, and a sense of belonging. New Atheism offers critique without cure — it knocks down pillars of myth and builds no new foundation. As a result, we have seen surrogate narratives rush in to fill the void, from nationalist mythologies to

consumerist visions of "the good life," and even to science-fiction-like optimism in movements such as transhumanism (to be explored more in the next chapter). Any new comprehensive worldview must grapple not only with what is true but also with what is meaningful, especially one aiming to supplant religion. As we are reminded by Jung and Frankl, people require a positive narrative to make sense of their lives, and a purely intellectual deconstruction of myth is insufficient. Otherwise, the perennial hunger for meaning will find its satisfaction in potentially destructive ways. For secular thought to move forward, it needs to craft "a story to live by" that can speak to our minds and our inner lives. These stories should offer the meaning, sense of community, and moral guidance that religions have given in the past, while still being honest and thoughtful. Only then can atheism's narrative vacuum be filled with something both true and sustaining.

Chapter 2: Secular Myth making: New Atheism, the Hero's Journey, and the Rise of Transhumanist Eschatology

2.1 Mythic Narratives in a Secular Age

Myth has been considered primitive, especially since the Enlightenment. Religion is often seen as a pre-rational attempt to explain the world in a way that modern science has now rendered obsolete. Yet scholars have increasingly argued that religious myths remain an important part of how humans construct meaning. As discussed in the previous chapter, Gottschall (2012) and Storr (2019) suggest that storytelling plays a central role in how humans understand and organise experience. An evolutionary perspective is added by Harari (2014). He suggests that shared fictions enabled large-scale cooperation and social cohesion (p. 32). Myth continues to inform secular modernity, despite being associated with the distant past. Writing in the mid-twentieth century, Eliade (1963) proposed that mythic thinking persists in modern secular life, often disguised in political, scientific, or ideological forms (p. 192). It is also argued that myth is understood more by its function than its content, and according to Segal (2004), this function is to structure experience, explain existence, and offer purpose (p. 28).

An interesting paradox is raised here, in that a movement so committed to rejecting religion nonetheless adopts narrative patterns strongly reminiscent of myth. These patterns include valorising reason, casting religion as the enemy of progress, and

positioning its leading figures as heroic redeemers. The argument that New Atheism is simply a new religion is a well-worn claim and deliberately avoided. Instead, the focus is on how New Atheism's rhetorical force and cultural appeal emerge from narrative forms that resemble mythic storytelling. This chapter will explore these narrative patterns employed by New Atheists such as Dawkins, Hitchens, and Harris, and argue that they conform to archetypal patterns of mythic storytelling, including the hero's journey. It will also consider transhumanism and how it represents an emerging eschatological vision, promising transformation, immortality, and transcendence without supernaturalism.

2.2 Framing the Hero: New Atheism's Mythic Structure

The hero's journey, as described in Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), begins in the ordinary world, where a protagonist is called to adventure. The protagonist acquires aid or a symbolic weapon, confronts trials, undergoes transformation, and returns with new insights. This journey is mirrored by the trajectories of neoatheist authors. Beginning in the ordinary world of academia, Richard Dawkins responds to the rise of religious extremism and creationism, accepting a broader public role in defending science. In The God Delusion, he describes the explanatory power of Darwinian evolution as having a "consciousness-raising" function (2006, pp. 23–25, 141–142), a kind of symbolic weapon capable of liberating minds from religious dogma. He regularly frames this in oppositional terms, suggesting that ignorance and superstition must be countered by science.

Likewise, Christopher Hitchens casts himself as a cultural combatant. In the final chapter of *God Is Not Grea*t, titled *The Need for a New Enlightenment*, he declares: "Above all, we are in need of a renewed Enlightenment, which will base itself on the proposition that the proper study of mankind is man and woman. This Enlightenment will not need to depend, like its predecessors, on the heroic breakthroughs of a few gifted and exceptionally courageous people. It is within the compass of the average person" (2007, p. 283). Such statements illustrate a self-presentation as a moral crusader, engaged in trials on behalf of humanity. Sam Harris also adopts the posture of civilisation's defender. He opens *The End of Faith* (2004) with a fictional suicide bombing and asks the reader to consider why the attacker's religion is obvious. This is a rhetorical device, dramatising the threat and positioning Harris as confronting it directly. Together, these figures approximate Campbell's archetypal structure: departing from ordinary contexts, taking up symbolic weapons of reason, confronting adversaries, and returning with renewed authority. In this sense, they function as secular heroes, rallying their audiences, invoking moral purpose, and presenting themselves as truth-tellers standing against the tides of irrationalism. Yet the irony is that their authority often relies on the very mythic storytelling patterns they seek to dismantle, underscoring the persistent human tendency to frame experience through archetypal forms.

2.3 Narratives of Conflict and Redemption

New Atheism puts forward a narrative where science and religion are in perpetual conflict. As the heroes in this conflict, the New Atheists are there to ensure that secular rationality ultimately triumphs. The decline of religion is assumed to be both inevitable and morally necessary. As a form of secular eschatology, this orientation aligns with what Christian Smith (2003) terms the "secular revolution". There exists the implication that once irrational belief is eradicated, a more just and enlightened world will be ushered in by science and reason.

This linear subtraction model has been critiqued by Charles Taylor (2007) as the "subtraction story". This is the idea that society has a rational core that is surrounded by layers of religious myth. Simply remove these layers, and only rationality remains. He argues that this is a simplification. What we call "secular" is not merely the absence of religion, but rather the product of centuries of cultural and philosophical transformation (p. 22). This challenges the neoatheist idea that secularism is the default state and shows that it is actually a worldview shaped by specific historical developments.

The neoatheist historical framing is also critiqued by Johnstone (2018), especially the mythologised conflict between religion and science. He argues that neoatheist authors often rely on black legends, which are exaggerated or selective accounts of religious opposition to science. These accounts perpetuate a one-dimensional and adversarial model of history. As he states, "In many cases, the New Atheists rely on words like 'Crusade,'

'witch-hunt' or 'Northern Ireland' to quickly summon up powerful pre-existing images in the mind of the reader. They do not elucidate because they believe they do not have to" (p. 10). Galileo and Bruno are among the people invoked by this selective retelling, and they are often cast as secular martyrs. This is despite Bruno being a mystical pantheist and Galileo having a more nuanced relationship with the Church.

John Gray (2018) asserts, in the final paragraph of Seven Types of Atheism, that "contemporary atheism is a continuation of monotheism by other means. Hence the unending succession of God-surrogates, such as humanity and science" (p. 158). What this is saying is that the New Atheists retain the structural form of religion despite displacing its content. This form includes a battle between good and evil, a mission to liberate humanity, and a promise of future enlightenment. Rejecting religion is presented as a moral awakening rather than just a personal belief, making disbelief seem like a transformative moral choice. Taylor, Johnstone, and Gray show how the New Atheist story oversimplifies both religious history and the development of secular ideas. It constructs a redemptive story rather than offering a historically grounded analysis, where religion is cast as the source of ignorance and violence, and science as its heroic liberator. By doing this, the movement seeks to replicate the narrative structure of religious myth, even as it seeks to supplant it with secularism as the destined salvation. Recognising this continuity does not take away from the importance of science or secular ethics. Instead, it encourages a more thoughtful and open-minded secularism that understands its own tendency to create stories.

2.4 Progress and the Evolutionary Epic

Alongside heroic narratives centered on individual intellectual figures, New Atheism also relies upon a broader historical story about progress, reason, and the authority of science. During the Enlightenment, when this story has its roots, human history came to be understood as a linear movement away from superstition and toward rationality. Knowledge was not only increasingly seen as cumulative, but also liberating. Humanity needed to overcome ignorance, violence, and injustice, and reason was seen as the primary way in which to achieve this. Religion was now within a new framework where it was not seen as an alternative worldview, but as a remnant of a less enlightened state of human development.

The emergence of the modern scientific persona further consolidated these progress narratives. Science became professionalised, and the figure of the professional scientist appeared, coming to embody certain ideals, including those of objectivity, intellectual courage, and moral seriousness. Historians of science have noted that this period saw the construction of science not only as a method, but as a cultural authority, distinct from and superior to other forms of knowledge. Science was now granted privileged access to truth, demarcating itself from religion, metaphysics, and even tradition. The authority of science came not only from its explanatory success, but also from a moral narrative in which the scientist appeared as a heroic agent of progress, standing against dogma and irrational belief.

When these Enlightenment and nineteenth-century narratives were inflected with Darwinian evolution, they gave rise to what has come to be described as the evolutionary epic. Within this genre, the history of the universe is a single, continuous story. It begins with the origins of matter, and proceeds through the emergence of life and consciousness, culminating in human rationality and scientific self-understanding. The central organising principle of this narrative is evolution, and it is therefore the principle around which the significance of human existence is described. The universe becomes intelligible as a story of increasing complexity, and humanity is positioned as both the product of this process and the point at which the universe becomes aware of itself.

This genre has been widely popularised through science communication rather than through formal philosophy or theology. Authors such as Harari exemplify a late expression of the evolutionary epic, presenting human history as a long movement from myth to science, and from shared fictions toward increasingly rational systems of organisation (Harari, 2014). While such accounts explicitly reject religious explanations, they nonetheless perform many of the narrative functions traditionally associated with myth. They provide an account of origins, situate humanity within a broader cosmic story, and imply a normative trajectory oriented toward greater knowledge, mastery, and control. As Rubenstein has argued, modern scientific cosmologies frequently reproduce the structural features of earlier creation narratives, even as they deny any continuity with religious myth (Rubenstein, 2018). The persistence of language invoking awe, inevitability, and cosmic destiny suggests that the human need for overarching stories has not been eliminated by science, but instead reconfigured through it.

At the same time, the evolutionary epic also opens onto future-oriented narratives. Evolution is not just biological history, but an ongoing process of transcendence. Further transformation is therefore both natural and desirable, with technological interventions simply a continuation of evolutionary logic. There is now a conceptual bridge between the critiques of religion provided by the New Atheists and the more explicit eschatological visions found in transhumanist thought.

2.5 Transhumanism: A Secular Eschatology

Transhumanism is often presented as the pinnacle of science. It presents a vision in which technology allows humanity to transcend its biological limits. Yet the underlying structures of transhumanism borrow from religious eschatology and are deeply mythic. It is typically rooted in secularism and materialism, just like New Atheism, but it moves beyond this to explicitly seek answers to existential questions that science alone cannot resolve.

Hava Tirosh-Samuelson (2012) argues that transhumanism functions as a kind of secular religion, noting that it "shares with Western monotheistic religions a strong eschatological impulse, even though transhumanism speculates about the eschatological end of the world as a goal that can be accomplished by human efforts alone rather than with divine intervention" (p. 721). She observes that transhumanism pursues ideals of perfection and transcendence, but replaces traditional methods such as prayer and ritual

with the mobilisation of technology. This dynamic is part of a broader cultural pattern in which "presumably secular science has an aura of the sacred in contemporary culture" (p. 722).

Mikael Leidenhag (2020) similarly discusses the relationship between transhumanist discourse and theology. He argues that transhumanism "gives rise to both a soteriological conception of human nature and an eschatological prediction about physical reality," in which the human being is viewed as a project to be perfected through technological transformation (p. 7). The technological singularity, which is the hypothetical future point at which artificial intelligence surpasses human intelligence, is framed as an event akin to a secular apocalypse and rebirth, and not merely as a development in computation. Ray Kurzweil (2005) is another Transhumanist who envisions this moment as the dawn of a new humanity, a time when consciousness might be uploaded, intelligence merged with machine, and death overcome. Religious narratives are mirrored on multiple counts. The promise of immortality through mind uploading resembles hope for life after death, and the imagined post-human perfection evokes doctrines of glorification. Salvation is now about overcoming finitude, fragility, and mortality, rather than being related to dealing with sin and moral failure. Worship is replaced by design, and divine grace is replaced by human ingenuity.

This framing has important philosophical implications. Where New Atheism sees metaphysical and existential questions as distractions or remnants of irrational belief, transhumanism takes these questions seriously. By attempting to fill the meaning vacuum

rather than eradicating the need for existential narratives, it replaces religious metaphysics with technological teleology. But in doing so, it recognises what thinkers from Carl Jung to Viktor Frankl have long argued, that human beings are not merely rational animals, but symbolic and meaning-seeking creatures.

The question, then, becomes not whether transhumanism can deliver on its promises, but whether it is wise to pursue them. Any attempt to resolve existential anxieties through technological mastery risks introducing new ethical and existential dilemmas. If humanity's deepest questions are tasked to science, such as questions of purpose, destiny, and transcendence, **then science may be pushed into a role that it is not equipped to fulfil**. If immortality, for example, is on the horizon, then the significance of finitude, conceptions of justice, or issues of global inequality may be eroded. Human flourishing is easily conflated with boundless enhancement, but this may obscure the moral and existential limits of self-transcendence.

Transhumanism highlights a broader conflict within modern secular society. Existential longing is not erased by the decline of traditional religion, but such longings are forced to find new expressions. More speculative or ethically ambiguous narratives may gain the cultural terrain of meaning-making if secular movements such as New Atheism fail to engage these concerns. Transhumanism promises a lot, but it is not immune to mythic thinking; it inherits it.

2.6 The Limits of the Secular Myth

Despite its commitment to rationalism, the neoatheist movement's secular vision still has its limitations. Although their ideas are often presented as neutral, objective and grounded in science, it has been noted by critics that secular ideologies can function as closed moral frameworks, complete with their own normative assumptions. The dismissal of religion by the neoatheist movement is frequently accompanied by a reluctance to engage, both with the emotional and symbolic concerns, as well as the communal functions that such traditions have long fulfilled. As a result, the rhetorically powerful secular myth struggles to provide an alternative that resonates widely across diverse cultural and existential contexts.

Talal Asad (2003) argues that "the concept of 'the secular' today is part of a doctrine called secularism," and that secularism is grounded not in neutrality but in a particular conception of the natural and social world (pp. 191–192). He challenges the assumption that secularism represents a neutral space from which religion has been cleanly subtracted, and he rejects the notion that religion simply "infects" a pre-existing, untainted secular domain. He demonstrates instead that secularism emerges from historical efforts to regulate the religious and political life in early modern Europe, efforts which shape categories of legitimate belief and public expression. So that by defining particular worldviews as irrational or regressive, secular regimes may produce their own exclusions. Legal scholar Iain Benson (2013) similarly critiques this understanding of secularism. He argues that it is a mistaken assumption to assume non-religious perspectives are free of

substantive commitments. His view is that all citizens operate from underlying convictions, whether religious or secular, and contends that this mischaracterisation can lead to the exclusion of religious voices from public institutions such as education and health care, under the guise of neutrality. Benson calls for a conception of the secular that is more pluralistic, and which recognises the legitimacy of diverse metaphysical beliefs in shaping public discourse and policy.

Beyond dismantling religious narratives or reliance on scripture, these analyses also point to a deeper issue. Throughout much of human history, people have viewed God not only as a religious concept but also as a symbol of our highest moral and spiritual aspirations. Religion has also been a way of orienting life toward meaning, justice, and transcendence. As Taylor (2007) observes, there has been a shift "between a condition in which our highest spiritual and moral aspirations point us inescapably to God, […] to one in which they can be related to a host of different sources, and frequently are referred to sources which deny God" (p. 26). Secular modernity therefore redirects the need for orientation rather than erases it, but in doing so, it may obscure the symbolic frameworks through which humans have long interpreted suffering, mortality, and purpose.

Ultimately, the critique of religion is not enough. If secular movements wish to resonate beyond certain elite or academic circles, then the symbolic, emotional, and communal dimensions of human life need to be addressed. Critique alone cannot relate to the enduring need for meaning, identity, and transformation. In one form or another, myth will persist, whether it be through religion, science, or a combination of both. This is

because human beings are, at their core, storytelling animals. A more inclusive or humane vision may be offered by a secularism that recognises this, rather than by one that simply asserts its superiority over religious belief.

Chapter 3: God of the Gaps" Reversed: Science, Ego, and Epistemic Overreach

3.1 Scientific Authority and the Neoatheist Persona

In the early twenty-first century, New Atheism emerged as the custodian of truth. It was an assertive defence of scientific rationalism against religion, championing scientific literacy in areas such as evolutionary biology. The promotion of science was deemed important, but the movement's rhetoric extended beyond this, stating that its claims were intellectually and morally superior. Therefore, if there was disagreement with neoatheist positions, they were not often taken seriously. Any opposition was treated as evidence of ignorance or delusion, giving New Atheism an identity that was defined more by exclusion than by dialogue.

An example of this posture appears in the neoatheist treatment of the so-called "God of the gaps." This term describes a theological tendency to replace domains of human ignorance with divine action. New Atheists regularly criticise this reasoning as intellectually dishonest and as an epistemic retreat, as these domains represent gaps in understanding that science has yet to fill. Dawkins describes it as displaying a "pathetic lack of logic and utter nonsense" (Dawkins, n.d.), while Neil deGrasse Tyson has remarked

that "God is an ever-receding pocket of scientific ignorance" (Tyson, 2014). The scientific worldview is therefore destined to close all the gaps in human knowledge. Since science is framed as both superior and comprehensive, religious worldviews are cast as defensive and obsolete.

This interpretation of the "God of the gaps" trajectory perhaps overlooks a more generous interpretation. John Polkinghorne (1998, Preface) states that theology should be understood not as a desperate appeal to ignorance, but as an ongoing attempt to integrate multiple domains of truth. Alister McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath (2007) add a layer that is more critical: they praise Dawkins' demolition of gap-worship but fault his overgeneralisation. They note that some eighteenth- and nineteenth-century apologetics did resort to gaps in scientific knowledge and that this was "a foolish move, and was increasingly abandoned in the twentieth century," adding that Charles A. Coulson "damned it with the telling phrase 'the God of the gaps'," urging instead a comprehensive account of reality (p. 29). McGrath and McGrath then write: "Dawkins' criticism of those who 'worship the gaps', despite its overstatements, is clearly appropriate and valid. So we must thank him for helping us kill off this outdated false turn in the history of Christian apologetics. It is a good example of how a dialogue between science and Christian theology can lead to some useful outcomes" (p. 29). Unfortunately, they continue, Dawkins weakens the case by implying that "all religious people" try to halt inquiry, "a crass generalisation that ruins a perfectly interesting discussion" (p. 30). For these authors, the deeper problem lies with Intelligent Design, which relocates God into domains of scientific ignorance and thereby makes faith "deeply – and needlessly – vulnerable to

scientific progress" (p. 30). Their alternative is not to look for God in explanatory gaps, but in the very intelligibility of reality, drawing on Richard Swinburne to argue that science's capacity to explain the world itself calls for further explanation (p. 31).

Yet if outdated claims are willing to be revised, then this should not be dismissed too quickly. Allowing for doctrinal recalibration in the face of compelling scientific explanation need not be seen as a weakness. It can be a real strength to acknowledge when scientific accounts offer better explanations of natural phenomena. Therefore, at least in a limited sense, the so-called "God of the gaps" can be read as a positive dynamic. It can be interpreted as a readiness to reconfigure belief as understanding deepens, and not simply as a desperate clinging to ignorance. The more serious problem is what is often seen with religious fundamentalism, where its adherents often refuse revision altogether, and not with those who once located God in explanatory gaps and later revised their position. Persistent resistance can cause religion to become brittle and maladaptive, making it more difficult to endure and adapt in the face of new discoveries. At the same time, as scientific understanding advances, the remaining questions **are not merely smaller; they are deeper**. This means that theistic interpretations can continue to be an explanatorily option, standing alongside secular accounts.

Still, New Atheists tend to portray even this form of adaptation as insufficient. It is as though they want the complete eradication of religion from intellectual life, and will not view compatibility as a meaningful step towards understanding. Science is therefore treated as an absolutist epistemology, one in which its evidence must invariably yield a

single, reliable theoretical outcome. In reality, however, the same evidence is often open to multiple, reasonable interpretations. Ironically, New Atheism adopts a mirror of dogmatism, despite actively claiming to oppose it.

3.2 The "Science of the Gaps": A Mirror Image

"God of the gaps" is frequently mocked by New Atheists as they consider it to be intellectually dishonest. It is seen as an attempt to preserve religious belief by retreating into areas where scientific understanding remains incomplete. However, they often rely on an inverse assumption: that all explanatory gaps will eventually be filled by science. This outlook, which can be termed the "Science of the gaps," presumes that any current mystery, from the origin of consciousness to the fine-tuning of physical laws, will eventually yield to the scientific method. Despite expressing confidence in scientific progress, it risks replicating the same dogmatic posture for which the New Atheists criticise religion.

This optimistic view of scientific progress is challenged by Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962/2012). In this important foundational work, he argues that science does not advance through the steady accumulation of facts, but through "non-cumulative developmental episodes in which an older paradigm is replaced in whole or in part by an incompatible new one" (Kuhn, 1962/2012, p. 92). These changes in scientific knowledge are sudden and are therefore often resisted by the very institutions

that claim to champion reason. This is mainly because the shifts are unpredictable and unexpected. New Atheists overlook this historical reality and perpetuate instead an idealised image of science that obscures its provisional and self-correcting character (even though they may state otherwise).

In addition, there are still so many domains within science that have serious foundational challenges. The nature of consciousness, for example, remains elusive despite substantial progress in neuroscience. As Chalmers (1996) argues in *The Conscious Mind*, the "hard problem" of consciousness — the question "Why is all this processing accompanied by an experienced inner life?" — resists reduction to physical mechanisms (p. xii). Developments in quantum physics likewise continue to generate philosophical quandaries. Classical notions of causality are undermined by phenomena such as quantum indeterminacy, and this complicates materialist and reductionist interpretations of the universe. As Barad (2007) explains in *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, probability within classical mechanics reflects an incomplete knowledge of a system, whereas in quantum theory it becomes embedded in the mathematical structure of the wave function, and thus a fundamental property of reality itself (Notes to Chapter 7, p. 457). These features of reality suggest that science still confronts questions whose answers are not purely empirical, even in its most successful domains. This raises broader issues about meaning, intentionality, and value.

This "science of the gaps" outlook is more than an expression of faith in empirical progress; it can become a kind of belief system in its own right. Anything that lies beyond the reach of current scientific explanation is often regarded as either unimportant or certain to be solved in the future. In this way, the neoatheist rejection of religious metaphysics conceals its own metaphysical assumptions — above all, the conviction that nature is entirely self-sufficient, a claim that may not itself be philosophically demonstrable (Nagel, 2012, pp. 13–16). As McGrath (2020) observes, "Historians of science regularly point to a group of theories which were scientific orthodoxy in their age, and are now regarded as clearly incorrect" (p. 98). Yet at the same time, New Atheists often point to mistakes and revisions within religious traditions as proof that they are fundamentally unreliable. So now there is an obvious double standard: **fallibility is presented as a fatal flaw for religion but as a virtue for science.**

3.3 Possibilities of Coexistence: Religious Adaptation and Scientific Engagement

There is a growing body of scholarship highlighting the capacity of religious traditions to engage constructively with scientific discovery. Science and religion can function as complementary ways of making sense of the world, and do not have to exist in binary opposition. There are movements such as theistic evolution in which this is particularly evident, where the findings of evolutionary biology are accepted and belief in divine intentionality is maintained.

Polkinghorne (1998) is both a physicist and a theologian, and he offers a model of "critical realism". Within this model, science and theology pursue different but compatible forms of truth. He writes, "A judicious philosophy of science is based on the analysis of particular contingent experience and not on the establishment of universal necessary truths" (p. 109). He argues that although their aims may differ, both science and theology depend on a commitment to rational inquiry through interpretation and inference. Similarly, McGrath and McGrath (2007) argue that succumbing to scientism is not necessary in order to integrate scientific insight into theology. As they write, "For there is, of course, a third option, that of 'partially overlapping magisteria' (a POMA, so to speak), reflecting a realisation that science and religion offer possibilities of cross-fertilisation on account of the interpenetration of their subjects and methods" (p. 41). There is space for constructive engagement in this model, as seen in religious dialogue with fields such as cosmology and genetics, and the neoatheist assumption that religion must always be static or regressive is challenged.

A strictly materialist worldview is also rejected by prominent figures from within the scientific community itself. Francis Collins (2006) is a former director of the Human Genome Project. In *The Language of God,* he recounts his journey from atheism to Christianity, arguing that faith and reason can coexist. He also proposes upholding scientific integrity while affirming spiritual belief through his "BioLogos" framework. As he explains, "BioLogos doesn't try to wedge God into gaps in our understanding of the natural world; it proposes God as the answer to questions science was never intended to address, such as 'How did the universe get here?' 'What is the meaning of life?' 'What

happens to us after we die?' Unlike Intelligent Design, BioLogos is not intended as a scientific theory. Its truth can be tested only by the spiritual logic of the heart, the mind, and the soul" (p. 204). For Collins, evolutionary biology enriches a broader understanding of reality rather than threatens religious faith. It is notable that Collins served as Christopher Hitchens's oncologist during his final illness. Hitchens, despite remaining a committed atheist, described Collins as"the best of the faithful," "a great humanitarian," and "one of the greatest living Americans" (Hitchens, 2010). This exchange acknowledges a moment of deep respect across the science–religion divide.

Collins is not the only prominent figure who rejects this materialist worldview. John Lennox is an Emeritus Professor of Mathematics at Oxford, with an academic background in group theory. He has long paired his academic career with a long-standing interest in theology and has engaged in high-profile public debates with atheists such as Dawkins and Hitchens. During these debates, he is seen defending the idea that science and theism can be mutually reinforcing. In his book *Can Science Explain Everything?*, he argues that science, while powerful, cannot answer all of life's fundamental questions. He also states, among other things, that since the universe has such a high intelligibility through its mathematical structure, there is likely a rational designer (Lennox, 2019). For Lennox, like for many prominent scientists before him, belief in God is not a denial of science but a framework that deepens its significance.

These examples are often dismissed by neoatheist critics as mere capitulations or compromises. However, such dismissals may reflect a form of ideological rigidity from the New Atheists themselves, and this reduces possibilities for mutual understanding.When New Atheism calls for people to give up religious frameworks, it can make existing divisions even worse. As Collins (2006) observes, "Unfortunately, the evidence of potential harmony is often overshadowed by the high-decibel pronouncements of those who occupy the poles of the debate" (p. 4).

3.4 Toward Integration: Meaning, Dialogue, and the Limits of Certainty

Despite the passionate efforts of neoatheist critique, religious belief persists. This suggests that more than epistemology is at stake, with the struggle being not only over truth claims but also over frameworks of meaning. While it was great to see New Atheism succeeding in mobilising public discourse against the dangers of religious extremism and irrational dogma, its shortcomings become clearer when viewed through the lens of meaning-making and existential fulfilment. In their discussion of Aquinas, McGrath and McGrath (2007) note Christian thought often holds that "an existing faith in God offers a better 'empirical fit' with the world than its alternatives" (p. 25). They also point out the irony that Dawkins elsewhere employs a similar line of reasoning to commend atheism. The argument is not simply about whether religion can be refuted with logical reasoning, but about whether alternative worldviews can meet the same existential needs. Therefore, the legacy of New Atheism is incomplete.

The challenge then is to craft frameworks, whether they be secular, religious, or hybrid, that speak to both reason and to the psyche. This is not a call to surrender scientific integrity nor to return to religion uncritically. As Tirosh-Samuelson (2012) observes, "A few self-defined transhumanists acknowledge the religious dimension of their agenda and even encourage their fellow transhumanists to enter a conversation with representatives of religious traditions" (p. 722). This means that communities can be created around shared existential questions so that the future of meaningful discourse can move beyond binary oppositions.

Chapter 4: Argument and Counterargument: The Existence of God in Contemporary Debate

4.1 Framing the Debate: Turek vs Hitchens in Context

It is rare that the full range of tensions between belief and disbelief can be captured in a single public debate, but the 2008 exchange between Christian apologist Frank Turek and the late atheist Christopher Hitchens did exactly that. Titled "Does God Exist?" (Turek & Hitchens, 2008), the debate took place at Virginia Commonwealth University and was widely shared online. The debate was a contest between two prominent individuals and also a confrontation between fundamentally different worldviews. Turek believes that the strongest arguments for a transcendent and personal God can be found by observing the structure of the universe and reflecting on the existence of moral order. In contrast, Hitchens emphasised scepticism, humanistic ethics, and a critical stance toward religious authority. The discussion was framed by Turek as a "burden of proof" exercise. Hitchens argued that atheism is not about claims of certainty. Instead, it rejects theistic arguments that do not hold up to critical examination.

Although the debate occurred in 2008, it still remains highly relevant today. Bite-sized excerpts repurposed into YouTube Shorts and TikTok clips accompany the Long-

form versions online, and they continue to attract large audiences along with a steady stream of comments from both supporters and critics of each worldview. Such content is continuously rediscovered, re-contextualised, and re-consumed in the algorithm-driven ecology of social media, and this reflects broader patterns in how religion and belief are absorbed online, where digital practices intersect with conventional media and offline social networks (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021, p. 49). These debates also intersect with longstanding patterns in how young people approach religious identity, with many embracing inclusive, pluralistic, and individualistic views about truth and belonging (Smith & Denton, 2005, p. 72).

The debate continued to resonate partly due to its timing. Religion returned to the centre of Western cultural consciousness after the September 11 attacks, becoming no longer a private matter of personal belief, but a global force with implications that were not only geopolitical, but also ethical and existential. Sam Harris's *The End of Faith* (2004) is often credited with starting the New Atheist movement, and he positioned religious belief directly as a threat to global stability. This was further amplified by Richard Dawkins in his book The God Delusion (2006), followed by Hitchens in God Is Not Great (2007), where moral outrage and biting prose were combined to dismantle what was viewed as the corruptions of faith. As Bruce Lincoln (2006) and William Cavanaugh (2009) have observed, post-9/11 discourse shifted the cultural location of religion from private virtue to potential public danger. Lincoln, reflecting on the motives of the September 11 attackers, noted that their actions were "intensely and profoundly religious" and that religion can serve as a human construct through which "any deeds can be defined as moral" (p. 16).

Similarly, Cavanaugh observed that, especially after September 11, 2001, scholarly and public discourse increasingly portrayed religion as peculiarly prone to violence, contrasting it with a supposedly rational and peace-making secular order (p. 4). Hitchens explicitly framed religion as a civic threat as well as an intellectual error, linking his own post-2001 focus to resisting theocratic movements. Christian apologetics responded not just with doctrinal defences, but with philosophical arguments intended to reclaim religion's moral and rational credibility, such as the claim that evils which appear pointless to us may in fact be justly permitted from within God's wider framework (Craig & Moreland, 2003, p. 543) or that the Bible "hardly justifies 'holy war' as an enduring standard" (Copan, 2009, p. 156).

The Turek–Hitchens debate can be seen as a clear example of the tensions that followed 9/11. New Atheism tried to question the truth and moral value of religion, while Christian apologetics worked to defend theism as both logical and culturally coherent. Turek tries to demonstrate the existence of God with an analytical, step-by-step method. The three main areas of focus for his arguments are 1. the universe had a beginning, 2. the physical laws are fine-tuned, and 3. there is objective morality. He also adds further arguments about reason and logic, mathematics, human freedom, consciousness, and biological information (DNA). Hitchens, by contrast, mounts a multi-pronged challenge: he questions the coherence and morality of core doctrines (e.g., vicarious atonement and apocalyptic eschatology), denies the explanatory necessity of God given modern cosmology and evolution, presses the deism—theism—Christianity gap, and invokes

human scepticism about miracle testimony. These arguments from Turek and Hitchens form the basis of the analysis for the rest of this chapter.

It is also important to note that the arguments deployed by Turek and Hitchens do not exist in isolation from their rhetorical aims. Turek shows a metaphysical desire for intellectual and moral anchoring through his appeal to analytic structure and cumulative coherence. This includes his insistence on objective standards and the charge that critics must "borrow" morality to attack theism. Hitchens's empirical scepticism allows for a forceful rejection of religious systems, but this also stems from a deeper moral-political protest against authoritarian religious claims. He repeatedly describes a "master–slave" relationship and the demand from God to be "created sick, commanded to be well." As such, the debate is not only about whether God exists, but about what kind of world we inhabit if God does or does not, and what kind of people we become, civically and ethically, when we choose to believe or disbelieve. For Hitchens, this means resisting theocratic power after 9/11; for Turek, it means securing a transpersonal ground for duties, dignity, and reason.

This chapter critically examines six core arguments from the debate. The focus is on their philosophical coherence, rhetorical construction, and broader cultural implications. Rather than analysing their points one-by-one, the analysis proceeds thematically with regard to the underlying metaphysical (what exists), epistemological (what justifies belief), and ethical (what obligates us) claims of both positions. In doing so, it moves beyond score-keeping to more deeply analyse the debate's assumptions, anxieties, and aspirations.

This analysis helps define what makes such claims endure in a secular age. It also aims to clarify how argument and attitude (confidence, irony, moral urgency) work together to make the case for or against the existence of God.

4.2 Cosmological Origins: Cause, Causality, and Conceptual Boundaries

Frank Turek opens the debate and begins his case for the existence of God with the cosmological argument, often framed through the Kalam formulation popularised by William Lane Craig (Craig, 1979, 2013). This is a simple three-step argument: (1) everything that begins to exist has a cause; (2) the universe began to exist; therefore, (3) the universe has a cause. Turek's goal is not just to show that the universe had a beginning. He also argues that the cause of this beginning must have certain qualities. These qualities include being spaceless, timeless, immaterial, immensely powerful, and personal (since, he argues, a transition from non-existence to existence requires a "choice"). The Kalam move is presented as a rational, cosmology-informed case that appeals to the God of classical theism, rather than to one with a vague deistic origin.

To support that the universe began to exist (premise (2)), Turek uses his own SURGE mnemonic to appeal to standard Big Bang evidence: the Second Law of Thermodynamics (the universe is running down), the Universe's expansion (Hubble redshift), the Radiation afterglow (cosmic microwave background; COBE-era findings of tiny temperature variations), refinements that allow Galaxy formation (Smoot/Hawking's accolades for the data), and Einstein's General Relativity (time, space, and matter are co-

relative). He uses this argument to state that the universe must have had a transcendent cause, since it had a genuine beginning. He also presses the conceptual point that "nothing" is literally no thing, aligning creation ex nihilo with a philosophical reading of cosmology.

Hitchens challenges the idea of causality in two ways. First, he shifts the burden of proof away from atheism, which means he rejects the argument that moves from a 'beginning' to a 'choosing being.' Second, he questions whether or not a benevolent designer is the best explanation through leveraging cosmological dissipation (accelerating expansion, heat death) and later labels Turek's eschatological claim, that "A new heaven and a new earth will be created", as fatuous. These discussions set the main boundaries for this section. They include what comes after a cosmic beginning, if causality goes beyond spacetime, whether personal agency is a valid idea, and how much physical cosmology alone can answer metaphysical questions.

Turek does not use empirical cosmology alone to support his case. He also uses metaphysical intuition linked to the principle of sufficient reason, including with the first premise — everything that begins to exist has a cause. To deny this, he argues, is to embrace absurdity, since the claim that follows would be that universes can simply pop into being, uncaused, and out of nothing. In his wider apologetic work, he targets physicists who redefine "nothing," such as Lawrence Krauss, who writes that "we all are here today because of quantum fluctuations in what is essentially nothing" (2012, p. 98). For Turek, that "nothing" is really a something, that is, a quantum field governed by laws, and so it misses the philosophical nihil at issue. He views the effort to suspend causality at

the cosmic level while relying on it everywhere else as selective skepticism, which is used in order to dodge theistic implications.

Turek's claim that the cause of the universe is personal is one of his key moves. He states that impersonal causes produce effects automatically. Any effect that is initiated at a particular moment must involve a mind, and since the universe is finite, the cause of it must have had the ability to freely begin it. He argues that the beginning of the universe is an act, which is better explained by conscious will than mechanical necessity. This argument allows him to move from a generic first cause towards a theistic God. This echoes Leibniz's argument that the sufficient reason for contingent reality lies outside the series, in a necessary being with power, knowledge, and will (Leibniz, 1989, p. 210). Hitchens resists this move and shifts the burden back to Turek. He states: "Don't say 'being'… No you do not [need a choice]."

Turek's cosmological argument serves as both philosophical reasoning and a way to invite discussion. He combines contemporary physics with his own intuitive logic in order to invite audiences, particularly those invested in science, to reconsider whether theism may actually provide a more coherent account of cosmic origins. Also, by using the language of modern cosmology to frame ancient metaphysical arguments, he is able to position himself as both intellectually respectable and scientifically informed. This argument serves as a plausible and satisfying starting point for belief, as many in his audience may be sceptical of a universe arising from nothing and without cause.

A rival cosmogenesis is not offered by Christopher Hitchens. Instead, he questions what he sees as unnecessary physical steps by examining whether the premises even make

sense. He rejects the idea that a starting point means there must be someone making choices. He puts the burden of proof back on Turek by saying: "I don't have to know, you do." He then appeals to *Ockham's razor* to question whether a designer is needed. Hitchens does not focus on disproving the Big Bang or the idea that the past has a beginning. Instead, he challenges the idea that a scientific explanation of the universe's origin supports a theistic conclusion. He believes that moving from physics to theology lacks enough justification and stretches the cosmological argument too far.

Hitchens questions the causal principle in the first premise, which says that "everything that begins to exist has a cause". He agrees that causality seems to apply in daily life, but he does not think these rules must also apply to how the universe began. One of his well-known responses is, "Who made God?" which is more of a rhetorical device than a question of theology, designed to reveal the problem of special pleading. Why is God exempted from causality? If He is uncaused and eternal, then Hitchens argues that this is smuggling in an exception without justification.

Hitchens further questions if causality, which is a concept developed from our experience within the universe, can really be used to explain the universe as a whole. Immanuel Kant raised this issue more generally, saying that causality, along with space and time, is an a priori category that shapes how we experience the world, not something that exists independently of us. This makes causality a form of intuition rather than a feature of the universe itself (Kant, 1781/1998, A189/B232). His view is that to apply such causality to the origin of the universe, beyond time and space, is a category error. Modern cosmologists like Sean Carroll (2016) agree with this idea, saying that "our familiar

intuitions concerning cause and effect have developed over evolutionary time because they provide useful guides for understanding how the world really works." The mistake is to elevate this expectation to an unbreakable principle" (p. 38). Hitchens argues that applying a causal order to the origins of the universe is speculative. It reflects human thinking by assuming that effects come from agents. This turns the cosmological argument into a kind of cosmic intuitionism—an idea that seems persuasive, but that lacks empirical support.

Hitchens mocks the idea that the universe has a personal cause, especially the claim that the whole cosmos was made for human life. In doing this, he overlooks many metaphysical traditions in both Islamic and Western thought, such as Ibn Arabi and the Neoplatonists, who see creation as an expression of divine self-disclosure or overflowing being rather than an arbitrary act (Chittick, 1998, p. 52; Rist, 1967, p. 122). Plotinus states, "And thinking that soul, which has been set in motion by god, is not mightier than any bond, is a fallacy of human beings who are ignorant of the cause that holds everything together. For it would be absurd if soul, which has been given the power to hold things together for any stretch of time, did not do so always" (Plotinus, 2017/ca. 270 CE, p. 144). Seeing creation as the natural result of divine life gives a different perspective from the voluntaristic model that Hitchens criticises. It is not surprising that he views this as an outdated philosophy, far removed from current discussions.

Hitchens refuses to allow the theist the comfort of mystery, insisting that not knowing the origin of the universe is epistemically preferable to fabricating answers. In a separate exchange, he argued that religion is "derived from the childhood of our species…

It comes from a time where we had no good answers. But we are pattern-seeking animals" (Hitchens, 2007a). On stage, he claimed that accepting the unknown is intellectually honest and preferable to adopting the religious framings of already knowing. This critique overlooks multiple theological traditions, such as Jewish Kabbalah and Christian apophatic theology, where God is postulated not as an explanatory endpoint, but as an unknowable mystery at the heart of existence. This mystery deepens rather than resolves the unknown. As Joseph Dan notes, in mystical traditions, "mysteries of the divine may be conveyed by various methods using words, but these should not be taken literally. In mysticism, language is apophatic, a 'language of unsaying,' language that denies its own communicative message" (Dan, 2006, p. 9). Similar insights are found in Christian apophatic theology, which stresses that God is encountered precisely as that which exceeds human language and understanding (Turner, 1995, p. 32).

Hitchens responds to the cosmological argument not by directly rebutting it, but by challenging its foundations. He does not say that science has fully answered the question of where the universe came from, and he does not provide his own naturalistic explanation. Instead, he focuses on challenging theistic arguments and puts the responsibility of proof back on the theist. By doing this, he implies that you cannot solve the mystery of the origins of the universe by simply saying that 'God is the answer'. The arguments from both sides show that they reach different conclusions and have conflicting metaphysical beliefs.

Big Bang cosmology itself has a complex intellectual history. The original hypothesis, that the universe expanded from an initial singularity, was proposed in the

1920s by Georges Lemaître, who was not only a Belgian physicist but also a Roman Catholic priest. Lemaître described his theory as the hypothesis of the primeval atom, and he was careful to distinguish it from religious dogma. But others did not — in fact, some leading scientists of the era resisted the model precisely because it appeared to echo the biblical doctrine of creation ex nihilo. Notably, Arthur Eddington described the idea of a beginning as "repugnant," and Fred Hoyle, a proponent of the rival steady-state theory, coined the term "Big Bang" as a pejorative (Kragh, 1999, p. 46). Ironically, although the Big Bang now represents standard cosmology, it was initially viewed by many scientists as suspiciously metaphysical. It could not be scientifically respectable because it was too suggestive of divine intervention. In this sense, historical discomfort has been reversed by Turek's apologetic strategy — he embraces the cosmological beginning not as a threat to science, but as confirmation of theism's explanatory power.

Even though a rival cosmogenesis was not offered by Hitchens in this debate, prominent naturalists have pressed a different conclusion from the same cosmological evidence, seeking accounts within physics rather than theism. While Richard Dawkins often states that he is not a physicist when pressed on matters of cosmology, he still maintains that scientific progress offers better explanations for questions that were once in the domain of religion. In *The Grand Design*, Stephen Hawking famously asserts, "Because there is a law such as gravity, the universe can and will create itself from nothing" (Hawking & Mlodinow, 2010, p. 180). This view, which aligns with quantum cosmological models, suggests that a vacuum state, governed by quantum laws, can give rise to particles and, by extension, spacetime itself. However, as discussed previously, such

definitions of “nothing” are deeply contested. Critics point out that the “nothing” referred to in these accounts is not a true absence of being, but a field governed by potentialities, fluctuations, and mathematical regularities. In this vein, William Lane Craig challenges Daniel Dennett’s suggestion that the universe might have created itself “out of something well-nigh indistinguishable from nothing,” arguing that such a claim overlooks the absolute metaphysical divide between being and non-being (Craig, 2008, p. 151). If that state is still governed by laws of physics, then it is not genuinely void — it is something rather than nothing.

“Nothing” cannot be unstable. This is because instability assumes a system with properties and potentialities that can vary with time. A more accurate term might be “total non-existence”, with no space, time, fields, or potentiality at all. In total non-existence, there is nothing to be unstable. This conceptual contrast has deep mythical and religious roots. The Nasadiya Sukta of the Rigveda opens: “Then, there was neither existence, nor non-existence” (Rig Veda 10.129, trans. O’Flaherty, 1981). This hymn describes the very limits of understanding. Rather than offering a definitive origin story, it questions whether even the gods could know how creation began, and shows that both ancient and modern thinkers have struggled with the conceptual adequacy of origin accounts. The Nasadiya Sukta models intellectual humility, rather than following the scientific process of reducing mystery to mechanism. This describes an openness to the possibility that the question of origins may exceed the explanatory reach of both theology and physics.

From a strictly scientific perspective, the idea of God can seem unlikely or unnecessary. Still, there are major questions—such as how the universe began, how life started, and what consciousness is—that science has not fully answered. Due to these gaps, some people continue to consider theistic explanations, which can seem just as reasonable as scientific ones. Even with advances in cosmology, we still do not fully understand where the universe originally came from. Ideas like quantum tunnelling from "nothing," multiverse theories, and spontaneous fluctuation models all face their own empirical challenges. In a similar manner, evolution explains how complex life can develop from simpler forms; however, the process by which life first arose from non-living matter remains a topic of debate. Abiogenesis provides a possible framework, but no clear mechanism has been observed or recreated, and questions remain about how the first self-replicating systems could have formed (Davies, 2019). When it comes to consciousness, physicalist theories struggle to explain how subjective experiences arise from objective neural processes. This is what David Chalmers called the "hard problem" of consciousness (Chalmers, 1996, pp. xii–xiii). Theistic explanations also have philosophical challenges, but they remain part of the discussion, not just to fill gaps in knowledge, but because they recognise how much is still unknown.

In recent years, an interesting asymmetry has emerged in the scientific and philosophical discourse surrounding origins. While scientists and secularists are often uncomfortable with the idea of a divine creator, often no such discomfort surrounds the so-called simulation hypothesis. This hypothesis has been promoted by thinkers such as Nick Bostrom (2003) and further popularised by figures such as Elon Musk and Neil

deGrasse Tyson. It describes our own universe as an artificial construct created by an advanced civilisation. It goes like this: given sufficient technological advancement, posthuman civilisations could generate countless simulated realities indistinguishable from genuine ones. It is therefore argued that statistically, we are much more likely to be living in a simulation than in a base reality. What is often overlooked is that while external designers are often objectionable within theistic accounts, the same metaphysical structure is acceptable within the simulation hypothesis. Although such designers would be agents within a broader reality and not necessarily a transcendent creator, the debate's core question resurfaces — whether a "mind behind the world" is needed, and if so, of what kind.

The simulation hypothesis is accepted with relative ease by scientific and secular communities, and the reason appears to be more philosophical than cultural. While the rejection of a personal God is often made on pre-modern or anthropocentric grounds, the concept of a programmer appears to be more appealing in a contemporary world shaped by digital technology. It is more scientific to appeal to the language of bits and processors than to that of souls and spirits, yet the underlying logic is functionally the same (though ontologically different). The hypothesis still relies on a contingent reality grounded in the intentions of a "transcendent mind" or extra-systemic agent. Simulation theorists do not claim that a simulation could exist without a simulator. The simulation hypothesis is just a new way to express the same ideas found in design arguments, but using technology as the focus. It does not bypass metaphysics, but reinstates it in a form palatable to those already immersed in scientific materialism. Being open to the idea of a simulator but

rejecting the idea of a creator seems to reflect cultural preferences for certain stories, rather than a consistent way of thinking about knowledge.

In short, regardless of the position taken, there is a risk of overextension. Turek appears to move too quickly to a theological conclusion from a scientific construct, and Hitchens too quickly to polemical rhetoric from justified scepticism. Yet, an issue of deeper consequence escapes the mere winning of the argument. The cosmological question has always tested the limits of human understanding within our ability to reason. Describing the beginning of the universe is not simply a scientific inquiry — it remains, as it always has been throughout human history, a yearning for narrative coherence. But is this question best expressed through God or principled secularism? This is a question that continues to be contested in both philosophy and public life.

4.3 Cosmic Design: Fine-Tuning, Disorder, and the Limits of Inference

The second major argument for the existence of God, as presented by Frank Turek, is the apparent fine-tuning of the universe. As he puts it, only an extraordinarily narrow range of conditions will allow life, especially intelligent life, to arise. The physical set-up of the universe is so finely calibrated that a minute change in the expansion rate one second after the Big Bang would exclude structure formation. He uses the familiar 'tape-measure across the universe' image to illustrate the sensitivity of gravity to be 1 in 10^40, and points to Earth's 24-hour rotation, its 23.5 degree axial tilt, and Jupiter acting as a "cosmic vacuum

cleaner" to argue that our environment appears strikingly set up for life. These facts taken together, he contends, favour design over chance. He puts the claim even more strongly in his wider work, where he states, "The extent of the universe's fine-tuning makes the Anthropic Principle perhaps the most powerful argument for the existence of God" (Turek & Geisler, 2004, p. 105)."

Contemporary philosophical and scientific discussions of cosmological fine-tuning support Turek's version of the argument. Robin Collins (2009) develops a Bayesian design inference, whereas Paul Davies, although himself not a theist, states that "the impression of design is overwhelming" (1988, p. 203). Turek supports his arguments in the debate by referring to well-known ideas in cosmology. He cites Arno Penzias, who described the universe as "created out of nothing" and "delicately balanced." He also mentions Steven Weinberg's point that even small changes in certain parameters would make life impossible. In addition, he refers to the COBE/Smoot and Hawking recognition of anisotropies that led to galaxy formation. For Turek, these points show that theism best explains why the universe's structure allows for life.

People have wondered for centuries whether the order of the universe points to design. This question — later called the teleological argument — appears in Thomas Aquinas's writing, where he saw in nature's regularity a sign of divine purpose (Summa Theologiae, I, q. 2, a. 3). Many years later, William Paley made this argument well known with his watchmaker analogy. In Natural Theology (1802/1819, ch. 1), he claimed that the intricate organisation of living beings, like the inner workings of a watch, implied the

existence of a designer. For about the next hundred years, critics focused on this analogy, especially after Darwin explained evolution. More recently, Frank Turek has changed the debate. Instead of looking at biological complexity, he focuses on how the universe itself seems fine-tuned. By moving the discussion from the design of life to the conditions of the universe, he avoids the usual Darwinian objection, which Richard Dawkins summarises in The Blind Watchmaker (1986), that natural selection makes arguments for biological design unnecessary.

Despite Turek's teleological argument presenting apparent coherence, critics have still raised some serious objections. One area of critique argues that treating the low probability of life-permitting constants as evidence for intention commits the fallacy of probability misinterpretation (Sober 2005). Low probability outcomes occur all the time without design, and it is difficult to know if our own universe is improbable without understanding all possible physical constants and the full range of possible universes. Some combinations of constants that we deem non-life-permitting might allow alternative forms of life or rebalance under unknown laws, making the inference to design less secure. The apparent fine-tuning is also explained by multiverse theories. Although these are heavily contested theories, they basically state that if a vast ensemble of universes exists, each with randomly assigned parameters, then it is not surprising that at least one is life-permitting (Tegmark, 2003, pp. 44–47). In his wider literature, Turek rejects these explanations by noting that the multiverse itself would require finely tuned initial conditions or generative laws, effectively pushing the design question one step back

(Turek & Geisler, 2004, p. 107). Whether this response adequately addresses the objection remains debated.

The rhetorical power of the teleological argument goes beyond its logical structure. Turek also relies on its existential appeal, aligning his theistic worldview with the ability of the vastness, order, and beauty of the cosmos to naturally inspire wonder. He goes beyond simply making a deductive case by inviting people into a way of seeing the universe that provides coherence and meaning in the apparent elegance of nature. This resonance helps explain why this reasoning has broad appeal, particularly for audiences who are already open to theism. The fact that this interpretive framework may be more psychologically motivated than epistemically warranted is part of the broader debate.

Christopher Hitchens does not address the teleological argument in the same way that Frank Turek does. His critique is not structured and syllogistic, but embedded in a broader rhetorical and moral strategy in which he aims to discredit the plausibility, coherence, and desirability of belief in a designed universe. He chooses not to engage with the mathematical probabilities that are presented by Turek, but he challenges their underlying assumptions. He questions whether the universe is really fine-tuned for life, and he does not believe we can actually infer design simply because we experience order.

Hitchens' most consistent objection is not empirical but moral. In *God Is Not Great*, he highlights the chaotic character of natural history, noting that an "intelligent 'designer' might have managed without these chaotic episodes of boom and bust" such as mass

extinctions and evolutionary explosions (Hitchens, 2007, p. 71). On stage he makes the same point by stressing the cosmos's hostility: he cites the accelerating expansion ("the Hubble rate… is increasing") and the coming Andromeda collision, adds that "every other planet in our solar system is either too hot or too cold to support life, as is most of our own planet," and then asks, "Some design, wouldn't you say?" Rather than seeing precision and beauty as signs of purpose, Hitchens sees indifference. He challenges the anthropocentric bias of the fine-tuning argument: why assume the universe was made for us when we are confined to an infinitesimal fragment of it and constantly threatened by its violent forces? For Hitchens, this is not the mark of divine concern but of cosmic indifference — perhaps even malevolence, were intention to be presumed.

This critique echoes earlier challenges to design from thinkers like David Hume, who in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* ridiculed the idea that order implies beneficence, suggesting that the universe, if designed, might be the first rude attempt of an infant deity — or the work of a committee (Hume, 1779, p. 111). Hitchens inherits this line of thought and intensifies it by coupling it with contemporary scientific imagery. Among the counter-evidence to the teleological argument that he presents are the vast stretches of uninhabitable space and the long history of extinction on Earth. He further argues in his wider literature that even the design of the human body is filled with inefficiencies and evolutionary leftovers, which he claims is evidence not of design, but of blind, contingent processes (Hitchens, 2007, p. 85).

The implication that a designer is both intelligent and good is also targeted by Hitchens. He argues that going from fine-tuning to theism is a theological move that implies an omniscient and intelligent designer. The assumptions about the divine character of this designer rest on the smuggling in of unexamined assumptions. Assuming that a designer exists, why then suppose that this being has moral concern or is worthy of worship? By making this argument, Hitchens contends that justifications for God's existence are often rhetorically mobilised to support specific religious narratives without the necessary intermediate steps. Therefore, the jump from fine-tuning to the personal God of the Bible is unwarranted.

Finally, Hitchens is sceptical of apologists' appeals to epistemic humility. He points out that it is a suspension of critical inquiry to appeal to mystery, as when theists argue that God's purposes are inscrutable. He pressed Turek on stage to offer public reasons rather than label them scientific: "Do yourself and your faith the honour of saying it's faith… Don't say it's science based," and, "I want to know what sources you have that are not available to me." He acknowledges that the universe is strange and that much is still unknown, but he believes that claims about a designer should be treated as matters of faith unless there is evidence available to the public.

While Frank Turek states the teleological argument, Christopher Hitchens critiques it. Turek begins with the apparent order and specificity of the cosmos and moves outward to infer a transcendent mind. Hitchens, by contrast, begins with the vast indifference and cruelty of the universe and questions whether any meaningful purpose, let alone

benevolent design, can be inferred at all. These are not just divergent conclusions, but divergent epistemologies. Each view emphasises different aspects of reality. While Turek emphasises precision, Hitchens emphasises scale, waste, and suffering. The debate reveals less about the empirical data, on which both broadly agree, than about the frameworks used to interpret that data.

Turek's main strength is his use of probability and metaphysical economy. Since the initial conditions are so finely tuned, it makes more sense to suggest a designer instead of assuming endless brute facts or random multiverses. This approach resonates with inference to the best explanation, used in both science and philosophy. However, critics say that Turek's argument may confuse explanatory power with truth. Elliott Sober (2005) notes that a theory is not true simply because it explains observations, especially if other possible explanations are not fully developed or cannot be tested (pp. 118–147). Theistic design might provide a simple story, but its details—such as the intentions, methods, and qualities of the designer—are still unclear or cannot be tested by scientific methods.

One of the most common naturalistic responses to fine-tuning is the anthropic principle. In its weak form, the anthropic principle states that observers can only exist in regions of the universe, or in universes, where the conditions happen to support life. Therefore, we should not be surprised to find ourselves in a universe that appears fine-tuned, because any observers who did not live in such a universe would not exist to notice it (Barrow & Tipler, 1986). This is a kind of observational selection effect: life evolves within the constraints of its environment, and thus necessarily adapts to those constraints.

What seems like improbable calibration may be, from this perspective, the tautological result of conscious observers reflecting on their own conditions of existence. As Weinberg (2001) observes, the anthropic principle is often regarded by physicists as a disappointing "last resort" that explains little in scientific terms (p. 20), yet it can still carry philosophical weight by reframing cosmic suitability as the contingent outcome of a universe whose laws and constants happen to permit life (pp. 68–69). Still, the principle is disputed: some see it as a helpful guideline in multiverse theory, while others call it empty or question-begging. In either case, it complicates the teleological inference by suggesting that what appears to be purpose may actually be nothing more than survivorship bias.

Meanwhile, Hitchens' scepticism is a valuable reminder that not all cases of order imply intention, and not all cases of improbability demand design. As much as rare events like hitting a royal flush can happen through chance without any kind of manipulation involved, life-allowing circumstances might similarly arise from statistical probabilities within a vast cosmic landscape. Rather than again recounting the assemblage of adverse traits already discussed, his emphasis chiefly plays on a moral objection: through emphasis on suffering, scale, and wastage, he calls up distaste rather than denial. In John Leslie's words, environments like neutron stars "would be inhospitable" (1989, p. 20), but such mere presence of advanced chemistry in rare niches might still entail fine-tuning nonetheless. In this manner, Paul Davies says that without scrupulous adjustment of physical parameters, "the Great Designer had better set the knobs carefully, or the universe would be a very inhospitable place" (2007, p. 146). Each remark suggests that systematic inhospitability in itself does not invalidate design's idea; instead, it might shift discourse to

a kind of intention (personal or impersonal) that might underlie a sparse-but-permitting cosmos.

Moreover, both Turek and Hitchens arguably overextend the scope of design reasoning. Turek moves quickly from cosmological fine-tuning to the God of classical theism without pausing over intermediary questions: why would a perfect being create via physical constants? Why permit such vast stretches of lifeless matter? Hitchens, in turn, often assumes that a designed universe must reflect human standards of goodness or efficiency. Yet classical theism, especially apophatic traditions, has long resisted projecting human traits onto God. As Rowan Williams observes, "Surely God, above all, is one whose purposes we can't fathom, whose 'agenda' is hidden from us, a completely alien intelligence, remote and transcendent?" (2010, p. 7).

There may be deeper issues here — either of methodology or interpretation. What kind of explanations are appropriate in cosmology? Should we be drawing boundaries between inference and speculation? Historically, when scientists have redefined their field, it often initially appeared that they we pushing their interpretations into the absurd. Are we now preempting such absurd solutions to try to answer such deep philosophical questions, which may not be amenable to science? There is clearly a desire for coherence, both in the design theories and their rejection, but trying to force brute facts into intelligible patterns may be trying to project meaning onto a universe whose scale and complexity exceed our own conceptual tools. Fine-tuning, for example, remains an

important observation — but how we interpret it tells us more about ourselves than about the universe.

4.4 The Moral Law: Ethics, Authority, and the Nature of Value

Frank Turek's third main point for the existence of God is the moral argument. He claims that objective moral values and duties exist and need a foundation beyond humanity. This view is similar to Kant's philosophy, which says that God is needed to achieve the highest good, but not as the foundation of moral law. (Kant, 1788/2015, 5:110–115; 5:122–132). In his formulation, "Of course, every law has a law giver. There can be no legislation unless there's a legislature. Moreover, if there are moral obligations, there must be someone to be obligated to" (Turek & Geisler, 2004, p. 245). On stage, he makes the same point clearly: "Since objective moral laws exist, there must be an objective moral law giver." He also uses a pharmacist analogy, saying, "If there's a prescription, there must be a prescriber." This argument aligns with a long tradition in moral apologetics, captured with particular clarity by C. S. Lewis, who argues that while an outside observer could never infer morality from human behaviour, "the moral law is about what we ought to do" (Lewis, 1952/2009, p. 24).

Turek frequently presents the argument from an experiential perspective. He gives examples of actions that are not just socially disapproved but are regarded as universally wrong, such as torturing children or committing genocide. He also argues that, despite

naturalistic frameworks being able to explain the development and function of moral beliefs, they are insufficient for deriving prescriptive moral obligations. In the debate, he is careful to add that he is not claiming atheists can't know morality or be moral, his point is about grounding — "there's a standard beyond everybody," and "that standard is God's very nature." He uses moral realism to argue that when we talk about rights, justice, or moral progress, we assume there is an objective standard beyond individual or cultural views. He argues that theism provides a strong foundation for this standard because it is based on the nature or character of God, who is viewed as morally perfect and as the source of moral order.

This argument draws strength from its resonance with moral intuition. Most people behave as if certain values, such as fairness, dignity, or compassion, are not dependent on context but apply universally. Theistic moral arguments, therefore, assert that if moral truth requires a source independent of changes in nature or society, then these moral intuitions can be transformed into a metaphysical claim. Others who support this view, such as Robert Adams (2002, pp. 309–310) and Mark Linville (2009, p. 394), argue that naturalism either collapses into relativism or can only offer pragmatic reasons to behave morally, not reasons rooted in objective truth.

However, the argument is not without its challenges. Secular ethicists such as Louise Antony and Erik Wielenberg argue that moral realism is compatible with atheism. In the introduction to *Philosophers Without Gods*, Antony argues against the idea that atheists lack moral values. She maintains that divine authority is not a necessary requirement for having objective standards of right and wrong, supporting Plato's

argument that morality does not depend on God (Antony, 2007, pp. 9–15). Wielenberg, on the other hand, champions what he terms "atheistic moral realism," a striking view that asserts objective moral values and duties truly exist, independent of both evolution and human opinion, and yet find no foundation in God (Wielenberg, 2014, pp. 44–45). From this perspective, morality does not require a divine lawgiver. Furthermore, in *Euthyphro*, Socrates famously asks, "Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?" (Plato, Euthyphro 10a). If the latter (pious because loved), morality seems arbitrary; if the former (loved because pious), morality appears independent of God and thus undermines the argument's foundation.

Turek attempts to circumvent the argument, not by rooting morality in arbitrary divine commands, but rather in God's unchanging nature. In the debate, he states this explicitly: "that standard is God's very nature." This view means that moral truths are now grounded in the very essence of a necessarily good being, and not independent of God or subject to divine whim. The reformulation was influenced by Adams (2002, p. 49), who maintains both the objectivity and the theological foundation of morality. Can we grasp moral knowledge without invoking theism? Some critics suggest that we can, but others find the sense of moral obligation to be powerfully persuasive.

People tend to hold strong beliefs about right and wrong, and Turek's moral argument seeks to tap into these convictions by offering a metaphysical framework that clarifies them. He argues that by pointing to a moral lawgiver, theism not only fits with moral realism but also stands as its only solid foundation. Whether this resonates depends

not only on how one perceives morality but also on whether one believes a deeper metaphysical grounding is necessary at all.

Christopher Hitchens tackles the moral argument with his trademark wit and fiery scepticism, blending sharp rhetoric with a sense of moral outrage. He rejects the idea that objective morality depends on belief in God, arguing passionately that morality existed before religion and frequently challenges it. In *God Is Not Great*, he concludes that "ethics and morality are quite independent of faith, and cannot be derived from it" (Hitchens, 2007, p. 52). On stage, he poses a two-part challenge: first, to "name a moral action undertaken or a moral and ethical statement made by a believer" that a non-believer could not also make or do; second, to "think of something wicked that only a believer would be likely to do or say." He uses the example of the Good Samaritan to show that people can recognise moral values without religious teaching. He also says, "We do not get it from Big Brother," to argue that morality does not depend on divine approval. Hitchens finds the idea that morality depends on a divine lawgiver both unconvincing and offensive. He believes this view wrongly suggests that people cannot act ethically without the threat of divine punishment, which he firmly rejects.

Despite such philosophical alternatives, Hitchens develops a twofold challenge to the moral argument. Firstly, he argues that people are capable of having moral awareness, which can arise from human empathy, social life, and rational reflection, without requiring divine command. He illustrates this in the debate by appealing to ordinary cases of integrity and courage, as well as to conscience (Socrates' "daimon"), and Adam Smith's "internal witness". Secondly, he points to the ethical failures of religious traditions in order

to turn the moral argument on its head. This point is further critiqued in *God Is Not Great*: "Is it too modern to notice that there is nothing about the protection of children from cruelty, nothing about rape, nothing about slavery, and nothing about genocide? Or is it too exactingly 'in context' to notice that some of these very offences are about to be positively recommended?" (Hitchens, 2007, p. 100). For Hitchens, religion does not ground morality at all; it frequently corrupts and distorts it.

Hitchens' arguments have clear parallels in secular philosophy. Other thinkers have also explored themes surrounding human-sourced moral awareness and scriptural morality. Philip Kitcher, for example, argues that operating within an evolving practice of ethics is central to our humanity. He contrasts the ethically guided life of humans with the social state of chimpanzees (2011, p. 278). Louise Antony supports secular moral realism and argues that both theists and atheists use the same moral intuitions and reasoning methods. This suggests that morality and metaphysical belief are separate (2007, pp. 12–14). For Hitchens and his supporters, the main question is not if objective moral values exist, but whether these values are better explained by divine command or by human reasoning.

Yet Hitchens' response is not without its own philosophical vulnerabilities. He often focuses heavily on Abrahamic scripture, and this leads him to conflate a belief in God with adherence to specific moral codes. In the debate, his moral focus is on biblical injunctions (genocide, slavery, sexual and dietary rules) and on vicarious redemption. This approach lets him point out serious moral issues in religious texts, but it does not address more complex theistic views that base morality on God's nature rather than on specific

commandments. Moreover, Hitchens does not offer a developed metaethical account of moral realism. His defence of secular morality relies heavily on the intuition that human beings can be good without God, but this does not resolve the question of whether moral truths exist independently of human minds, or what justifies their authority.

Still, Hitchens' moral critique remains powerful. He insists that moral reasoning must be understood within its historical and political context, since ideas about good and evil are not just theoretical but a part of real life. He also argues that since the moral argument has historically been used to justify systems of power and repression, it is not simply incorrect but also dangerous. He makes his argument stronger by repeating the phrase "we do not get it from Big Brother." This rhetorical move connects religious authority to totalitarian control. Although he is not providing any alternative moral claims, he still questions the logic of those underpinned by theism by highlighting their cultural and ethical contradictions.

Hitchens and Turek each have very different views about what it means to be human. Turek believes in the universality of moral values and that matters such as justice, human rights, and moral responsibility become unintelligible without God. Hitchens says people can act morally without religious beliefs and that secular humanism provides a strong, and possibly better, basis for moral progress. Their disagreement is not limited to ethics. It concerns whether moral values truly exist and if they need any foundation at all.

Turek's argument is strongest when it exposes the difficulty naturalism has in explaining moral obligation. Evolutionary psychology may account for prosocial tendencies of altruistic behaviour, but it doesn't explain why we ought to act in certain

ways, particularly when doing so conflicts with self-interest or survival. William Lane Craig describes "Atheistic Moral Platonism" as an attempt to defend objective moral values in the absence of God. But he argues that this leaves moral values "floating in an unintelligible way," without adequate foundation in reality and with no source of obligation to act in accordance with them (2008, pp. 178–179). Turek attempts to secure both the objectivity and authority of moral claims by locating morality in the unchanging nature of God, an account which provides not only coherence but teleological structure — where moral truth is intimately tied to moral purpose.

Secular moral realists such as Erik Wielenberg (2014, pp. 44–45) and Russ Shafer-Landau (2003, pp. 47–49) offer an interesting critique of theistic moral foundations. They argue that objective moral facts could be basic features of reality, much like the laws of logic or physics. From this point of view, moral truths are not tied to any supernatural source or even natural properties. This approach not only states that moral facts are not natural, but also denies their explanation by theism. Another question posed is how humans, with all their limitations and fallibilities, can hope to truly understand moral values that come from God? This is especially difficult given the variety of religious traditions, unclear scriptures, and the history of moral wrongs committed in God's name.

Hitchens' response, while rhetorically powerful, is more reactive than constructive; perhaps, given the logical force of his position, he does not feel the issue requires reconstruction. He is angry about religious cruelty and ethical hypocrisy, but this comes across mainly as a moral protest rather than a well-developed philosophical argument for a realist view. He appears to believe in moral absolutes, particularly regarding human

dignity and his opposition to authoritarianism. However, it is not clear how he justifies these beliefs in a world without God.

There was a moment in the debate, during the Q&A on empathy and morality, when Turek appealed to moral objectivity and was met with applause. As perhaps emblematic of the broader dynamic in neoatheist discourse, Hitchens shot back: “Some people will clap at anything”. These debates, although sometimes approached amicably, are too often marked by not only disagreement but also by derision and condescension. Tones of superiority, by both sides, undermine the very ideals of open rational exchange that these debates claim to uphold. Despite his undeniable brilliance, Hitchens' tendency to dismiss theistic arguments as not only incorrect but also contemptible contributes to the polarisation of the discourse. As noted in earlier sections, when New Atheists move beyond defending reason and science to asserting their intellectual and moral superiority, they risk alienating the very audiences they claim to enlighten. In defence of figures like Hitchens, such postures may be a reaction to the historically oppressive or dismissive attitudes of religious fundamentalists. But this is still counterproductive, especially in the context of a formal debate where the speakers are typically scholars or theologians rather than dogmatists.

4.5 Mind and Meaning: Reason, Consciousness, and Metaphysical Mystery

There is a point during the debate when Frank Turek challenges Christopher Hitchens on the problem of materialism. If human beings are simply "molecules in motion" or "a bunch of chemicals", then this not only makes moral obligations meaningless, but also rational thought. He states that "Chemicals don't reason, they react", and argues that if our thoughts are just chemical reactions, then how can we trust any of them to be true, including arguments for atheism? This objection has a long history in Christian apologetics, and it aims to show a contradiction in the naturalist worldview. Turek argues that reason, freedom, intentionality, and consciousness cannot be explained by physical processes alone. If they could be, then naturalism would undermine the rational abilities it needs to make its own arguments.

Turek's argument extends those made by earlier thinkers, such as C. S. Lewis, who asserted in *Miracles* that strict naturalism undermines the possibility of reason itself. If our thoughts are nothing more than the by-product of atomic motions, Lewis contends, then we have "no reason to suppose that [our] beliefs are true … and hence no reason for supposing [our] brains to be composed of atoms" (Lewis, 1947/2001, p. 23, citing Haldane, 1927, p. 209). Rationality, in this view, presupposes a source beyond blind physical causation. More recently, Alvin Plantinga (1993) has developed this concern into the Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism, which contends that if both naturalism and evolution are true, we have a defeater for trusting our cognitive faculties: they would be aimed at survival, not truth (pp. 216–238).

Turek reinforces this argument by appealing not only to rationality but to personal identity and free will. If brain chemistry and the firing of synapses are all there is to being human, then the self is an illusion. When this illusion vanishes, then so too does any coherent notion of moral accountability. The murderer, the hero, the philosopher — all are just biochemical reactions playing out deterministically. Turek is not denying that the brain is involved in thought or decision-making, but rather arguing that consciousness, will, and personhood point beyond what physics and chemistry alone can explain. As he puts it on stage, "What is the murder molecule? How much does justice weigh?" He thus invokes a dualist or at least non-reductive ontology, suggesting that human beings are more than physical machines.

While this argument can be, and often is, dismissed as naïve or unscientific by materialists, it resonates with deep philosophical concerns about the nature of mind. Subjective experience has resisted being explained in purely physical terms. This is known as the "hard problem of consciousness" (Chalmers, 1996). Why does the brain give rise to felt experiences (qualia), such as the redness of red or the pain of injury, rather than responses that are more functional? Turek gestures towards the mystery that first-person consciousness is not reducible to third-person observation, and even cites Daniel Dennett's claim that consciousness is an illusion with some light-hearted banter: "one wonders if he was conscious when he wrote this."

This is not merely a theistic concern. Thomas Nagel, himself an atheist, has argued that materialist explanations of mind are insufficient, and that "consciousness is what makes the mind–body problem really intractable" (Nagel, 1974, p. 435). More recently, he

argues that evolutionary naturalism still lacks a satisfying account of consciousness. Even if we treat consciousness as a biological by-product, like the redness of blood, "the mere identification of a cause would not be a satisfactory explanation" for why it exists at all (Nagel, 2012, pp. 50–51). Other philosophers make related points. John Searle (1992) argues that consciousness is an irreducible feature of the physical world, without committing us to dualism, as irreducible does not imply supernatural (pp. 116–117). Galen Strawson (2006) goes further, suggesting that physicalism itself entails panpsychism. Their conclusions differ from Turek's, but they share his unease about the explanatory gap at the heart of strict materialism.

Some philosophers treat mind not merely as a scientific problem but as an existential one, bound up with what it is to be human and with the nature of reality itself — and thus prior to any scientific question. Michael Eldred tries to show the psyche not as a thing but as the site where meaning emerges through the "hermeneutic as," the interpretive act that makes the world and its beings appear as such. Here, being is not encountered as a discrete object but as a broader field of meaningful presence. In his phenomenological study of temporality and the psyche, he shows that the psyche does not reside inside the brain, nor can it be reduced to computations or chemicals; rather, it belongs to a temporal openness — a clearing — in which beings come to presence (Eldred, 2024, pp. 45–65, 112–120). While his analysis is too technical to cover here, his main idea is straightforward: we cannot reduce mind to a mechanism without erasing the lived, interpretive, and time-bound qualities that constitute human existence. From this perspective, Turek's concern that materialism misses something is not merely theological.

The rejection of dualism (that the mind and body are separate things) is part of a larger tradition that was revised during the Enlightenment. La Mettrie claims that humans function like complex machines and believes the soul is not a separate or immaterial entity. His work, *Man in the Machine* (1748), was so controversial that he was forced to flee France. In this position, the self is not metaphysical, and the mind and psyche emerge from brain activity. Although Hitchens is not a philosopher of mind, he channels the Enlightenment tradition and states that we should not assume the presence of the immaterial without evidence. He strongly supports naturalism on stage, but he doesn't extend these beliefs to the point of believing that life has no meaning. He also sees no contradiction in reasoning emerging from evolved brains. As Daniel Dennett puts it, consciousness can be treated as a "virtual machine" with a "user illusion" (1991, pp. 219–220), a metaphor that avoids positing a "ghost in the machine."

Hitchens maintains his confidence in human rationality and does not fully confront the implications of his position. He argues that reason is simply a by-product of random evolution, but he does not feel the need to justify trusting this randomness to produce truth. His confidence continues the optimism of the Enlightenment tradition, which does not appear to be based on solid epistemological foundations. He trusts science because it works, and he therefore trusts the mind that generated it. But whether this instrumental success guarantees metaphysical reliability remains an open question.

Hitchens' argument is more rhetorical in nature, and he refuses to concede any ground to what he sees as religious nostalgia. His tone, often defiant and even mocking,

reinforces the clarity and confidence of his position and works to galvanise like-minded audiences. This approach could ultimately widen the gap that good science communication aims to close. For those genuinely uncertain about the metaphysical implications of the mind, Hitchens offers more assertion than explanation, more resistance than exploration.

The question of the relationship between mind and matter remains unresolved, as it does not reconcile naturalism and theism. Both perspectives encounter significant explanatory constraints. Physicalist theories need to explain consciousness without assuming any purpose-driven principles. In contrast, dualist theories must justify how the mind and body interact without relying on unexplained events. What Turek and Hitchens make clear, even in passing, is that consciousness remains a battleground not only of metaphysics but of meaning. Whether one sees it as the by-product of matter or the signature of transcendence, the mind remains — perhaps now more than ever — an emblem of what science has yet to fully understand.

4.6 Beyond Argument: What the Debate Reveals About Meaning and Posture

What emerges from this chapter is not simply that one argument is superior to another, but also a deeper tension between explanation and posture. The New Atheists have developed a habit of ridiculing religious beliefs. Although they do this in the name of

rationality, it can undermine the credibility of science. This has nothing to do with the correctness of scientific conclusions, but the manner of engagement. When the New Atheists dismiss metaphysical questions or positions with scorn or ridicule, they posture intellectual superiority. This approach tends to increase polarisation instead of helping people understand each other, which goes against the purpose of science communication. To be effective, it needs to build trust across divides, both epistemic and cultural. This is a goal that is often jeopardised by Hitchens's rhetorical strategies.

In these debates, appeals to God are not made out of strict metaphysical necessity, and often serve as a narrative tool. Both Turek and Hitchens demonstrate, in different ways, that arguments for or against God typically stem from prior intuitions and affective leanings that shape our openness to explanation in the first place. There is a clear cultural divide regarding how meaning, value, and agency are assigned, and this is reflected in the fact that the debate had no clear winner. This was not only about whether God exists, but also whether reason alone can carry the weight of human longing.

Chapter 5: Between Silence and Friendship: Truth, Comfort, and the Human Condition

5.1 Framing the Question: Truth, Comfort, and Epistemic Authority

In the debate titled *Has Science Buried God?* (Fixed Point Foundation, 2008), John Lennox contrasts two existential stances. The first is standing tall "in the silent and cold universe with no hope", and the second is "enjoying the personal friendship of God" (43:53). Richard Dawkins does not deny the force of the contrast but immediately pivots: "What the basic question is is it true or not … it is completely irrelevant if it's comforting" (44:25). This debate between Lennox and Dawkins may first appear as a simple rhetorical exchange about the existence of God. But it soon reveals a much deeper epistemological issue regarding what constitutes truth, and whether emotional resonance or existential meaning should play any role in discerning it. Dawkins argues for "truth over comfort", urging us to "throw away childhood illusions". He also states that we "stand up tall in the universe and it's cold… we're going to die" (41:37–42:32).

John Lennox is one of the most prominent intellectuals defending the position that science and religion can co-exist harmoniously. As a Professor of mathematics at Oxford University (emeritus), he is one of the few Christian apologists with such a strong mathematical or scientific background. He has debated the New Atheists, including

Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, on important platforms such as the Oxford Union and in debates hosted by the Fixed Point Foundation. As a noted mathematician, he does not reject the authority of science, but as an apologist, he argues that science and religion can not only co-exist, but can also support each other. In his book *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* (2009), he argues that the universe is both rational and intelligible, and that this points towards a mind behind the cosmos (pp. 58–59). Unlike the New Atheists, he does not appeal to condescension and rhetoric. Rather, he uses intellectual arguments to show that Christian belief is both emotionally meaningful and intellectually robust.

In the 2008 Oxford debate, Lennox combines empirical reasoning with theological and philosophical analysis in order to contrast what he considers cold atheism with the intimacy of a divine relationship. This approach prompts Dawkins to return to one of his foundational claims, that the comforting nature of a belief, however moving, is irrelevant to whether it is true (Dawkins, 2007, p. 21).

Dawkins's response, at first glance, seems intellectually principled, reinforcing the modern scientific ideal that truth must be unyielding in the face of sentiment (see 44:25; 41:37–42:32). His writings in *The God Delusion* (2006) are consistent with this stance. He argues that religious conviction and psychological need must be separated, and that belief can only be grounded in that which is empirically verifiable or logically deducible. Yet such an unemotional and methodological conception of truth belongs to a specific philosophical tradition. It emerges from a post-Enlightenment view of knowledge that has

long been criticised, not only by theologians, but by philosophers of science, and even by science itself (Daston & Galison, 2007, pp. 35–36). This chapter argues that Dawkins's model of truth, while historically contingent, is philosophically narrow. It also argues that such positions are becoming increasingly difficult to sustain, especially with developments in quantum theory and studies of consciousness.

The chapter uses the Lennox–Dawkins debate as a starting point in order to explore the broader issues, particularly those surrounding empirical truth and existential orientation. It first traces the evolving conception of truth through philosophical and scientific cultures, and argues that the uncompromising separation of truth and meaning, so routinely made in scientific discussions, is historically tenuous and philosophically unnecessary. By examining what it would be like to live "between silence and friendship," this chapter challenges the idea that the only stable epistemic solution is provided by detachment. It instead proposes that certain truths are present in the very resonance Dawkins seeks to exclude.

5.2 Philosophical Histories of Truth

Must truth be cold, objective, and separate from human longing? In fact, this is a relatively modern invention. In Ancient Greek philosophy, truth (*alethia*) is best understood as a process of unveiling, and not of simple, factual correctness. Plato, for example, conceives of truth as transcending sensory experience — as a recollection of

eternal Forms and unchanging realities. The analogy of the cave in *The Republic* vividly illustrates empirical reality as both shadowy and misleading. True knowledge, on the other hand, requires a dialectical ascent toward the Form of the Good (*Plato, Republic*, Book VII, 514a–521d). Truth is therefore not grounded in physical reality, but in a higher metaphysical order. Plato believes that the path to truth both disciplines the soul and attunes the mind, and therefore reaching truth requires rigorous philosophical and mathematical training. The mind is then tuned to intelligible rather than sensible realities. What appears in the world is deceptive and unstable, and truth emerges only through a process of purification, reflection, and inner transformation.

Aristotle, despite being more empirical in his approach, nonetheless retained the metaphysical commitment. In his principle of non-contradiction, he stated what is often regarded to be a foundational element of Western realist philosophy: "To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false; while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true" (*Metaphysics*, 1011b25). The significance of the statement becomes even clearer when considered within Aristotle's broader accounts — those that involve substance, essence, and purpose. For Aristotle, there is more to truth than the mere correctness of statements; it is also a matter of apprehending the reality of things as they are.

With the rise of Christian theology, the concept of truth was absorbed into a theological metaphysic. In *Confessions*, Augustine states that "truth is in the inner man," but this inner truth is not self-originating; it is illuminated by divine reason (Augustine,

trans. 1991, Book X, Chapter 23). This is further developed by Thomas Aquinas. He distinguishes between truth in things (*veritas rei*) and truth in the mind (*veritas intellectus*). Both of these truths ultimately participate in the eternal truth of God (Aquinas, 1947/1265–1274, I, Q16, A1). This framework does not have competition from empirical observation, rational inference, or theological doctrine. They are instead harmonised under a unified concept of divine truth. During the Middle Ages, people saw truth as something real and important, with deep roots in both philosophy and spirituality.

This synthesis began to unravel during the Enlightenment. With Descartes, the centre of epistemology shifts to the autonomous subject. By doubting all his methods, he arrived at the unquestionable cogito: "I think, therefore I am". Nietzsche delivers a strong critique of the modern obsession with truth. In Beyond Good and Evil, he asks, "What in us really wants 'truth'?" (Nietzsche, 2002/1886, §1). He believes that the search for truth is influenced by cultural expectations and personal psychological factors, rather than being just a neutral moral pursuit. Humans often feel a deep need for meaning, and Nietzsche's look at truth suggests that our search for knowledge is closely linked to a desire for order and control. He critiques both religious and scientific absolutism as forms of the "ascetic ideal," the moral elevation of truth-seeking above life itself (Nietzsche, 1994/1887, III, §23). From a Nietzschean perspective, Dawkins does not avoid the ascetic posture. Instead, he takes on a secular version of it.

Martin Heidegger adds to this critique by referring to the Greek idea of aletheia, a word that means not just truth but also the act of unforgetting, or the revealing of what

was hidden. In Being and Time, Heidegger contends that truth is not merely a matter of statements, but a living process of revealing beings against the vast backdrop of human existence (Heidegger, 2010, §§44–45). Heidegger believed the modern view of truth was too narrow, arguing that it did not simply correspond to reality. It's a view common in scientific realism and one supported by thinkers like Karl Popper (1972), but Heidegger saw it as missing something deeper about how truth is actually revealed. It obscures the more primordial event of disclosure by reducing truth to the agreement between statements and facts. In doing so, it forgets that truth is never purely objective and always emerges from human history and a background of human concern, care, and embeddedness in the world.

These critiques do not negate the value of empirical truth; rather, they deny that it is exhaustive. Some truths may be accessible only within relationships and practices of meaning. Lennox may be appealing to comfort with his framing of divine friendship as a form of truth, but that is not all he is doing. He is also grounding his model of truth differently, highlighting an attached-observer stance and orienting it towards a different kind of epistemic relation.

In short, the history of philosophy reveals that truth has never been a singular or uncontested category. From Plato to Heidegger, from Augustine to Nietzsche, the question of what truth is, and how it is known, has been bound up with metaphysical, ethical, and existential concerns. Dawkins's question, "But is it true?", cannot be answered without

first asking what kind of truth is at stake, and whether truth must always be indifferent to the needs of the one who seeks it.

5.3 Scientific Truth and Its Revisions

The history of science itself shows that the concept of scientific truth has never been fixed. The Enlightenment may have laid the groundwork for scientific naturalism, but it soon became clear to some that scientific theories are not simply mirrors of reality. These models usually remain provisional and ultimately reversible. Science continues to evolve, and as it does so, it continues to defy the notion of a fixed truth. Scientific truth is also rarely cumulative.

The Copernican revolution is often regarded as a turning point in Western thought. Copernicus moved the Earth from the centre of the cosmos, and by doing so, not only altered the prevailing astronomical models, but also profoundly changed the way in which people understood their place in the universe. This break with scientific tradition was furthered by Galileo, who, through using his telescope as a tool to study the universe, observed sunspots, the phases of Venus, and the Moons of Jupiter. All of these observations added considerable weight to the heliocentric model, and in doing so, challenged current wisdom and long-held truths about the universe. Yet both Copernicus and Galileo inherited classical astronomical traditions that continued into the Scientific Revolution. These traditions were based on the idea of a stable, understandable universe governed by mathematical laws (Kuhn, 1962/2012, pp. 68–69).

It was the work of Isaac Newton that consolidated the mechanistic worldview. In the *Principia Mathematica* (1687/1999), he formulated his universal laws of motion and gravitation. These laws described reality with striking mathematical precision. The cosmos that he described not only appeared to be fully deterministic, but also governed by laws and therefore intelligible. But Newton believed that this universe was governed by a divine law, and that periodic interventions were necessary to preserve cosmic stability. It wasn't until the early nineteenth century that Pierre-Simon Laplace removed this need for intervention through his demonstration that the Solar System could remain stable under its own laws. When Napoleon asked why there was no mention of God in celestial mechanics, it was reported that Laplace replied, "I had no need of that hypothesis". This shift was welcomed by many Enlightenment thinkers, representing a triumph of reason and observation, as well as the redefinition of traditional metaphysical and theological concerns in terms of empirical explanation (Gaukroger, 2006, pp. 3–5).

Laplace then moved to ensure that his vision was completely deterministic. He famously imagined 'Laplace's Demon', an intelligence that had knowledge of both the position and momentum of every particle in the universe. Through this knowledge, the 'demon' was able to precisely calculate every past and future state of the universe. This being was purely rational and impersonal, and while not divine, had the attributes of omniscience traditionally ascribed to God — a perfect metaphor for a universe transparent to reason. In this vision, scientific truth was not just descriptive but totalising. Uncertainty was eliminated, and contingency was now a function of ignorance rather than reality.

While the theological overtones are obvious, God is conspicuously absent. The intellect that governed this universe was not relational or moral, but coldly computational. It appeared that the long effort to reflect nature had finally worked, and truth was seen as absolute. This new way of thinking did not openly criticise religion, but quietly replaced it. For a while, people had great confidence in this model, but its goal to understand everything by removing the observer was soon questioned.

The early twentieth century witnessed another scientific revolution, where our understanding of motion, time, and space was radically changed. Special relativity (1905) revealed that time and length are no longer absolute measurements but are relative to the observer's frame of reference. Following this, general relativity (1915) re-conceptualised gravity — it was no longer a force but a curvature of spacetime. Newtonian physics, once regarded as universally true, became a special case useful only in limited contexts. Einstein explained that Newtonian mechanics was an incomplete description of the cosmos at large, and can only be regarded as valid within Galilean systems of coordinates (Einstein, 1916/2001, p. 12). So theories that were once considered absolute truths now only hold within restricted domains.

More radically, the emergence of quantum mechanics undermined the very foundations of determinism. With the discovery of wave–particle duality and the development of the Schrödinger equation, physicists encountered a world where probability replaced certainty. The Heisenberg uncertainty principle demonstrates that both the position and the momentum of a particle cannot be known simultaneously,

challenging the idea that we can know everything about nature. In the famous double-slit experiment, the simple act of measurement influences observed outcomes, indicating an observer-dependent effect. As Richard Feynman wryly noted, "I think I can safely say that nobody understands quantum mechanics" (Feynman, 1965, p. 129). These developments highlight tensions for any epistemology that equates scientific truth with finality. If reality behaves differently depending on the act of measurement, and if even the most successful physical theories of one generation are later revealed to be limited or incomplete, then truth in science cannot be equated with finality.

Philosophers of science have long recognised this. Nancy Cartwright, in her book *How the Laws of Physics Lie,* argues that scientific laws are not literal descriptions of the world, but instead are idealised abstractions that work under restricted, *ceteris paribus* conditions. In Chapter 2, she contends that only under the most tightly-controlled circumstances are the most high-level claims of science true, and that explanatory power often comes at the expense of literal truth (Cartwright, 1983, pp. 44–53). Thomas Kuhn's landmark *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* argues that science proceeds through paradigm shifts rather than through linear accumulation. These shifts are moments in which the fundamental assumptions of a field are overturned and replaced by new conceptual frameworks. These paradigms are often only partly compatible. For example, a question, method, or observation that makes sense in one paradigm might not have any meaning in another. (Kuhn, 1962/2012, pp. 103–104). Thus, scientific truth is not a mirror of reality but a product of historically situated communities of practice.

Kuhn's analysis helps us better understand Dawkins's approach to knowledge. He argues that scientific knowledge is influenced by human perspectives, theories, and cultural values. When people treat science as the ultimate source of truth, they overlook these influences. According to Kuhn, the idea that science is 'pure' or free from interpretation is a myth found in textbooks, not in real scientific work. (Kuhn, 1962/2012, pp. 136–137). The Enlightenment's confidence in the development of a single, objective truth accessible through observation alone is undermined by all of these scientific revolutions. This is not to say that science is unreliable or irrational. Rather, it is to acknowledge that scientific truth is not a static mirror of reality — it is epistemically situated, model-dependent and provisional — a dynamic process of interpretation and revision. As such, it cannot bear the metaphysical weight that figures like Dawkins often place upon it.

This opens a space for alternative accounts of truth, ones that are not opposed to science but that recognise its limits. It also suggests that the subject, far from being an irrelevant contaminant, may be an indispensable participant in the process of knowing. When seen this way, Lennox's emphasis on relational and experiential truth does not mean he rejects reason. Instead, he questions the limits of the empiricist model of truth that has influenced modern epistemology and points out the growing problems within this approach.

5.4 Quantum Physics, Consciousness, and the Problem of Observation

Quantum theory did not simply unsettle classical physics — it tore it apart by questioning the very concept of objectivity upon which modern science had come to rest. The idea of measurement influencing what is measured undermines the classical conception of the scientist as an independent observer, and forces us to rethink the interaction of subject and object, knower and known. This introduces, or at least should introduce, a profound complication for a figure like Dawkins. It becomes more difficult to insist on a truth that is empirically verifiable when the act of verifying may itself constitute part of the reality being verified.

This tension is most famously illustrated by the double-slit experiment. Send electrons through two slits, and interference appears. When a detector is placed to measure which slit the electron passes through, the interference disappears, and the electrons behave like particles. In standard accounts, it is the measurement of the electron's path that alters the outcome, not the observer's consciousness. **Science has generally avoided attributing causal power to consciousness, since doing so risks re-introducing metaphysical or anthropocentric assumptions** — a discomfort reminiscent of early resistance to the Big Bang, which many feared sounded too much like a creation story. This experiment, and others like it, are often presented as showing that quantum systems exist in a superposition of states until a measurement is made, at which point the wavefunction collapses into a determinate state. The observer is no longer a neutral recorder but a participant in a measurement context that helps fix the observed outcomes.

These findings can seem very disruptive, especially to those who follow classical or realist traditions. They challenge the idea that reality exists on its own, without being observed. However, others are influenced by different frameworks where the participatory role of consciousness is already acknowledged. These include phenomenological or theological frameworks, where these features of quantum mechanics are less threatening and more revealing. These theories may therefore invite a re-thinking of long-held assumptions and open up a new understanding of truth, as relational rather than strictly observational.

There have been multiple interpretations that have emerged to account for quantum phenomena. For example, Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg developed the Copenhagen interpretation, which states that quantum properties do not exist until they are measured. This emphasises that physics is a formal system for organising experience, which necessarily occurs at the classical level (Bohr, 1935). The Many-Worlds interpretation, by contrast, denies the collapse of the wave function and proposes instead a single, universal wavefunction that continually branches into decoherent classical worlds. Each of these worlds corresponds to different possible outcomes (Everett, 1957). Relational interpretations are more radical still, and these suggest that quantum properties only exist in relation to the observer's frame of reference (Rovelli, 1996). These interpretations may appear vastly different, but they are united in their shared rejection of the Newtonian ideal of an observer-independent reality. So what is called 'truth' in the quantum domain is context-dependent and lacks a direct correspondence with an independent world.

This ontological entanglement of the observer has led some physicists and philosophers to consider whether consciousness itself plays a role in the measurement process. In the mid-twentieth century, Eugene Wigner suggested that consciousness may be necessary for wavefunction collapse, arguing that "it was not possible to formulate the laws of quantum mechanics in a fully consistent way without reference to consciousness" (Wigner, 1961, p. 172). Although most physicists do not accept this interpretation and it is still debated, it points out an ongoing problem: there is no clear line between subject and object.

Speculative theories in quantum biology and neuroscience have attempted to explore this boundary further. Roger Penrose and Stuart Hameroff's Orchestrated Objective Reduction (Orch-OR) theory suggests that quantum processes in microtubules might be the basis of consciousness. While also heavily debated, such theories reflect the ongoing debate about the view that the mind can be reduced to classical computation or mechanistic processes alone (Hameroff & Penrose, 2014). The emergence of consciousness, its unity, intentionality, and irreducibility, remains contested within the physicalist framework that Dawkins endorses.

Even aside from quantum mechanics, consciousness provides a serious challenge to any truth theory that dismisses the subject. All knowledge, according to Michael Polanyi (1958), is personal: it is to be found in a knowing subject who is placed, embodied, and committed.He argues that what we call objectivity actually hides the fact that knowing is

based on trust. We believe before we know, and our interpretations depend on our values, commitments, and ways of life. This does not entail relativism, but it does mean that truth cannot be abstracted from the subject who seeks it.

Seen this way, the clear line Dawkins draws between comforting beliefs and truthful ones does not hold up philosophically. If observing something changes it, then people are not obstacles to truth but are needed for it to develop. Moreover, if consciousness has to date resisted reduction to physical explanation, then empirical science may not be sufficient to account for all forms of truth. These developments do not support a return to supernaturalism, but they do suggest that the epistemic model of detached empiricism is incomplete.

This view suggests that truth is not just a simple match between words and reality, but a lively exchange between the person who knows and what is known. So, when Lennox talks about divine friendship, he is offering more than a theological idea; he is suggesting a different way of understanding knowledge. It reflects a worldview in which truth is not only discovered but also encountered, not only observed but also lived. Whether one agrees with its theological conclusions or not, such a posture demands serious philosophical consideration, especially in a scientific context that increasingly recognises the limits of its own objectivity.

5.5 Comfort, Meaning, and Epistemic Relevance

The post-Enlightenment legacy is one that treats emotion with suspicion. When Richard Dawkins asserts that comforting beliefs do not matter in the pursuit of truth, he continues this tradition. In his view, science is credible only when it removes personal needs to show the world "as it really is." Despite being rhetorically powerful, this is a very narrow model of rationality. So when Dawkins insists on the separation of truth and comfort, he adopts a model of detached reason that has been repeatedly critiqued by philosophers, theologians, and psychologists who see it as being epistemically impoverished.

The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard was among the first to articulate this critique in a sustained form. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, he declared that "truth is subjectivity" (1846/1992, Part Two, Book One, Chapter II). Many people misunderstand this statement as relativism, but for Kierkegaard, it actually points to the existential nature of the most important truths. Kierkegaard did not believe that such truths could be evaluated from a purely neutral standpoint. They demand instead a response from the whole self, revealing a truth that is inseparable from lived experience.

This idea is also found in the American pragmatist tradition, especially in the work of William James. In *The Will to Believe*, James defines a "genuine option" as one that is "forced, living, and momentous" (James, 1896/1979, p. 3). He then defends the right to believe in such cases when evidence is inconclusive, arguing that "our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions" (p. 11). James

believed that the aspects of human life that are both passionate and related to one's will were essential elements in certain forms of rational decision-making, rather than merely epistemic failures. It is no more rational to ignore these contexts than to risk missing truths that are only accessible through commitment. James envisions a richer way of knowing, one that weaves together our human limitations, the urgency of our choices, and the boundaries of what evidence alone can prove.

Contemporary psychology and cognitive science provide empirical support for this position. Viktor Frankl's logotherapy, which was shaped by his harrowing time in Nazi concentration camps, asserts powerfully that our search for meaning is not simply a psychological illusion but essential for a fulfilling life (Frankl, 1946/1985). He argued that people who found meaning, even during suffering, were more likely to survive. This shows how belief can shape reality, even when it cannot be proven. More recently, studies in narrative psychology have shown that coherent life stories — especially those involving redemptive or morally grounded arcs — are strongly correlated with well-being, resilience, and moral reasoning (McAdams, 2006, p. 27). This insight resonates across entire civilisations. David Christian's *Maps of Time* weaves together the vast story of cosmic, biological, and human evolution. This grand narrative reveals that our drive to create meaning is evident not only through the stories of individual lives but also through the unfolding of the universe and the cultures and history that arise (Christian, 2004, pp. 2–3).

From this perspective, the invocation of Lennox's divine friendship can be further analysed. For Dawkins, it may appear as little more than an emotionally satisfying

illusion. From the standpoint of existential epistemology, however, such a relationship might reflect an intuitive fit between the structure of human consciousness and the nature of the world. That it is comforting does not disqualify it. **Some truths may be comforting precisely because they align with the deep structure of human existence**.

The real question is not whether comfort is enough to justify belief—it is not—but whether comfort can ever matter in how we come to know things. Thinkers like Kierkegaard, James, and Frankl suggest that it can. Comfort does not make something true, but it might be needed to engage with some kinds of truth. This idea is similar to Plato's concept of the Forms, which are ultimate truths that we cannot reach through our senses alone but require a certain attitude of the soul (The Republic, 514a–520a; Plato, 2000). To seek a truth that has no bearing on the shape of one's life may be admirable as an ideal, but it is questionable as a human possibility.

5.6 Revisiting the Dawkins–Lennox Exchange

"Is it true?" This is a pivotal movement of the debate, where the exchange moves from shared emotional experiences to epistemic authority. Lennox prefers to enjoy "the personal friendship of God" rather than "standing tall in a silent, cold universe", but according to Dawkins, this preference is irrelevant to what is actually true. Dawkins acknowledges the emotional force of the contrast, but does not appreciate the different conceptions of truth, particularly the one articulated by Lennox, that is relational, participatory, and full of reason.

This exchange highlights the main points of disagreement between Dawkins and Lennox. They both claim to know the nature of truth, but they both operate within different understandings of truth. Dawkins operates from within a model that is grounded in empirical verification. In this model, subjectivity is a potential contaminant and emotional comfort a red flag. The universe is impressive because it is indifferent, and trying to give it personal meaning can lead to sentimentality or even self-deception. From this standpoint, the question "Is it true?" means: does it correspond to an observable, falsifiable reality.

Lennox refuses to separate truth from human commitment. His friendship with God is not a form of terror management, but a claim about reality. This reality involves human consciousness, our sense of morality, and what makes us who we are. The universe feels even more grand when we consider a close connection with the divine. His truth claim is part of a bigger story, where people do more than just observe a meaningless world. Instead, they take part in a world that has meaning and connection.

The exchange between Lennox and Dawkins marks a significant philosophical turning point. One view sees truth as strict, detached, and neutral — a truth that might be accurate but does not answer our human need for meaning. The other view sees truth as something that involves connection, resonance, and response. This kind of truth may be harder to prove, but it offers a richer experience. Standing between silence and friendship is not just about choosing between theism and atheism. It is about facing the deeper question of what it means to know anything, and whether the universe we want to understand is one that communicates with us or remains silent.

Chapter 6: Contingency, Credibility, and the Challenge of Religious Particularism

6.1 The Dawkins Dilemma: What If You're Wrong?

Among the many challenges New Atheism poses to religious belief, few have achieved the rhetorical cut-through of Richard Dawkins's now-famous response to a student asking what he would say if he were wrong. "What if you're wrong?" she asked, suggesting the possibility that Dawkins himself may face the divine. His reply was sharp: "What if you're wrong about the Great Juju at the bottom of the sea?" (Dawkins, 2006b). He then elaborated that most people are atheists with respect to the gods of other cultures — Thor, Zeus, Mithras — and that atheists simply go one god further. This argument's strength lies in its appeal to contingency: the religion one believes in is almost always the same as the one into which they were born. Had the student been born in another country, she might have believed something entirely different. This implies that the choice of religion is arbitrary. It is a product of cultural happenstance and not one of reason or evidence.

This line of critique is not unique to Dawkins. Christopher Hitchens presents a similar argument, that religious belief is rarely shaped by independent conviction but almost always by early socialisation. In *God Is Not Great*, he observes that if religious instruction were withheld "until the child had attained the age of reason, we would be living in a quite different world" (Hitchens, 2007, p. 220). He adds that "all monotheisms

have, or used to have, a very strong prohibition against apostasy" (Hitchens, 2007, p. 220), highlighting how religious identity is reinforced by both upbringing and institutional pressure. The British comedian Ricky Gervais supports this view in popular forums, writing: "Isn't it a coincidence that nearly everyone has the same religion as their parents? And it always just happens to be the right religion" (Gervais, 2010). The power of this argument lies in its simplicity. It questions the authority behind religious conviction and casts doubt on religious content.

This objection deserves to be taken seriously. Not only does it highlight the sociological, cultural, and psychological forces that shape belief, it also acknowledges the problem of religious exclusivism. By highlighting the role of context, the "What if you're wrong?" response represents a challenge not only to theological doctrine but also to epistemic confidence. Religious certainty is only as secure as that of your parents. The applause to Dawkins' response is widespread — likely more for the rhetoric than the argument. Nonetheless, some intellectual levelling has taken place — religious belief is no longer a transcendent grasp of truth, but one of many competing cultural inheritances.

Despite being rhetorically effective, the neoatheist version of this argument is incomplete. It assumes that belief is invalidated and irrational because one's worldview is shaped by culture. This conclusion does not follow. As explained in the next sections, all human systems of thought, including atheism, scientific naturalism, and liberal moralism, are similarly shaped. Cultural contingency may be a reason for humility, but not for dismissal. The strength of the Dawkins dilemma lies in its ability to puncture dogmatism;

its weakness lies in the failure to recognise that contingency is not unique to religion, nor necessarily a mark of error.

6.2 Geography of Belief: Context, Culture, and Conversion

Dawkins draws much of the force for his argument from a simple sociological fact: religious belief is overwhelmingly determined by geography. Whether one is Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, or an atheist — this depends far more on the accident of birthplace than on any systematic evaluation of evidence or arguments; this is not merely a critical attack, as large-scale demographic studies consistently show patterns of religious affiliations that closely mirror regional and cultural boundaries (Pew Research Center, 2012).

Anthropological accounts add further depth to this pattern. It has been observed by Clifford Geetz (1973, p. 90) that religion is a cultural system through which people make sense of the world, and not simply a set of doctrines upon which people agree. Rituals, symbols, and stories are a key part of social life. They shape our beliefs, emotions, morals, and sense of community. So if someone decides to convert, it is not simply a change of mind — it is a change of their entire world and a reconfiguration of their entire symbolic universe. In other words, treating religion as a personal choice to agree with abstract statements (e.g., "God exists," "karma is real") is a modern Western way of thinking about faith (Asad, 1993, pp. 35–62).

But while religious exclusivism has its problems, so too does the selective lens of neoatheist critique. If belief is geographically conditioned, then so too is disbelief. The

secular humanist in Sweden or the atheist cosmologist at Oxford is no less a product of context than the Hindu in Varanasi or the Pentecostal Christian in Lagos. Education, media, and cultural norms all play a role in shaping our moral beliefs, trust in science, and views on human rights. Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) argues that all worldviews are embedded in traditions and that none of them arises in a vacuum. All are embedded in traditions, shaped by histories, and sustained through practices. As he puts it, "What we possess […] are the fragments of a conceptual scheme, parts which now lack those contexts from which their significance derived" (p. 2). The problem, then, is not that religious belief is culturally contingent, but that the contingency of other systems of thought is often left unexamined.

The geography thesis is further complicated by conversion. Despite most people retaining the religion of their upbringing, conversion does occur, and in both directions. Common reasons cited for conversion go beyond simply greater cultural exposure and include existential, moral, and relational reasons. Migration and marriage can cause some of these changes, but they also happen because people look for coherence, connect with certain experiences, or feel dissatisfied with what they have inherited. So, while context shapes beliefs, it does not fully determine them. There is always a balance between outside influences and personal choice.

In short, the geography of belief is real, but it is not totalising. While culture exerts a powerful influence, narrative and ritual will continue to shape worldviews. It also invites a broader reflection on the contingency of all beliefs, religious or secular, and the limits of using context as the basis for dismissal. All meaning systems, including those grounded in

reason, emerge from particular cultural ecosystems, making it not so simple to dismiss religion on grounds of geography.

6.3 Epistemic Blind Spots: The Uneven Logic of Contingency

The observation that belief is shaped by cultural and historical context has become a cornerstone of the neoatheist critique. But it has been applied selectively, meaning that the insight becomes a rhetorical device rather than a tool of analysis. The argument used by the New Atheists is that if one's faith is determined by geography, it cannot be grounded in truth. This contingency of religious belief now acts as decisive counter-evidence. However, the same standard is rarely applied to secular beliefs, including those underpinning the critique itself.

There is a deeper problem revealed here: the implicit assumption that rational, scientific, or humanist perspectives are exempt from cultural forces. Talal Asad (2003) argues that secularism is not a universal or neutral idea. Instead, it comes from particular intellectual, political, and theological developments in the West. As he observes, "it is common knowledge that religion and the secular are closely linked, both in our thought and in the way they have emerged historically. Any discipline that seeks to understand 'religion' must also try to understand its other" (p. 22). Dispassionate reason is not simply a corrective to inherited tradition — this idea is itself an inheritance from the Enlightenment tradition and further reinforced by modern institutions. To ignore this is to

perpetuate the assumption that secular commitments arise outside of history, while religious ones do not.

Since the references to cultural contingency are selective, New Atheism is able to challenge the legitimacy of religious belief without its own foundations being submitted to the same level of scrutiny. This is not about rejecting reason. Instead, it is a call to use reason fairly. If faith comes into question due to cultural influences, then these same influences must also cast doubt on rationalism, scientism, and moral progressivism, since these are also culturally conditioned truths. A consistent application of the contingency critique does not eliminate the search for truth — it simply levels the field on which that search takes place.

6.4 Neoatheism's Moment of Insight — and Its Limits

There is certainly some merit to the neoatheist critique of religion's cultural contingency. It demonstrates that even though we hold our beliefs very deeply, even with conviction, they are still shaped by historical and social forces. This line of inquiry draws on a longer tradition of Enlightenment scepticism, including David Hume's critique of miracles as violations of "uniform experience" (Hume, 1748/2007, p. 83), and Ludwig Feuerbach's claim that theology externalises human longing as divine agency. As Feuerbach wrote in the preface to *The Essence of Christianity*, "the true sense of Theology is Anthropology, that there is no distinction between the predicates of the divine and human nature, and, consequently, no distinction between the divine and human subject"

(Feuerbach, 1841/2012, p. X). These reviews challenge inherited authority and emphasise the psychological and cultural causes of the persistence of belief. In this respect, the New Atheists continue an important tradition of questioning assumptions that have gone unexamined.

These insights show that not only do religious beliefs vary across cultures, but they also often mask this contingency behind claims of timelessness. The neoatheist critique performs a service by exposing this. They unsettle the neutrality of one's own worldview along with easy appeals to divine self-evidence. If such epistemic pressure can prompt genuine introspection, then this will serve as a legitimate tool for philosophical self-examination. It resonates with Paul Ricoeur's (1970) notion of "interpretation as an exercise of suspicion," in which critical thought seeks not to reject meaning altogether but to examine its formation with seriousness and depth (p. 32).

However, these critiques seldom prompt a closer look at secular commitments to science and reason, or the reflective humility they require. This inconsistency weakens the argument. Secular critics must also take seriously the idea that belief is shaped by context, if they expect religious adherents to do the same. To fail in this regard is not merely an oversight, but a philosophical blind spot.

Secular reason is shaped by history and culture. Overlooking this fact can lead to a sense of intellectual exceptionalism. The irony here is evident: New Atheism rejects absolutism while blind to its own. A better way forward is to accept that truth-seeking always begins from a particular human standpoint, and thus universal claims are rejected.

6.5 Religious Pluralism and Philosophical Humility

By recognising that belief is shaped by circumstance, we not only begin to see the limits of certainty, but we also find a path toward humility. The existence of many different, sometimes competing, religious traditions does not necessarily lead to the idea that all beliefs are equally true (relativism) or to the belief that there is no truth or meaning at all (nihilism). It also does not require us to claim exclusive authority for any one tradition. Pluralism asks us to reconsider what truth is. We never fully own it. Instead, we see parts of it from our own perspectives, shaped by our limits and experiences.

John Hick has developed this idea most fully, arguing that different religious traditions may reflect culturally shaped responses to one transcendent reality. Hick (1989), building on Kant's philosophy, argues that we cannot directly know ultimate reality. Instead, he says that religious traditions, shaped by culture and history, aim to help people understand that reality. As he explains, "the Real is so rich in content that it can only be finitely experienced in the various partial and inadequate ways which the history of religions describes… They represent the Real as both reflected and refracted within human thought and experience" (pp. 246–247). From this perspective, different claims to truth do not merely highlight each other's mistakes. Instead, they reflect partial understandings of a greater mystery. Hick recognises that there are different religious traditions, but he sees them not as competing judgments, but rather as different responses to a shared, indescribable source.

Religion is not simply a set of doctrines that can be compared or tested like scientific theories. Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1962/1991) urges instead to focus on the personal and existential connections found within faith itself, as well as on the living traditions that form around these experiences. (pp. 154–169). As he explains, "elements in a cumulative tradition may be dropped as well as added; customs disappear, observances are not observed, temples fall into ruin. Lofty insights are degraded, warm spontaneities are gradually institutionalised, and novelties become traditions. The community not only preserves the insights of its leaders, it can also misinterpret or lose them" (p. 161). Shifting the focus from fixed beliefs to evolving, lived experiences makes it easier to engage with different religious perspectives. It also pushes back against the neoatheist tendency to reduce religion to a set of absurd claims or propositions, and instead highlights the valuable exchange between stories, practices, and ethical growth.

This is pushed even further by philosopher Raimon Panikkar (1999). He argues that religious pluralism requires intra-religious dialogue, going beyond mere tolerance and towards a recognition that one's own understanding of the divine may be incomplete. As he explains, "If interreligious dialogue is to be real dialogue, an intrareligious dialogue must accompany it; that is, it must begin with my questioning myself and the relativity of my beliefs (which does not mean their relativism), accepting the challenge of a change, a conversion, and the risk of upsetting my traditional patterns" (p. 74). Panikkar insists that pluralism must not collapse all difference into sameness, but rather preserve these differences in order to deepen truth.

A public dialogue between Richard Dawkins and Jordan Peterson presents a striking example of this interpretive shift. Peterson proposes that evolving psychological truths, which have emerged through cultural selection, are encoded within religious stories. Dawkins remains sceptical about literal belief, but he finds the idea of evolving stores interesting. The fact that narrative may evolve through processes analogous to biological or memetic adaptation is worthy of his attention. He concedes that religious archetypes could be "compatible with a Jungian archetype," and he acknowledges that some ideas persist because they resonate psychologically and culturally (Peterson, 2023, 17:35–24:47). There is a moment of receptivity here. Although it is not typical of how such debates unfold, it nonetheless shows an openness to religion's symbolic and evolutionary dimensions. Dawkins accepts that some truths may arise from the deep structures of human storytelling, although he remains unconvinced.

These perspectives offer some contrast to the usual neoatheist impulse that dismisses all forms of religious pluralism. While Dawkins, Hitchens, and Harris sometimes treat doctrinal diversity as evidence of widespread delusion, pluralist thinkers treat it as a clue to the complexity of the transcendent and the interpretive limits of the human mind. Humans have historically responded to existential questions in diverse ways, and this does not need to lead to dismissal. It can help people recognise that no single perspective is exhaustive and serve as an invitation to listen and learn. In a global age marked by both ideological polarisation and interreligious encounter, this form of humility may be not only intellectually responsible but morally necessary.

6.6 Beyond Teapots and Thunder Gods: Reclaiming Symbolic Truth

One of the most common rhetorical strategies used by New Atheists is to mention defunct or clearly absurd deities such as Zeus, Thor, the Flying Spaghetti Monster, or Bertrand Russell's well-known celestial teapot. These are used as analogues for contemporary religious belief. These comparisons aim to make people sceptical by equating belief in God with belief in fictional or mythological beings. Dawkins, in particular, leans on this strategy to argue that believers are atheists with respect to most gods, and that modern atheists simply disbelieve in one more (Dawkins, 2016, p. 77). In order to find this analogy powerful, one has to accept a literal reading of religion: as if to believe in God were to affirm the empirical existence of a discrete supernatural entity, much like affirming the existence of a physical object in orbit.

This framing does not account for the symbolic and imaginative aspects of religious thought. The issue is the continued focus on trying to make religious claims empirically verifiable as the only way in which they can become meaningful. Some existential and moral insights cannot simply be reduced to propositional form, and religious language attempts to articulate these insights rather than provide scientific descriptions of them. But such interpretations have always been selective. While religious communities themselves often insist on the literal truth of their own central claims, they often selectively interpret others metaphorically. The appeal to symbols is therefore not a universal shield against critique, but represents a particular strand of interpretation. Even so, it illustrates that religion can operate in registers beyond empirical description.

Karen Armstrong (2009) explains that myth is a form of truth-telling that speaks to the human condition, and should not be equated with a form of primitive explanation. As she explains, "a myth was never intended as an accurate account of a historical event; it was something that had in some sense happened once but that also happens all the time… Put into practice, a myth could tell us something profoundly true about our humanity" (p. 3). Ancient myths were more concerned with existential realities than empirical events, and their associated rituals helped communities navigate these realities together, including those of death, suffering, love, and purpose. The collapse of myth into factual claim has impoverished religious discourse. When religion is judged by scientific standards of evidence, its metaphorical power is removed. The same thing occurs when religious adherents defend it on the same empirical grounds.

In the end, the critique of religion as outdated mythology may say more about our narrow conception of truth than about the nature of religion itself. If symbolic expression helps people understand suffering, mortality, and transcendence, we should not ignore it. Instead, we should try to interpret it more deeply. Religious stories need not be defended as historical truths in order to be significant; they need simply to be seen for what they are: efforts to articulate the inarticulable, to bring into visibility the moral architecture of being, and to bind human community together with a shared imagination.

Chapter 7: Beyond the Myth: Reassessing the Science–Religion Conflict Thesis

7.1 Between Invention and Inheritance

One of the most enduring and influential narratives of modern public life, is that science and religion have always been in conflict. The warfare between faith and reason has been portrayed as both timeless and inevitable. Yet most historians of science now consider this narrative to be deeply misleading. As Ronald Numbers (2009) observes, "The greatest myth in the history of science and religion is that they have been in a state of constant conflict" (p. 1). For many scholars, that myth can be traced back with unusual clarity to the late 19th century. Lawrence Principe (2006, pp.4–6) identifies the origin of the modern conflict narrative with striking precision: it was codified in the works of John William Draper and Andrew Dickson White. These two authors presented history as a battleground between scientific progress and theological repression (see also Brooke, 1991, p. 33; Lindberg & Numbers, 1986, pp. 19–48).

Although the reinterpretation of the historical account is important, there may be a more complex reality. This chapter contends that Draper and White did not originate the conflict, but rather formalised and legitimised pre-existing tensions within Western history. According to Harrison (2015), even the categories of science and religion themselves are recent, arising from earlier theological debates concerning knowledge and

nature. Gaukroger (2006) documents the development of scientific culture that involved ongoing dialogue with religious thought rather than a simple opposition. There was ongoing friction between scientific autonomy and ecclesiastical authority, and the essays compiled by Lindberg and Numbers (2010) showed that these were often intertwined with issues of politics, power and epistemological control. So rather than dismissing the conflict narrative entirely, this chapter argues that it drew on genuine cultural memories, and it explores why these memories continue to resonate.

The conflict thesis continues because it sells. It's a clear narrative structure that is not only rhetorically effective but also commercially and politically expedient. Science popularisers, especially those who are aligned with New Atheism, often capitalise on this structure. Even while they cloak their language in scientific rationality, they frame their message in ways that echo White and Draper. They may cite evolutionary biology or neuroscience, but the emotional arc of their storytelling is aligned with the same old antagonism: A war between knowledge and dogma, light and dark.

This chapter shows that New Atheism is closely linked to the Draper-White conflict thesis. New Atheism brings this older idea into a modern context, shaped by today's culture and media. Both movements arise during times of cultural uncertainty, particularly when religion seems to challenge the authority of science. In both cases, the debate is often simplified into moral opposites, with religion seen as the oppressor and science as the liberator. This approach turns a complex history into a single story of struggle and progress. Draper and White gained from the growth of mass education and print culture, just as the New Atheist message spread through mass media, which favours controversy,

clear messages, and strong opinions. In both situations, the focus was on mobilising audiences rather than conducting careful historical analysis. The conflict narrative provided a ready-made framework through which scientific authority could be asserted and defended in public, particularly in a post-9/11 context marked by anxiety about religious extremism. In this sense, the narrative did contribute to the qualified success of New Atheism as a cultural phenomenon. However, this chapter also shows why this success was necessarily limited. Identity through opposition cannot replace an identity formed through belonging, at least not in the long term. New Atheism could therefore not sustain a more enduring cultural role without existential resonance and community resources, a conclusion that bears directly on the central thesis of this dissertation.

7.2 Codifiers, Not Creators: Draper, White, and the Formalisation of Conflict

In 1874, John William Draper published *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science*. This is a sweeping narrative that frequently casts the Roman Catholic Church as the principal antagonist to scientific progress. Twenty-two years later, Andrew Dickson White, historian, diplomat-politician, and co-founder (and first president) of Cornell University, echoed and systematised the theme in his two-volume work: *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (1896). These works were widely circulated and continue to be cited. They have come to exemplify what is often called the 'conflict

thesis' — the view that religion and science have always been in opposition over truth and authority.

Draper and White undoubtedly exaggerated their claims. They both presented history as a linear progression in which science repeatedly triumphed over religious ignorance. Lawrence Principe observes that their works were not only polemical and methodologically flawed, but also driven by grievances, both personal and political (Principe, 2006, pp. 4–6). John Hedley Brooke points out that Draper cast the history as a struggle between "two contending powers," and that White, upset by opposition to Cornell's non-sectarian charter, framed theology and science as natural enemies. As Brooke notes, both accounts reflect their authors' circumstances as much as the historical record (1991, pp. 34–35). Draper was a physician and chemist, and he wrote at a time when debates over Darwinism and biblical literalism had become culturally explosive.

White's Warfare was in many ways a justification of Cornell's founding vision — a defence of the separation of scientific inquiry from theological influence. As George Marsden points out, White's polemics were not merely rhetorical flourishes but reflected ideological convictions that helped legitimise Cornell's secular ethos (Marsden, 1994, p. 172). More broadly, as Peter Harrison argues, the very notions of "science" and "religion" are of relatively recent origin, and the ways in which they were carved out of the intellectual landscape provide "crucial insights into their present relations" (Harrison, 2015, p. 3). He further suggests that the modern separation of these domains arose not from natural or inevitable divisions, but from historical contingencies and the cultural and institutional contexts of their formation.

But to say that Draper and White invented the idea of conflict is itself a historical simplification. As David C. Lindberg and Ronald L. Numbers point out, the so-called war between science and religion was often not a single coherent struggle at all, but rather a "hypostatization … out of a number of conflicts," many of which had little to do with science (Lindberg & Numbers, 1986, p. 7). What Draper and White did was not to fabricate a wholly fictitious war, but to codify and formalise a loose collection of frictions into a persuasive and usable story. Their work crystallised a mood already present, especially among some of the 19th-century scientific and intellectual elite. People felt this way because they believed that traditional religious institutions, especially Christianity, often stood in the way of scientific progress and public understanding.

Importantly, their works endured because they filled a rhetorical and cultural vacuum. Science was both victim and liberator, as secular thinkers came to view themselves as continuing a great tradition of opposition to oppression. The framing had a profound afterlife, not merely in its textbooks but also in US (and, to a certain extent, European) public education. It also influenced the popular writings of later figures such as Bertrand Russell, Carl Sagan, and, more recently, the New Atheists. In this way, Draper and White did not so much distort history as reshape it to fit a new cultural need. During the era of scientific optimism, science had to do more than explain the world. It also had to prove its authority over older beliefs.

7.3 Friction Before the Thesis: Ancient and Pre-Modern Tensions

Draper and White may have given the conflict thesis its rhetorical form, but they could do so only by drawing on a history of tension between religious institutions and natural inquiry. Their work resonated widely because it echoed real moments where scientific explanation clashed with religious authority. These moments were, however, selectively interpreted and against a background of religious and scientific co-evolution. But though historians now caution against overgeneralising these encounters, it is equally misleading to suggest that they were invented wholesale in the 19th century. From antiquity through the early modern period, the boundary between science and religion was continually negotiated and, at times, hotly contested.

The seeds of this tension were already being sown in the ancient world, as evidenced in the relationship between *mythos* and *logos*. Anaximander, for example, explained the origin of the cosmos not by appealing to the *apeiron* (the boundless or infinite), but rather to anthropomorphic gods. As Guthrie notes, “To this initial simple state or archē Anaximander gave the name of the Boundless, and the process by which a world-order emerged from it he described as a ‘separating-off’” (Guthrie, 1978, p. 83). This was further developed by later figures such as Democritus and the Atomists. They argued that “natural forces work blindly, without any conscious aiming at a particular end, and from their interaction there happens to emerge a cosmos” (Guthrie, 1978, p. 144). Epicurus adopted the atomist framework, but he introduced the 'swerve' (*clinamen*) to allow for human freedom. This move was recorded by Lucretius: “If atoms never swerve and make

a beginning of motion such as to break the decrees of fate, cause and effect would follow one another to infinity, and free will would be abolished for all living things" (De Rerum Natura II. 251–255; Lucretius, 2008). The dangers of such rational inquiry were vividly illustrated in the trial of Socrates. He was accused of both "corrupting the youth" (Plato, Apology, 24c) and "not believing in the gods in whom the city believes" (Plato, Apology, 26c–27a). Many ancient thinkers mixed religious ideas with their natural philosophy, but they still faced challenges when trying to explain things in a more systematic way without relying on myths.

In the Christian Middle Ages, that fault line did not disappear but was partly stabilised through synthesis. Augustine and Aquinas, for example, saw reason as a gift of God, which was capable of illuminating but never contradicting divine truth. Aquinas was particularly influenced by Aristotelian natural philosophy, and he created a vision of the cosmos that was both rationally ordered and theologically grounded. As Edward Grant observes, "the Church did not require reason and philosophy for the faith, which was independent of reason. But, as had been argued in the struggle against the heretical Cathars, the Church should resort to reason and philosophy to defend itself against unbelievers and heretics" (Grant, 2001, pp. 211–212). But tensions still flared, and Bishop Étienne Tempier issued the 1277 Condemnations at the University of Paris, which banned 219 propositions deemed to conflict with Christian doctrine, several of which were drawn from Aristotelian science. Pierre Duhem describes these condemnations as "the birth certificate of modern physics" (Duhem, 2011, p. 4), since they opened the way for alternatives to Aristotelian necessity. But whatever their unintended consequences, the

condemnations still testify to the period's deep anxiety about the autonomy of reason when it strayed too far from theological orthodoxy.

In the early modern period, the Galileo Affair remains the most symbolic case. It was a period during which a scientific statement about geocentricity was openly challenged by an institution. The political and personal complexities of Galileo's trial have been demonstrated by contemporary scholarship. These complexities include papal politics, patronage pressures, Jesuit rivalries, and Galileo's own combative style. It is still clear, however, that the Church attempted to control interpretive authority over natural philosophy, especially when it appeared to contradict scriptural cosmology (Finocchiaro, 1989, pp. 3–4). Galileo's trial and condemnation have since become one of the most frequently cited episodes in science popularisation, invoked as a symbol of religious oppression of reason. In Cosmos, Carl Sagan portrays Galileo as "forced by the Catholic Church under threat of torture to recant his heretical view that the Earth moved about the Sun" (Sagan, 1980, p. 88). While this may be rhetorically powerful, it still collapses theoretical, personal, and political complexities into a modern fable. Its depiction reflects the enduring mythic framing of Galileo as a martyr for science, illustrating the broader cultural memory that scientific truth is regularly endangered by institutional authority.

The above analysis does not support the idea of an inevitable warfare between science and religion. What it does do is reveal the recurrent frictions that arise each time theological accounts of human nature are undermined and humanity's place in the cosmos is reconfigured. Draper and White were able to amplify these narratives into a broader

storyline. This was their strength, despite sacrificing historical complexity in favour of moral clarity.

7.4 Sagan and the Inheritance of Secular Awe

Andrew Dickinson White helped shape the idea of science as a secular and liberating force. Later, Carl Sagan took up this vision and adapted it for television. Sagan spent many years teaching at Cornell University, which White co-founded to make education independent from religious influence. He both embodied and modernised the legacy of scientific humanism, and his work as a science communicator was made famous in the television series Cosmos (1980). He expressed a sense of wonder usually linked to religious awe, but instead focused it on the vastness of the universe as shown by science.

Sagan's style was still often rhetorical, but it diverged from the polemicism of Draper and White. Where they treated history as if it were a battleground, Sagan focused on a shared humanity, focusing on a narrative of exploration and humility. He presented science as a profoundly meaningful way in which to experience existence. In the opening episode of *Cosmos: A Personal Voyage* (1980), he proclaimed, "We are a way for the cosmos to know itself." This phrase combines scientific naturalism with an almost mystical reverence and loosely echoes theological motifs, such as the Sufi notion of creation as divine self-recognition. His invocation of stardust — "we are made of star stuff" — has since become iconic in secular culture, expressing existential significance without invoking

a deity (Sagan, 1980, p. 140). Although his tone was less polemical than that of the later New Atheists, he still framed scientific reasoning as the truest path to knowledge and even moral progress. He often contrasted science with the dangers of superstition and literalism as described in *The Demon-Haunted World* (1995).

Sagan was also one of the first modern science communicators to emphasise human insignificance on a cosmic scale — not just as a scientific fact, but as a rhetorical counterpoint to religious conceptions of purpose. In Pale Blue Dot (1994), he describes Earth as "a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam," reflecting that "every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there" (pp. 12–13). He warns against the "anthropic principle as an argument for human centrality or uniqueness," arguing that such views place unwarranted faith in human specialness (p. 27). Though this imagery evokes humility, it also serves as a subtle repudiation of the religious belief in humanity's privileged place in creation. As James Herrick observes, Sagan helped transform scientific narrative into a form of modern mythmaking: "science fiction and speculative science have taken a decided interest in questions that once were firmly within the realms of myth and religion" (Herrick, 2004, p. 217). Elsewhere, Herrick notes that Sagan, like many science fiction authors, turned to "the ultimate authorities — aliens — to answer these questions," situating his cosmological vision within an emergent secular spirituality (p. 193). This is especially notable given Sagan's position at Cornell — an institution co-founded by Andrew Dickson White — where the original conflict narrative between science and religion was both born and institutionalised.

Sagan thus occupies a transitional role in the evolution of the conflict narrative. The Enlightenment ideals are retained, but to frame cultural authority, he uses storytelling rather than warfare. His method was less combative than Draper's, and his worldview less binary than White's. Still, religion in Sagan's work is usually treated as something to be outgrown, a vestigial worldview whose poetic function could be replaced by cosmology and evolutionary biology. This reframing was so effective because he offered an alternative cosmology while preserving the emotional register of religion. He avoided cold determinism by narrating the universe as a place of mystery, beauty, and fragility, while still reaffirming the historical and cultural authority of science in moral terms. He thus inherited not only White's institutional lineage, but also the affective power of myth. The New Atheists would inherit the same lineage but strip it of Sagan's gentler humanism, replacing his poetic cosmology with a more confrontational, rhetorical style of science communication.

7.5 New Atheism and the Reanimation of the Conflict Narrative

The New Atheists brought back the idea of a conflict between science and religion, but they used a more confrontational style and had a political agenda. They revived the warfare narrative with renewed urgency and did not present science as a source of existential meaning and awe like Carl Sagan did. After 9/11 and with the rise of religious

fundamentalism, people began to see religion as not just outdated but also dangerous. Their view of religion changed from a harmless myth to a threat to humanity.

This movement was not subtle in its appropriation of the conflict thesis. Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion* (2006) opens with an appeal to readers "unhappy in religion" or "worried about the evils that are done in its name," presenting atheism as "a realistic aspiration, and a brave and splendid one" (p. 1). Throughout his book, religion is presented as fundamentally incompatible with truth, and is portrayed not only as a form of intellectual constraint, but also of moral harm. In a similar vein to Andrew Dickinson White, he presents science as a light that pushes back on the darkness of ignorance and suspicion. Sam Harris, in *The End of Faith* (2004), likens religious belief to a socially accepted form of madness, warning that it "allows otherwise normal human beings to reap the fruits of madness and consider them holy" (p. 73). Christopher Hitchens strikes an even sharper tone in *God Is Not Great* (2007), asserting that "religion poisons everything" (p. 13). Across all of these works, the conflict between science and religion is once again presented as a moral narrative rather than a serious historical analysis.

These works repeat the core elements of the conflict thesis, particularly in rhetorical structure, updated for a post-9/11 context. Theological authority continues to obstruct a supposed linear story of scientific progress. Their approach is different from Sagan's, not because they reject religion, but because they do not offer a conciliatory story or show existential generosity. Dawkins, for example, frames it as the spread of "mental 'viruses'" within a by-product account of human psychology: "The general theory of religion as an

accidental by-product—a misfiring of something useful—is the one I wish to advocate… the child brain is, for good reasons, vulnerable to infection by mental 'viruses'" (The God Delusion, 2006, p. 188). He uses metaphor to explain belief not as an existential search for meaning, but as a malfunction of an otherwise adaptive process. This tonal shift also reflects a strategic change in the use of science communication. Here, scientific literacy not only functions as a public good but also as an instrument in cultural and political disputes. In this context, science and reason are the most rational means of combating irrational systems that shape public ethics and governance. Science is now seen not just as knowledge, but also as a moral authority. This change moves the conflict beyond the old Draper-White model and makes it a forward-looking campaign. The idea of conflict between science and religion has become popular. New Atheist books have become bestsellers, science festivals and debates have increased, and people like Dawkins have become well-known as defenders of truth against faith. However, this popularity also shows that conflict remains marketable. The simple view of science as reason and religion as delusion gives people clarity in a complicated world. It makes history seem simpler and discourages deeper thinking, but it does not need to be fully accurate to be convincing. Instead, it depends on emotional and ideological appeal.

The New Atheists attempt to defend science, but by doing so, they also harden its boundaries. With religion being framed as totally irrational, people seeking meaning through both faith and science are now alienated. They have risked deepening public resistance to scientific authority, but when that happens, they simply double down on their rhetoric. Their approach increases cultural polarisation and undermines the wider aims of

science communication. Later sections explore whether science can communicate meaning without reproducing the divisions it seeks to transcend.

7.6 The Enduring Power of a Simplified Story

Despite being discredited by historians of science, the science-religion conflict narrative continues to endure. The story that sells is familiar — science is a lone hero struggling against an oppressive dogma. Eventually, science will triumph and usher in an era of liberation and enlightenment. For many, this is not only a compelling narrative but also rhetorically useful. There is obvious appeal in this framing, particularly to New Atheists and science popularisers, as well as to audiences seeking a clear ideological landscape.

Conflict, not complexity, is what makes stories memorable. Take the story of Galileo, for example. This story stands out for its emotional journey, with a courageous scientist, a determined church, and the struggle to reveal the truth. This kind of story meets our cultural need for heroes and villains. Jonathan Gottschall (2012) explains that people are natural storytellers who make sense of the world through plots and moral tension. This is why stories with conflict are still so popular. They inspire books, documentaries, debates, and online content that often focus on division. Their straightforward message is easy to turn into slogans, sound bites, and viral media. It offers identity, not just information. So even though this conflict story distorts historical reality, it

matters little to audiences who are immersed in the digital attention economy and who crave clear identity positioning.

But the same things that make conflict stories interesting can also make it harder for people to connect or understand each other better. It alienates those who find meaning in both scientific and religious frameworks. It reinforces intellectual tribalism and discourages humility in the face of human cognitive limits. Most importantly, it overlooks the possibility that, if it is to play a meaningful cultural role, science may need to do more than displace religion; it may need to learn from it. Stories that inspire, symbols people connect with, and rituals that bring communities together have traditionally belonged to religion. If science wants to take on this role, it needs to offer meaning, not just facts.

Chapter 8: Rethinking Religion through Biology

8.1 Religion as a Biological Phenomenon

People often assume that all naturalistic accounts of religion have the same goal, but this is not true. Some approaches use evolutionary biology, cognitive science, or neuroscience to try to explain religion as an illusion, a mistake, or a leftover from earlier ways of thinking. Other approaches use the same scientific resources descriptively, seeking to explain why religious belief is so persistent, meaningful, and widespread without reducing it to pathology or deception. Much neoatheist rhetoric conflates these positions, presuming that a naturalistic explanation of religion inherently undermines its validity. This chapter challenges that presumption by utilising biological and cognitive research to examine religion as a natural aspect of human existence, while maintaining a clear analytical distinction from efforts to dismiss religious belief solely on naturalistic grounds.

There has been a re-examination of the function and purpose of religion in recent decades, prompted by advances in neuroscience and evolutionary biology. The neoatheist argument often uses biological framing as evidence that religion is vestigial — a by-product of otherwise adaptive cognition that the human race should have outgrown. This chapter uses this framing descriptively rather than pejoratively. Belief is not seen as a cultural aberration or an epistemic failure, but as a natural feature of the human species.

As Harari (2014) points out, “from a biological perspective, nothing is unnatural. Whatever is possible is by definition also natural” (p. 147). From this perspective, religion is an integral part of how the human mind has evolved. Religion continues to exist across different times and cultures because natural selection has shaped it and it is rooted in our psychology.

The conflict thesis is seriously challenged here. Framing religion as irrational or adversarial to science misses the point. If belief is a consequence of the way the brain is structured, shaped by evolution, then it is no more unnatural than language, empathy, or memory. Therefore, dismissing religion as unnatural, without understanding its basis in evolution, is to misunderstand it completely. This section explores how evolutionary theory and neuroscience have reshaped our understanding of religious belief. In doing so, it asks: can religion simply be 'overcome', or, since it is part of human nature, must it instead be understood and integrated into our account of what it means to be human?

8.2 Religion in Deep Time: Burial, Symbol, and Sacred Space

People practised rituals and used symbols long before organised religions or written scriptures existed. There is compelling evidence in the archaeological record that religion is a deep and enduring part of the human experience, and not a recent ideological development. Religion probably came before agriculture, permanent settlements, and even the development of abstract language. It is therefore not a later cultural imposition, but

rather something with early roots in symbolic behaviour, death rituals, and cosmological imagination.

One of the earliest markers of this behaviour is deliberate burial. Archaeological sites such as Qafzeh Cave in Israel (around 90,000 BCE) and Shanidar Cave in Iraq (around 60,000 BCE) have graves of early Homo sapiens and Neanderthals. People buried there are often found with ochre, antlers, flowers, and other items. At Qafzeh, archaeological evidence of symbolic practices, including the use of ochre and shell ornaments, appears in direct association with human burials (Bar-Yosef Mayer et al., 2009). At Shanidar, Neanderthal graves with pollen clusters — interpreted as evidence of flower burials — reinforce the inference of ritual significance (Solecki, 1971, p. xiv). These findings demonstrate that people made a conscious effort to remember the dead by honouring them, expressing grief, or showing belief in life after death. Although interpretations vary, the use of grave goods in many cultures suggests that burial was more than a practical act. Early forms of religious thought were beginning to appear.

Göbekli Tepe is arguably one of the most striking early ritual sites. It is located in present-day Turkey and dates to around 9600 BCE. Some of its monumental T-shaped pillars weigh up to 20 tonnes and are decorated with many animals and abstract forms. Remarkably, the site was constructed before the beginnings of agriculture and permanent village life. Archaeologist Klaus Schmidt argues that Göbekli Tepe did not function as a place of habitation, but rather a religious or ceremonial site. This inverts the usual

narrative that religion is a consequence of social complexity. (Schmidt, 2010, pp. 253–254). In this case, shared ritual may have been the precondition for a complex society, not its by-product.

Also, the development of cave art in Upper Palaeolithic Europe, epitomised by the paintings at Chauvet and Lascaux, demonstrates the emergence of rich visual cultures that combine observation, symbolism, and imaginative transformation. These paintings are characterised by hybrid entities, shamanistic motifs, and human-animal transformations. According to David Lewis-Williams (2002, Chapter 4), they represent altered states of consciousness and the beginnings of mythological thinking associated with trance, rhythm, and the neurological foundations of religiosity. There is no doubt that these practices were central to the early symbolic lives of our human ancestors.

Yet, in their accounts of prehistory, the New Atheists completely downplay this. Christopher Hitchens, for instance, frames religion as a by-product of a time when humans "didn't have the faintest idea what was going on," suggesting that belief systems emerged from ignorance and fear (Hitchens, 2007, p. 64). Historical evidence does not support the suggestion that our ancestors were not intelligent. In fact, it required astonishing intelligence to survive in Palaeolithic environments, as shown in examples of toolmaking, navigation, and, in some cases, surprisingly precise astronomical observations and measurements. But one of the most important examples of adaptability and social ingenuity was certainly the time when our early Homo Sapiens were reduced to fewer than 10,000 individuals, yet we still managed to survive.

More critically, Hitchens' portrayal reflects a broader Enlightenment bias: that not only does religion stifle scientific progress, but that scientific progress is always good. By expressing such a view, he not only simplifies the functions of belief but also misrepresents the historical record. Although the transition to agriculture, for example, has been hailed as progress, recent research suggests that it may have been detrimental to health, equality, and freedom. Jared Diamond has famously called the adoption of farming "the worst mistake in the history of the human race," citing declines in nutritional variety, increased disease, and the emergence of hierarchy and warfare (Diamond, 1987). There is also the assumption that mobility is associated with primitiveness, which is present in Australian colonial narratives that Bruce Pascoe challenges in *Dark Emu*. Indigenous Australians practised sophisticated land cultivation and aquaculture systems long before European arrival (Pascoe, 2018). These systems were not only sustainable and cooperative but also spiritually embedded in the landscape. This example provides further evidence that intelligence, culture, and sacred worldviews flourished outside the framework of settled, literate civilisation. It was important to characterise Indigenous societies as primitive or godless because this made dispossession, warfare, and attempted cultural erasure easier to justify. So neoatheist critiques must tread carefully. If they aim to use their rhetoric to liberate, they may unintentionally reproduce the dehumanisation associated with conquest and erasure. These are logics that have historically targeted those whose spiritual lives did not conform to Western, rationalist models of belief.

The arguments above, when taken together, strongly suggest that religion is no historical or cultural aberration. Caution must be taken when religious or spiritual beliefs are reduced to a mere cultural control mechanism. In its earliest forms, religious beliefs served as a framework for survival and meaning, as well as an evolving response to mystery and mortality. They were not simply a tool of domination. Our ancestors survived spiritually without waiting for prophets or scriptures to sanctify their world. They already inhabited it with reverence.

8.3 Evolutionary Origins of Religious Belief

Two influential thinkers within cognitive science can be analysed. Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell* frames religion explicitly as a phenomenon that needs to be explained in order to loosen its cultural authority, arguing that religion should not be exempt from scientific investigation and must be approached as an entirely natural phenomenon. He insists that resistance to such study is intellectually suspect, writing that "refusing to play by these rules only creates the suspicion that one doesn't really believe that religion is supernatural after all" (Dennett, 2006, p. 26). Naturalistic explanation is thus presented as a way of removing the epistemic protections that have historically insulated religious belief from scrutiny. The work of Justin Barrett approaches religious belief in a different way. He does not see explanation as an effort to discredit religion, but rather treats religion as a predictable outcome of ordinary cognitive processes. In *Cognitive Science, Religion, and Theology*, Barrett develops a model of cognition that seeks to understand how human minds generate, sustain, and transmit religious concepts. He does this while setting aside

questions of truth, value, or legitimacy (Barrett, 2011). The account developed in this chapter aligns more closely with this latter approach, using evolutionary and cognitive insights to explain the persistence and power of religious belief rather than to pronounce upon its validity.

Belief systems may have emerged not despite evolution but because of it. If their origins are sought in adaptive function rather than in revelation, then religion can be understood as a natural phenomenon rather than a supernatural one. A large body of interdisciplinary research has demonstrated the evolutionary advantages conferred by religion, including how ritual and group identity helped early human communities to survive, cooperate, and reproduce.

An important theory within this research is costly signalling theory. According to this theory, religious rituals show a person's commitment to their group. These signals are especially important when time, resources, and physical sacrifice are required (Sosis & Alcorta, 2003, p. 267). When people show commitment to shared beliefs, they strengthen their social connections. This suggests that religion helps build loyalty and cooperation, and is more than just a collection of ideas.

Cognitive scientists like Justin Barrett have developed another important idea called the hyperactive agency detection device (HADD). Put simply, it is safer to assume that the rustling of leaves is due to a lion hiding behind the bush, not just the wind. In other words, the human brain evolved to err on the side of caution. Our brains therefore

interpret a variety of ambiguous stimuli as the work of intentional agents, and while advantageous for survival, this bias may also underlie belief in unseen entities, such as gods and spirits. As Barrett (2004, as cited in Raymond, 2012, p. 320) explains, HADD "make[s] us prone to find agents, agency, and the consequences of agency in our environment." From this perspective, religious belief is not a pathological anomaly, but a by-product of normal cognitive functioning.

Religion can be a powerful mechanism for collective action, as described in the group selection hypothesis. As David Sloan Wilson (2010) explains, "around the world and across history, religions have functioned as mighty engines of collective action for the production of benefits that all people want" (p. 187). In this model, religious communities that share rituals are more likely to succeed than less cohesive groups. This is because they encourage unity and help members plan for the future. When individual behaviour is linked to divine surveillance, prosocial conduct is enforced even when external enforcement is weak.

These theories demonstrate that religion may have played an important role in human evolutionary success. This role was particularly important in small-scale societies where survival depended on cohesion and shared purpose. They do not support the truth claims of any specific religion. Instead, they change the perspective from seeing religion as an irrational relic to viewing it as an adaptive strategy. If science is to replace religion as a framework for human meaning, it may have to face an uncomfortable reality: it might not be able to bind communities and secure survival in the way religion historically has.

8.4 Neuroscience and the Religious Brain

Evolutionary biology discusses the adaptive functions of religion. To consider more proximal causes, such as the brain structures and processes that give rise to religious experience, we need to turn to neuroscience. Research in this area has revealed that belief in the divine may arise naturally from the way the human brain processes emotion, agency, and meaning.

Functional neuroimaging studies identify brain regions that show activation during prayer, meditation, and reported mystical experiences. In a preliminary study using single-photon emission computed tomography (SPECT), Newberg, d'Aquili, and Rause (2001) found that eight experienced Tibetan Buddhist meditators showed more activity in the frontal lobe, which is linked to focused attention, and less activity in the parietal lobe, which is related to spatial orientation and the sense of self. These changes matched what meditators described as feeling different in space, losing their sense of self, and feeling connected to something greater. The findings were later extended to other traditions, including Franciscan nuns engaged in centring prayer, and were popularised in *Why God Won't Go Away* (Newberg, d'Aquili, & Rause, 2001).

Researchers have also studied the temporal lobes, where unstable brain activity has been connected to intense religious experiences. For example, people with temporal lobe epilepsy have reported visions, voices, and a powerful sense of presence associated with

seizures. Michael Persinger (1983) hypothesised that transient microseizures in the amygdaloid–hippocampal complex may evoke phenomena such as out-of-body experiences, distortions of space and time, heightened meaning, and even overwhelming feelings of religiosity. While such findings have been interpreted by some as evidence that spiritual experience is a neurological by-product, they remain controversial. Religious life is symbolic and existentially rich, and it is unlikely that it can all be reduced to pathology or a clinical description. A more careful view, which matches Newberg's findings, is that the brain acts as a channel for transcendent experiences but does not determine what those experiences mean.

Religious belief, therefore, may be a neurologically plausible dimension of human experience. It seems as though brain states that are associated with spiritual or transcendent awareness are widely accessible, and may be elicited through ritual, silence, rhythmic movements, or even psychedelics. In a controlled study, Roland Griffiths and colleagues (2006) found that high-dose psilocybin reliably occasioned mystical-type experiences that participants ranked among the most meaningful of their lives, with positive changes in attitudes and behaviour persisting for at least two months. Such findings suggest that the capacity for transformative spiritual experience is deeply rooted in human neurobiology. This may help explain why certain religious practices are common across time and cultures, and why they have continued to meet enduring psychological needs.

This raises an important philosophical question. If the brain is naturally able to create religious experiences, and these experiences are meaningful and life-changing for a person, does the fact that they come from brain activity make them any less valuable? Many neoatheist writers tend to sidestep this question, often treating the apparent universality of religious impulses as irrelevant, or extrapolating from personal disposition to a general claim about human cognition. Such responses can also reflect the perspective of relatively narrow cultural contexts in which rational autonomy and individualism are already socially privileged. Yet such circles are historically exceptional. The overwhelming majority of humans, past and present, have found value in religious cognition, and neuroscientific evidence indicates that the capacity for such experience is deeply embedded in human psychology.

Neuroscience makes it harder to state with any confidence that religion is simply a mistake that needs fixing. Religious experience may be found not simply in the acceptance of supernatural claims, but in a felt connection to realities larger than the self. Such capacities are central to how the human brain generates meaning, and it is important not to dismiss them without an understanding of their neuroscientific basis.

8.5 Faith and the Educated: A Forgotten Continuum

It is often assumed that religion thrives in places or situations where education, affluence, and scientific literacy are lacking. Many neoatheist arguments are based on the idea that religion is an intellectual failure or a leftover from pre-modern thinking. As a

result, they suggest that as societies become more educated or wealthier, people should move away from religious beliefs and adopt secular rationalism. This argument is not only weak but also ideologically revealing.

Several demographic studies, such as those by the Pew Research Centre, show that the main drivers of religious growth are fertility and age distribution (Pew Research Center, 2017). Younger religious populations, such as Muslims and Hindus, are projected to grow faster than populations that are older and more secular (Pew Research Center, 2017). Religion remains important in both developed and developing nations, and there are even reports of a resurgence in Christian church attendance among young people across the UK (Mohdin, 2025). The argument that faith is present only when religion is absent does not reflect a demographic reality, but more of a secular bias.

In the West, too, religion has never been the exclusive domain of the uneducated. Throughout history, some of the most rigorous intellectual projects have been carried out within religious traditions by figures such as Augustine, Maimonides, Aquinas, al-Ghazali, and Pascal. Even those most closely associated with the scientific revolution had strong theological ties. When Neil deGrasse Tyson was asked who he thought was the "most extraordinary scientific mind that humanity has ever produced", he answered, "No contest... Isaac Newton...no one even comes close" (92nd Street Y, 2024). He and other scientific popularisers tend to ignore the fact that Newton's scientific legacy was embedded in a highly scientific worldview, and that over 80% of all his writings concerned theology, including biblical chronology, prophecy, and theological speculation (Iliffe, 2007,

pp. 119–120). He was not alone. Boyle, Kepler, and Descartes all engaged seriously with metaphysical and theological questions, seeing no contradiction between religious belief and scientific inquiry. This omission is ironic, given that New Atheists often accuse religious adherents of selective thinking. Ignoring these beliefs oversimplifies history and supports the idea of straightforward progress in knowledge. But for Newton and his contemporaries, theology was an integral part of their quest for knowledge and was often seen as offering a deeper truth than their discoveries alone could provide. It is a historical error to judge the past by today's standards and to think that if Newton had lived in a more "intellectually mature" society, he would have given up his beliefs.

This selectivity is rhetorically useful. It is often easier for a polemicist to argue against creationism than to engage with the existential theology of thinkers like Kierkegaard, Rahner, or Tillich. People also tend to assume that education always leads to secularisation. This view of reason values control, measurement, and proof, but it does not deal with questions of meaning or transcendence. There are many examples of educated people who continue to find religion intellectually, emotionally, and ethically compelling.

8.6 Toward a More Honest Conversation

In its modern form, the conflict thesis presents religion as either as an outdated superstition, an external imposition, or something inherently dangerous. It clings to relevance where education, progress, and scientific literacy are absent. But as this chapter has shown, religion is a natural, persistent, and cognitively embedded phenomenon,

supported by a vast body of evidence from evolutionary biology, neuroscience, archaeology, and sociology. Religion is a form of existential meaning-making and not simply a deviation from reason.

Religion is not only practised by those who are intellectually marginalised. It has been embraced by some of history's greatest thinkers, from early mystics and theologians to Newton, Pascal, and contemporary scientists who continue to engage with belief with intellectual seriousness. This fact resists the comforting dichotomy often maintained by neoatheist writers, who locate all progress on the side of reason and all regression on the side of faith. As argued above, such dichotomies do not withstand the combined force of archaeological depth, psychological insight, and demographic complexity.

If New Atheists see religion mainly as a tool for social control, they may end up repeating the same logic they criticise. Modern secularists often try to frame religion as a cognitive flaw, and they need to be careful not to repeat the views of colonial regimes that depicted indigenous spirituality as evidence of inferiority to justify dispossession. But when science itself studies belief, it arrives at conclusions that the New Atheists often ignore. It reveals that faith is not only biologically plausible but also an evolutionary adaptation and a part of being human.

Science popularisation and New Atheism need to deal with these insights honestly if they wish to move beyond conflict. They should begin to see religion as something personal to understand, not as an outside force to overcome. The aim is not to give in to theology, but to support respectful conversations about religion in the context of human

evolution, history, and culture. A secularism that cannot see this may itself become scientifically incoherent.

Chapter 9: Religion, Violence and the Myth of Inherent Conflict

9.1 Beyond the Rhetoric of Blame

In *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins invites readers to imagine a world without religion: "no suicide bombers, no 9/11, no 7/7, no Crusades, no witch-hunts… no Israeli/Palestinian wars" (Dawkins, 2006, p. 23). The message is clear: religion is not only irrational but catastrophically dangerous. Sam Harris similarly opens *The End of Faith*. A young man, with a bomb beneath his coat, boards a crowded bus. He detonates the bomb in the belief that he is securing paradise for himself and damnation for his victims (Harris, 2004, pp. 11–12). For Harris, such acts are the predictable results of religious conviction, and he underscores this by noting how "trivially easy" it is to infer the young man's religion from the act itself (p. 12).

These images are not incidental. They recur as a theme in neoatheist literature. The assertion is that religion is a central driver for violence and societal dysfunction, especially when taken seriously. So religion is not only flawed with regard to its beliefs, but is also morally corrosive. It is a force that justifies cruelty in the name of God and disguises tribalism as faith. From the medieval crusades to modern terrorism, this violence is presented as having persisted throughout history.

This chapter takes that claim seriously, not to endorse it, but to evaluate it. This section discusses how belief, identity and power interact, and by doing so, questions whether describing religion as inherently violent is an oversimplification. It also continues the broader argument contained within this thesis, that binary oppositions such as religion versus reason or myth versus truth, often hide more than they reveal. Just as earlier chapters have challenged the notion that religion and science are irreconcilable, this chapter questions the framing of religion as an exceptional threat to peace.

The chapter proceeds in three stages. Firstly, it examines how the relationship between religion and violence has been framed by the New Atheists, including their use of imagery and historical examples. Second, it looks at this relationship historically and statistically, comparing religious violence with violence committed under secular ideologies such as nationalism, colonialism, and political extremism. Third, it considers structural causes of violence, including political grievance, social inequality, and identity fragmentation, showing how religion can sometimes function as a vehicle for certain types of violence rather than their origin.

This analysis does not seek to absolve religion of complicity. Rather, it resists the myth that religion is inherently violent. It calls for a more honest conversation that does not blame religion or overlook the flaws of secularism, but instead relies on real evidence. It aims to treat both religion and secularism as being intertwined in the human struggle for power, belonging, and moral meaning.

9.2 The Neoatheist Framing of Religion and Violence

This neoatheist critique of religion does not simply rest on objections to its faith-based claims, but also on a narrative that it is a continuous and enduring source of violence. The narrative contains not only historical generalisations and vivid examples, but also a stark binary: on one side, reason and secularism, and on the other, faith and fanaticism.

Sam Harris presents one of the clearest articulations of this view in the above-mentioned image of the suicide bomber boarding a crowded bus. Harris sees this as the natural result of religious conviction, not just a rare occurrence. He says that beliefs influence how people act, and that religious faith especially makes compromise difficult and prevents rational discussion. As he puts it, "Religious faith represents so uncompromising a misuse of the power of our minds that it forms a kind of perverse, cultural singularity—a vanishing point beyond which rational discourse proves impossible" (p. 25). Harris extends this logic to geopolitical policy. He argues that the concepts of martyrdom and jihad make nuclear deterrence necessary. He argues that if an Islamist regime were to obtain long-range weapons, "the only thing likely to ensure our survival may be a nuclear first strike of our own," though he also admits that this would be "an unthinkable crime." (pp. 128–129). The clear implication is that belief itself, rather than extremism alone, is the problem.

Christopher Hitchens takes a similarly categorical stance. In God Is Not Great (2007), he warns the reader directly: "As I write these words, and as you read them, people of faith are in their different ways planning your and my destruction, and the destruction of all the hard-won human attainments that I have touched upon. Religion poisons everything" (p. 13). Crimes ranging from child abuse to genocide are attributed to religious influence, contending that theology has provided both the language and the legitimacy for otherwise unthinkable acts. Hitchens' tone is deliberately adversarial. The passage is a historical refrain and not a hypothesis to be tested. It overlooks peaceful expressions of faith, treats all religions as the same, and presents religion as inherently harmful.

Richard Dawkins follows the same basic logic, though sometimes with a more measured tone. In *The God Delusion* (2006), he objects to labelling children by religion, writing: "I want everybody to flinch whenever we hear a phrase such as 'Catholic child' or 'Muslim child'. Speak of a 'child of Catholic parents' if you like; but if you hear anybody speak of a 'Catholic child', stop them and politely point out that children are too young to know where they stand on such issues, just as they are too young to know where they stand on economics or politics" (p. 25). His objection is not so much to the fact that children may later adopt their parents' beliefs, but to the assumption that immature minds can meaningfully identify with complex ideologies. He suggests that the groundwork for conflict and irrational loyalty is laid by early indoctrination. He does acknowledge that not all religious believers are violent, but he still has as his central argument that religion's mechanisms are susceptible to abuse.

A shared rhetorical pattern emerges from these authors. There is a remarkable association between faith and bloodshed, and when religion is reduced to a literal belief in supernatural claims, then acts of extremism come to represent religion itself. Secularism, on the other hand, is elevated beyond moral inquiry and becomes the antidote to a world corrupted by irrational conviction.

This framing is functional. By casting the rejection of religion as both intellectually and ethically superior, it reinforces group identity among secularists. As William Cavanaugh (2009) argues, the "myth of religious violence" operates to legitimise secular power by constructing a "religious Other" that is irrational and fanatical, in contrast to the supposedly rational and peace-making secular subject (pp. 4–5). Violence carried out by openly secular governments, such as the Stalinist purges or Maoist re-education campaigns, often avoids the moral criticism that is usually directed at religious traditions. This is because such acts are usually seen as political, not secular. As a result, religion is often blamed for evils that modern secular society would rather ignore. So 'their' violence is irrational and religious, while 'our' violence is tragic but political. So 'they' indoctrinate children with religion, but 'we', do not indoctrinate — only 'educate' in secularism.

9.3 Ideology, Identity, and the Psychology of Group Conflict

While religious violence is real and at times devastating, the assertion that religion has been the principal cause of violence throughout history does not withstand historical scrutiny. In the twentieth century, violence was caused more by secular ideologies than by religious devotion. There were regimes that explicitly rejected or sought to eradicate religion, and they committed atrocities on an unprecedented scale.

The death tolls associated with Stalin's purges, Mao's Cultural Revolution, and Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge are staggering. These were systems and regimes that were not only secular, but in many cases, overtly hostile to religion. Despite this, tens of millions of lives were lost. These were not theocracies gone awry, but utopian political projects grounded in materialist ideologies that rejected transcendence in favour of total control over society and history. William Cavanaugh (2009) observes that a wide range of ideologies and institutions have supported violence under certain conditions, including Christianity, Islam, Marxism, capitalism, nationalism, and secularism. This makes the division between religious and secular phenomena "arbitrary and unsustainable" (pp. 15–16). When religion is blamed for violence, the underlying assumption is that secularism is peaceful by contrast; yet the bloodiest regimes of modernity were secular rather than religious.

In addition, when religious violence is publicly discussed, its historical complexity is often stripped. Discussions of the Crusades, for example, often involve images of severe

brutality seen as emblematic of religious violence. Jonathan Riley-Smith (2014, p. 36) notes that the Crusades are often oversimplified by popular accounts. There is a far more complex reality revealed by historical analysis, involving shifting political alliances, economic pressures, and papal authority. There is no doubt the campaigns involved large-scale violence, but they were also part of a broader conflict between Christian and Muslim powers. Both sides had a long history of territorial disputes, trade conflicts, and efforts to expand their empires. Recent research also suggests that the Spanish Inquisition may not have been as focused on torture as often portrayed. Instead, it emphasised religious orthodoxy, and executions were actually less common than in other courts of that era (Peters, 1989, p. 87). Such complexities are lost when these events are presented merely as illustrations of religious pathology.

By contrast, secular violence is rarely described as such. The atrocities of the Nazi regime are usually understood in terms of nationalism, racial ideology, or authoritarianism, seldom in terms of 'secular belief'. Yet, as historian Emilio Gentile (2006) has argued, fascist regimes often functioned as political religions, with myths of destiny, rituals of purification, and sacralised conceptions of the state (p. xvii). The Soviet government similarly replaced traditional religion with loyalty to the state, Marxist ideas about the future, and strict atheism. Religious believers were not seen as extremists, but as barriers to the state's goal of ideological unity. Both examples demonstrate that violence can emerge from decidedly non-religious ideals, including those that try to control truth, meaning and moral authority.

Religion is not innocent, but the point argued is that violence is not the exclusive domain of religion. It is also not more common or extreme when carried out in the name of God, with astonishing violence also being carried out in the name of utopia, progress or national destiny. So it is not about whether or not religion leads to violence, but more about how any system may become violent when it claims absolute authority and no dissent. So when neoatheist narratives present religion as the primary source of violence, they are not only distorting history, but also obscuring the dangers of secular dogmas operating with absolutism.

9.4 Religion and Terrorism: What the Data Actually Say

One of the most persistent legacies of the post 9/11 era is the association between religion and terrorism. Western public understandings of terrorism have been dominated by the image of the suicide bomber seeking divine reward. These images have frequently been used as proof by neoatheist writers when stating that religion is dangerous, irrational, and resistant to compromise. Empirical studies of terrorism, however, suggest a less convenient picture.

Bruce Hoffman (2006), in his comprehensive study of terrorist organisations, emphasises that until the late twentieth century, most labelled terrorist groups were primarily nationalist, separatist, or Marxist in character. Religious identity was therefore often secondary to political aims (p. 82). In the 1990s, this pattern began to change. By

1995, nearly half of all terrorist groups were classified as religious (16 out of 56) (p. 86). Hoffman further observes that while religious terrorists accounted for only a minority of recorded incidents between 1998 and 2004, their attacks produced a disproportionately high share of fatalities — about 30% of deaths despite constituting only 6% of incidents (p. 88). Therefore, religious terrorism is a relatively recent development, with earlier waves being predominantly politically-motivated.

The rise of religious terrorism coincided with a resurgence of identity-based politics. This resurgence was not only among Muslims but across a wide array of religious and ethnic groups. Hoffman emphasises that the distinguishing feature of modern religious terrorism is the fusion of religious identity with political beliefs, and not simply belief in a transcendent cause. This fusion is intensified by socioeconomic issues, authoritarian regimes, and foreign occupation. Religion often serves as a vehicle for deeper sources of resentment rather than a cause in its own right.

Mark Juergensmeyer (2017) reinforces this interpretation. He believes religious terrorism comes from a sense of "cosmic war," which he explains as a situation where people feel there is an existential conflict and their sacred values are threatened. He illustrates this with cases ranging from Anders Breivik, who imagined himself a soldier in a battle to save Christendom (pp. 22–23), to ISIS recruits who were drawn in by apocalyptic visions of a final struggle to bring in a new global caliphate (p. 75). In these cases, religion transforms political grievances into metaphysical battles by offering a

language of meaning. So the issue is not religion per se, but the sacralisation of identity and the polarisation of worldviews.

Scott Atran (2010), a cognitive anthropologist who has studied terrorism first-hand, argues that most violent extremists are not deeply versed in theology. They are usually motivated by emotional connections, strong group identities, and feelings of humiliation or exclusion. Detailed religious teachings are not often what drives them. In the preface to Talking to the Enemy, Atran observes that "people don't simply kill and die for a cause. They kill and die for each other" (Preface). In this light, religion functions as a social vehicle for belonging, group cohesion, and moral justification. Beliefs may be invoked to legitimise action, but they are rarely its true origin.

These dynamics are further illustrated by additional case studies. The violence in Northern Ireland has been described as a conflict between Catholics and Protestants, but it is widely recognised to be associated with post-colonial tensions, economic power, and national identity. John Brewer and Gareth Higgins (1998) argue that Protestantism in Northern Ireland was not a genuine theological commitment but rather socially marked political or secular allegiances (p. 152). Similarly, in the Balkans, Orthodox, Catholic, and Muslim identities were mobilised to express longstanding ethnic grievances and historical memories of occupation and oppression. According to Philip Barker (2008), the former Yugoslavia is an example of modern religious nationalism, in which faith traditions marked national identity and served as powerful tools of mobilisation (pp. 144–145). These

are further examples of how diverse underlying causes of conflicts were framed in religious language.

In addition, research shows that religion is not a reliable predictor of terrorism. As Robert Pape (2007) shows, many suicide attackers come from secular, educated, and otherwise integrated backgrounds, and are not necessarily poor, isolated, or fanatically religious. Pape argues that religion alone is a less consistent predictor of suicide terrorism than other conditions, such as foreign military occupation (pp. 120–133). The needed symbolic vocabulary may be provided by religion, but the conditions of violence are rooted in history, politics, and psychology.

All of this matters, because violence is often tolerable or even rational when executed in the name of political ideology or national security. But cloak violence in religious rhetoric, and it appears more alien. Religiously framed terrorism may have grown in recent decades, but it is neither timeless nor inevitable. Its causes do not lie exclusively in doctrine, but as much in identity crisis and political breakdown. Just because this complexity is recognised does not mean that religiously-motivated terror is excused. Historical awareness and knowledge of geopolitical contexts allow for more effective responses and responsible discussions, rather than simplistic blame. While it is true that religious narratives, symbols, and authorities can escalate conflict, they can also bring about peace. Religion is often the communicative framework of conflict rather than the generative source.

9.5 Scripture and the Violence of God

A recurring theme in neoatheist arguments is the claim that violence is embedded in sacred texts. This enables them to counter the familiar defence that religion can only be seen as violent when judged by its extremists (Reasoned Realities, 2023). In *God Is Not Great* (2007), Hitchens describes organised religion as "the accomplice of ignorance and guilt as well as of slavery, genocide, racism, and tyranny" (p. 339). This line of argument is not confined to Hitchens: Dan Barker's *God: The Most Unpleasant Character in All Fiction* (2016) compiles hundreds of Bible verses to depict God as jealous, wrathful, violent, and unjust. Many of the passages that are cited are indeed disturbing, making it difficult to simply dismiss these critiques. This section does not attempt to explain away these parts of the texts, but examines how they have been interpreted, challenged, and lived with by religious communities.

This critique is persuasive and even unsettling, but it also brings up questions about how we interpret sacred texts. In neoatheist readings, the main method is quoting scripture. There is no need for sociological research or historical context, just the citation itself. In this approach, religion is not corrupted by its interpreters but rotten at the root. Believers are then challenged — they need to explain how they can possibly revere texts that appear to endorse genocide (e.g., Deuteronomy 20), slavery (e.g., Exodus 21), or divinely sanctioned violence (e.g., 1 Samuel 15:3). For critics like Hitchens, these passages mean that religion can no longer qualify as a source of morality.

Yet while the texts in question are real and disturbing, the polemical use of scripture in this way raises significant hermeneutical and methodological issues. Firstly, scripture is not static — there are centuries of not only interpretative tradition and debate, but also ethical development by religious communities. People do not always use sacred texts as rulebooks. Instead, they often see them as collections of stories, laws, poems, and symbols. For example, many theologians do not read the Hebrew Bible as a strict moral guide.

At the same time, interpretation cannot resolve every troubling passage. Critics are right to point out that many apologetic defences try to avoid moral responsibility, either by relying too heavily on ambiguity or selective emphasis of metaphor. Verses which appear to command the killing of children and the taking of virgins (Numbers 31:17–18) remain deeply confronting. Efforts to explain such passages away often strain credibility. Although these passages are often acknowledged as products of an ancient and violent world, if religions want to retain their moral integrity, they need to confront them honestly.

What complicates the picture is often left out of neoatheist critiques. Many Christians live their faith primarily through the New Testament, which is defined by teachings of compassion, inclusion, and sacrificial love. In *Outgrowing God*, Richard Dawkins attempts to extend his critique to the New Testament but is reduced to ridiculing a fig tree — an episode in which Jesus causes it to wither — concluding with the comment, "poor fig tree" (Dawkins, 2019, p. 61). This critique is so superficial that it highlights the fact that there is far less material in the New Testament to support the charge of cruelty or

moral perversity. Hitchens also critiques Christianity as premised on the sacrifice of an innocent man, but demonstrates a lack of understanding of the theological framing of Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus knew who he was and understood his destiny. His sacrifice was a willing act undertaken in the face of systemic violence, not a command to inflict suffering on others.

There are many legal and tribal frameworks in the Old Testament, but Christians who draw on them are typically more orthodox and fundamentalist. On what many consider an opposite extreme, Pope Francis helped move contemporary Catholicism toward a more humanistic and inclusive version of Christianity. Not only does Francis emphasise mercy, humility, and environmental justice, but he also created considerable controversy, particularly amongst more orthodox believers, when he suggested that followers of different faiths may also encounter the divine. This was a claim that he reiterated in his 2024 inter-religious address in Singapore (Francis, 2024). Despite the criticism he drew, his message reflects a widening theological horizon.

Polemical accounts also often ignore the elements of sacred texts that promote peace, forgiveness, and restraint. The Bible may command war, but it also asks to love the stranger (Deut. 10:19), turn the other cheek (Matt. 5:39), and beat swords into ploughshares (Isa. 2:4). Perhaps the most extraordinary act of compassion is when Jesus states, in the midst of his own execution: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). This is perhaps the strongest example against Hitchens's claim that the crucifixion narrative is merely an endorsement of brutality. This forgiveness, extended

even to his tormentors, clearly shows that the presence of violent passages in the Bible does not define the whole, and that its moral meaning depends on the interpretive community.

The neoatheist use of scripture is more rhetorical than analytical. It aims to disqualify religion from moral discourse through provocation and ridicule. It demands from religion what no ideology, including secular ones, can provide: moral perfection at the level of textual origin. It is not about whether religious texts contain violence, but how religious communities use their interpretive traditions to foster peace, justice, or cruelty. That question cannot be answered with a proof-text — it requires history, theology, and attention to lived practice.

9.6 Religious Traditions of Peace and Restraint

As discussed in the last section, religion can not simply be reduced to the most violent passages from its scripture. This section looks more closely at long-standing traditions in major religions that encourage peace, compassion, and moral restraint. Neoatheist critiques often miss these qualities, but many people of faith consider them central to their daily lives.

Although certainly not a modern invention, the concept of non-violence is an important ideal in several religious traditions. In Buddhism, ethical commitments extend

beyond the individual to include compassion for others, as seen in the Theravādin practice of sharing karmic fruitfulness through acts of generosity (Harvey, 2000, p. 65). In Christian teaching, Jesus teaches radical forgiveness: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt.5:44). Early Christian communities also identified closely with ideals of peace, as seen in both the New Testament epistles and early writings such as 1 Clement (Cadoux, 2021/1919, p. 59). Their reluctance to serve in the Roman army was one of the features that set them apart from surrounding society (Cadoux, 2021/1919, pp. 56–62). Islam may be the most misrepresented religion in public discourse. Legal systems within classical Islam did not view warfare as lawless. Muslims were obliged to respect the rights of both combatants and civilians in enemy territory, and these obligations of restraint were grounded in Islamic law itself (Khadduri, 2006/1955, p. 171).

Religious teachings have also provided the moral foundation for movements of non-violent resistance. Mahatma Gandhi drew on multiple religious sources, including Hindu and Christian, to articulate the philosophy of satyagraha ("truth-force"). He used this as a method to resist British colonial rule without resorting to hatred or violence. He fused personal spiritual discipline with political struggle and drew his inspiration not only from the Bhagavad Gita but also from Sermon on the Mount. Gandhi later testified that the Sermon on the Mount "went straight to my heart," shaping his vision of non-violent resistance (Gandhi, 2021/1927, p. 58). The civil rights activism of Martin Luther King Jr. was explicitly grounded in Christian theology. For King, non-violence was a moral obligation, as described in his collection of sermons, *Strength to Love* (King, 1963, pp. 45–

47). These examples show how religious frameworks have opposed violence, defended dignity, and offered hope.

Institutional religion has also, at times, moved decisively toward peace and human rights. For example, Catholic engagement with the modern world changed significantly after the Second Vatican Council. Its declaration *Nostra Aetate* encouraged inter-religious dialogue, and later developments in Catholic social teaching have consistently emphasised the dignity of the human person and the call to solidarity. Pope John Paul II issued public apologies for Church-sanctioned violence in history, while Pope Francis, in his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, calls for "a culture of encounter" (§133) and frames political life around social charity oriented to the common good (§182). His vision of friendship and mutual support across different religions and nations was met with both praise and criticism, yet it nonetheless shifted Catholicism toward a more inclusive and peace-oriented theology (Francis, 2020).

To acknowledge these developments is not to idealise religion. All traditions are open to criticism, particularly when their ideals are betrayed in practice. But religion has always had the capacity to inspire restraint, reconciliation, and empathy. To critique religion only through the lens of violence is to overlook this. Sacred texts certainly include troubling passages, but they also convey messages of peace. While there are commands to

war, there is also the spiritual discipline to oppose it. Religion can clearly promote peace, but its adherents need to draw upon those interpretations in their practice.

9.7 The Danger of Overcorrection

By challenging the harms associated with religion, there is a risk of overcorrection. Secular critiques often do not acknowledge the dual capacity of religion to inspire both violence and compassion, so religion is regarded as a net liability that should be discarded. In this section, the risks of this vision are not only discussed in terms of the historical violence perpetuated by secular regimes, but also in the suppression of existential meaning offered by religion.

The following examples extend the earlier discussion of secular violence further by focusing on regimes that tried to either suppress or eradicate religion. Any attempts to eliminate religion have historically been accompanied by authoritarianism and mass violence. The regimes of Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, and Pol Pot were not only secular but explicitly anti-religious. In the Soviet Union, Stalin's League of the Militant Godless carried out church closures, arrested clergy, destroyed religious texts, and created atheistic substitutes for religious ceremonies, all in the name of scientific atheism. (Froese, 2008, pp. 6–7, 15). In China, Mao's Cultural Revolution sought to eradicate traditional religion, branding it as part of the "Four Olds," shutting down religious venues, destroying temples and scriptures, and persecuting religious leaders and believers (Yang, 2011, pp. 72–73). Pol

Pot's Khmer Rouge went even further, banning religion outright, defrocking monks and forcing them into agricultural labour, while also executing Buddhist leaders and recalcitrant monks in an effort to erase all traces of spiritual and cultural heritage (Chandler, 1991, p. 266; Kiernan, 2002, p. xii). All these atrocities were driven by ideological absolutism. By eliminating so-called irrational beliefs, societies could adopt utopian ideals where perfection was achieved through rationality. None of this suggests that New Atheists support violence, but it points out that secular ideologies can also become dangerous when they suppress competing worldviews and claim exclusive access to truth.

This danger is not only historical but existential. When religion is described as outdated or threatening, it can sweep away its very foundations. These foundations often help people make sense of suffering, mortality, and purpose. Charles Taylor (2007) describes this as life within the "immanent frame", a constructed social and intellectual space in which the natural order is understood as self-sufficient and the transcendent is no longer the assumed horizon of meaning. Taylor makes it clear that this framework is not necessarily atheistic. Rather, it describes a cultural setting where both belief and unbelief can exist, and transcendence is just one option among many (p. 542). For many, this does not bring a sense of freedom but a sense of loss. Terry Eagleton (2009) argues that replacing religion with rationalism overlooks something important. The desire for transcendence runs deep and often appears again in literature, the arts, and cultural rituals as a lively, improvised spirituality (p. 83).

Some find meaning in science because they are immersed in it professionally, culturally, or temperamentally. Scientists may experience awe in the elegance of physical laws or in evolutionary deep time. But it is not realistic to expect everyone to find existential fulfilment through science alone. This expectation ignores the diversity of human pursuits, as people are also drawn to the arts, humanities, or caregiving professions. For many of these people, abstract practices are not enough—they also need to find meaning in embodied practices, such as ritual, music, and storytelling, as well as in moral commitments grounded in relational life.

Many neoatheist thinkers underestimate this need, as they are too busy with their efforts to elevate science and reason. Richard Dawkins, for example, extols the beauty of a disenchanted universe in *Unweaving the Rainbow* (1998), but offers little in the way of existential consolation or communal meaning. Sam Harris argues in *The Moral Landscape* (2010) that science can determine human values. Some reviewers have pointed out that his framework seems to assume its own conclusion. In other words, it takes for granted that well-being, though hard to pin down, can be measured and used as a solid standard for what is right and wrong (Wall & Shackelford, 2011, pp. 296–297). For those already embedded in scientific or philosophical worldviews, these visions may be appealing. But for broader publics whose moral and emotional needs are not met by abstract reason alone, these visions often fail to resonate.

What emerges is a growing divide between intellectual elites and the wider communities they seek to influence. Secularism may lose its enchantment, leaving behind

an existential vacuum. This vacuum is all too easily occupied by political extremism, conspiracy theories, and pseudo-religious movements, where purpose is offered without complexity. The real challenge, it seems, is not so much to supplant religion with a form of materialism that reduces everything to mechanism, but to consider whether secular humanism is capable of providing a moral and imaginative framework sufficiently rich to address the full complexity of the human condition.

Critiquing religion is not inherently misguided, but when religion's rejection occurs without recognising the void that may follow, one risks substituting one kind of dogmatism for another. For secularism to mature, the dangers of coercive belief and the limits of disenchantment must be confronted. It should not just ask what is false about religion, but also what human needs are addressed by religion and whether or not anything else can replace it.

9.8 Conclusion: Toward a More Honest Account of Religion and Conflict

This chapter began with a common neoatheist claim: religion is a source of human violence that is both unique and problematic. In their critiques, this view is rarely framed literally but rather rhetorically. The New Atheists have advanced this position forcefully, citing terrorism, holy wars, and violent scripture as their evidence. But this chapter has revealed a more complex reality. While there is no doubt that religion is frequently implicated in violence, it has also been a source of compassion, moral vision, and non-

violent resistance. Claiming that religion is primarily violent is a violation not only of the historical record but also of the lived experience of billions of people.

Neoatheist critiques have often described all forms of religious belief by selecting their most extreme expressions and excluding secular atrocities. The most violent regimes of the twentieth century were explicitly anti-religious, motivated by political ideology. As William Cavanaugh and other scholars show, there is often an arbitrary boundary between religious and secular violence. Such violence can emerge from any absolutist belief, from the human tendency to fuse identity with power.

Saying that religion causes violence because of its scriptures takes a complex tradition and oversimplifies it. Sacred texts often contain contradictions, have multiple historical layers, and a rich history of interpretation. Some passages are no doubt troubling, but others promote justice, forgiveness, and peace, and have inspired people for centuries. The real question is not whether scriptures include violent verses, because they clearly do, but it is how faith communities interpret, question, or put these verses in context. Neoatheist critics often ignore the complex nature of scriptures, which have changed and developed ethically over time.

An existential and moral void can often follow the rejection of religion. Science and reason help us understand the world, but they do not always give us a sense of purpose or belonging. For some, the universe without God may be liberating. For others, it may be intolerably silent. The assumption that meaning can or should be derived from science

alone often reflects the worldview of scientists themselves — those professionally immersed in a system of thought not universally shared. The human search for meaning takes many forms, such as scientific, artistic, relational, and religious. No single approach is likely to be enough on its own.

A more honest account of religion and conflict requires moving beyond polemics. To understand religion, we need to see it as a collection of changing cultural, psychological, and ethical systems, rather than as a single force. It requires acknowledging that religion can be both violent and redemptive, both tribal and transcendent. It is important to recognise that secular ideologies can also become rigid, exclusive, or even violent if they ignore the emotional, social, and existential sides of human life.

This chapter has sought neither to absolve religion of responsibility nor to dismiss the secular critique of religious harm. Rather, it has challenged the logic of scapegoating — the tendency to locate the problem of violence within a single cultural tradition while neglecting its deeper roots in human psychology, group identity, and power. This reflects the broader argument of this thesis, that truth and meaning are not simply to be found in facts or beliefs, but rather in how we incorporate them into our lives. This involves how we treat others and shape stories, including religious stories, so we can better understand the world.

Chapter 10: Beyond the Facts: New Atheism, Science Popularisation, and the Ethics of Communication

10.1 Between Communication and Combat

While New Atheism has already been described as a philosophical and ideological movement, it has also emerged as a communication phenomenon. By promoting secularism and critiquing religion, they use the power of science as a cultural symbol to wield authority. Although Christopher Hitchens is best understood as a public intellectual, Richard Dawkins is both a scientist and a populariser. However, they all blur the distinction between science popularisation and activism, with their works often becoming a hybrid of popular science and political polemic. Because there is an overlap between ideological advocacy and communicative practice, the successes and failures of this model are best understood through the analytical lens of science communication theory.

Although this is often blurred in public discourse, science communicators are not the same as science popularisers. Science communicators are typically those who work within institutions such as universities, research organisations, and museums. Their focus is on building public engagement with science as well as trust. Their efforts are grounded in models of explanation, dialogue, and co-production, and they are often unknown outside of specialist circles. In contrast, science popularisers tend to be public figures. Brian Greene, Bill Nye, and Neil deGrasse Tyson are well known for making science

interesting, easy to understand, and relevant to everyday life. They commonly utilise media platforms that emphasise spectacle and simplification while retaining educational value. The New Atheists, however, employ science in a different manner. They use scientific terms mainly to persuade, relying on the authority of science to support their arguments instead of helping others understand the science more deeply.

This chapter is prompted, in part, by the author's contribution to public discourse on this issue. In a 2023 Conversation article titled "Science communicators need to stop telling everybody the universe is a meaningless void" (Ellis, 2023), an argument is advanced that describes many science popularisers as being influenced by neoatheist thinking. As such, they present a vision of the cosmos that is stripped of its existential meaning. Despite intellectual honesty and scientific accuracy, their communication approach can alienate audiences and reinforce the perception of science as cold or indifferent. A rebuttal article, "Fact bombing by experts doesn't change hearts and minds — but good science communication can," (Caruthers et al., 2023) responded to that piece by reframing the issue around persuasion tactics. The rebuttal focused on how people communicate and avoided the main issue: many public science figures do not provide a strong moral or existential vision, and some even try to break down the ones that already exist.

In retrospect, some of the confusion arose from the terminology used. By referring broadly to "science communicators" while critiquing public figures such as Neil deGrasse Tyson and Richard Dawkins, the distinction between institutional science communication

and science popularisation was blurred. Because of the ambiguity, the response was able to change the focus of the discussion. Instead of addressing criticism of cultural messaging, it presented the issue as a misunderstanding of communication theory. But this misunderstanding actually supports a main point of this chapter: when ideologues or entertainers shape the public image of science, it becomes hard for people to tell the difference between real scientific communication and rhetorical show. What suffers in the process is not only clarity but also trust, empathy, and meaning.

In this chapter, New Atheism is critically analysed through the lens of science communication theory. It draws on models such as the deficit, dialogue, and participatory paradigms (Bucchi & Trench, 2008), framing theory (Nisbet & Mooney, 2007), and the psychology of identity-protective cognition (Kahan et al., 2012). It also draws on recent research in affective science communication (Davies & Horst, 2016) to examine how emotion, identity, and narrative influence how people receive scientific messages. These explorations shift the argument from philosophical assumptions to communication strategy.

Good science communication helps build trust, start conversations, and makes it easier for people with different views to understand each other. New Atheism often uses the language of reason, but science communication focuses more on humility and curiosity than on certainty or confrontation. This way, it connects better with our need for stories, belonging, and purpose. Something well known in science communication circles is that

without proper engagement, even the most accurate messages are often ignored, misunderstood, or rejected.

10.2 The Goals of Science Communication Versus Neoatheist Rhetoric

Science communication attempts to build bridges between science and society. It aims to do more than just inform; it also fosters trust, stimulates curiosity, and helps individuals make informed decisions. Science communication theory focuses on these goals through the development of key models and theories. The deficit model was once dominant and assumes that people misunderstand science simply because they lack knowledge. Once that knowledge is imparted, the model assumes it will lead to rational acceptance of science (Gregory & Miller, 2010, pp. 178–179). This model has since been criticised for its simplicity and its failure to address the complexity of public responses to science. The dialogue model emerged in response to these limitations and emphasises mutual respect through two-way engagement and recognition of the audience's knowledge and values (Trench, 2008, pp. 120–122). More recently, the idea of scientific citizenship has emerged, where the public is seen as coexisting with science. Within this model, there is inclusion, deliberation, and shared responsibility (Davies & Horst, 2016, pp. 193–194).

As these models have developed, the public now plays an active role in creating meaning instead of just receiving information. Today's science communication is not simply about the portrayal of accurate facts, but about cultural sensitivity, humility, and

trustworthiness. Its ethos is relational rather than adversarial. Yet neoatheist rhetoric has not adopted these more recent models, and it remains stuck in deficit assumptions —the very models that modern science communication has sought to move beyond. When New Atheists assert that religion is a result of ignorance and childhood indoctrination, they assume that once the public is informed of the 'truth' of evolution, cosmology, or neuroscience, they will naturally abandon religion and embrace scientific secularism.

The New Atheists, therefore, treat the public as ignorant and deficient. In this sense, communication is not collaboration but rather a correction. Dawkins is explicit about a conversional aim: “If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down” (2006, p. 6), though he acknowledges this may be presumptuous optimism. He later writes that “religious faith is an especially potent silencer of rational calculation… it discourages questioning, by its very nature” (p. 306), and adds that “faith is an evil precisely because it requires no justification and brooks no argument” (p. 308). This approach quickly shuts down any chance for real dialogue or engagement, turning communication into a tool for pushing an ideology. It is as though he tries to convince people to change by simply patronising their position. It therefore comes across as self-congratulation to the already converted.

When the New Atheists prioritise confrontation over resonance, they present themselves as being largely uninterested in the relational dimensions of science communication. While this strategy may appeal to the already converted, it cannot reach the audiences they hope to change because it ignores the complex emotional, cultural, and

existential dimensions of belief. While the New Atheists see themselves as defenders of scientific truth, their approach is at odds with the goals of science communication. They aim to win — to publicly defeat religion with scientific rhetoric. And although this may satisfy those who are already convinced, it fails to satisfy those for whom science must coexist with other sources of meaning.

10.3 From Knowledge to Identity: Why Facts Alone Do Not Persuade

An extension of the deficit model is seen in the neoatheist assumption that people believe in God or religion because they are insufficiently informed. There is the idea that the persistence of irrational belief is due to public ignorance, and that enlightenment will simply follow the provision of scientific facts. This reflects a misunderstanding of how people take in information, as decades of research in science communication and cognitive psychology have shown. Knowledge is not separate from our lives. Our beliefs are tied to our identities and shared with people we care about. When someone from outside the group brings evidence that challenges these beliefs, people usually ignore it or find ways to explain it away so their beliefs stay consistent.

The theory of identity-protective cognition provides a well-documented account of this phenomenon. It describes how individuals tend to accept or dismiss information based on its consistency with their group identity (Kahan et al., 2012). Information that challenges core worldviews, whether scientific or ideological, is often perceived as a

personal or cultural threat. Consequently, when individuals encounter facts that conflict with their existing beliefs, the result is typically increased resistance rather than reflection. This creates a major challenge for neoatheist communicators, who often rely on what Carruthers, Bray, and Nurse (2023) call "fact bombing." This approach means quickly and firmly sharing scientific claims, assuming that simply presenting facts will persuade others.

The neoatheist style tends to be affirmational and resists encouraging dialogue; therefore, its messages usually resonate more with people who already hold a secular outlook. This kind of identity confirmation is similar to what New Atheists accuse religious communities of doing. When they prioritise reason above all else, they often end up repeating the same group behaviours, such as only engaging with certain ideas and becoming defensive. The irony is that in attempting to eradicate belief, New Atheists reproduce many of its social dynamics. Facts may illuminate, but meaning persuades. If communicators wish to encourage understanding, they need to begin with the understanding of their audience — **not as minds to be corrected, but as persons to be engaged.**

10.4 Narrative, Framing, and the Failure of Neoatheist Messaging

A serious weakness in neoatheist communication is in the framing of narratives. Framing, as defined by Nisbet and Mooney (2007), is the way information is structured to connect with particular views and experiences (p. 56). The New Atheists speak directly and, no doubt, communicate scientific facts, but their framing choices go beyond these facts: they convey moral postures of confrontation, superiority, and certainty. Within this framing, religion is not depicted as a cultural system but as a pathology. Dawkins' definition of faith as a "persistent false belief … especially as a symptom of psychiatric disorder" (2006, p. 5) and Harris's description of religion as "suggestive of mental illness" (2004, p. 72) typify this approach. While such language is entertaining to secular audiences, it activates identity-defensive responses from others. Provocation is not the same as persuasion, and such an approach ensures that genuine scientific insights are rejected because of the way they are framed.

Also absent from neoatheist framing is a coherent narrative structure that can address the human search for meaning. Religious traditions often frame life as a moral story, giving people a sense of purpose and something greater to strive for. In contrast, neoatheist arguments break this framing into separate critiques that focus on reason. When figures like Sagan describe humanity as "a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam" (1994, p. 12), the image inspires awe for some but existential emptiness for others, depending on the interpretive frame. The frame of mythic meaning is now replaced with one of cosmic indifference.

Neoatheist communication therefore undermines its own goals. If there are no compelling narratives or if arguments are not framed appropriately, then it becomes difficult to build trust across worldviews. Its messaging then becomes less persuasive and more polarising — preaching to the converted while deepening the divide with those who might otherwise be open to scientific perspectives.

10.5 The Spectacle and the Sermon: New Atheists as Entertainers and Evangelists

Despite presenting themselves as champions of rational discourse, neoatheist figures adopt a communication style that frequently resembles a performance. Across their media platforms, they dramatise their ideas against a simplified version of religion. Richard Dawkins, as an evolutionary biologist, has the aura of a science communicator, but often blurs the line between education and confrontation. Those New Atheists who are not scientists by profession still draw heavily on scientific authority, with their performance styles lending weight to their critique of religion. In this way, the New Atheists behave more like secular evangelists, using modern media to build personal brands, assert cultural authority, and galvanise followers. Their strategy has been highly successful, especially when measured against audience engagement and cultural visibility. But in terms of persuasion and the aims of science communication, it represents a profound failure.

Figures like Carl Sagan and Neil deGrasse Tyson, as science popularisers, also rely on their ability to stage science as spectacle. This theatrical element is more acceptable, as it can make science more engaging. But when the presentation of science becomes entangled with ideological messaging, communication risks shifting to propaganda. Neoatheist figures exemplify this risk. Debate stages are often used by Dawkins to confront religion as though engaged in moral combat, with audience applause often elicited by rhetorical flourishes (Dawkins, 2007). For Hitchens, the debates are often framed as intellectual theatre, where he leans on his wit and literary charisma. The audiences are being entertained more than educated, that is, if they are not being antagonised. With the speaker on stage, the moral clarity of the argument, the emotional reward of group agreement — it resembles a sermon more than a classroom.

There is also a paradox here. While the New Atheists criticise religious communities for relying on emotion, ritual, and group loyalty, these very dynamics are replicated by their own communication style. The use of applause lines, staged confrontations, and rehearsed arguments mirrors the structure of revivalist preaching more than scientific dialogue. They are not transcending religion, but they are imitating it by reversing its content. This performative style often involves ridicule, which obstructs genuine engagement and fails to invite religious people into the conversation. This approach rarely fosters long-term understanding or persuasion. What it does do, by prioritising spectacle over empathy, is generate social media approval and viral moments. But by doing so, it sacrifices the credibility and trust that science communication seeks to cultivate.

This style of communication is both amplified and rewarded, particularly in the era of algorithm-driven engagement. Calm discussion rarely trends — it is outrage, conflict, and rhetorical dominance that sells. This media environment encourages confrontational styles, but also ensures that while their influence grows amongst secular audiences, their reach diminishes amongst religious and spiritual audiences. This is how algorithms work —they ensure that only people who agree with the message are likely to hear it, meaning that New Atheists are preaching louder but to a narrower, increasingly self-congratulatory audience.

This dynamic is further complicated by the kinds of religious voices that neoatheist figures most often encounter. Prominent figures like Richard Dawkins are frequently targeted by fundamentalist critics. In one popular video, Dawkins reads aloud the hate mail he receives, much of it grotesque, threatening, or derisive (Dawkins, 2011). This kind of correspondence understandably entrenches a defensive, dismissive posture. When religious opposition takes the form of anti-intellectualism or personal abuse, it becomes harder to imagine productive engagement. As Francis Collins reflected, "So perhaps the 'battle' between science and religion is not as polarised as it seems? Unfortunately, the evidence of potential harmony is often overshadowed by the high-decibel pronouncements of those who occupy the poles of the debate" (Collins, 2006, p. 4).

10.6 Trust-Building Dialogues at the Science–Religion Interface

But there are more examples of constructive engagement, and they reveal what is when people on both sides take communication seriously. Francis Collins, for example, founded the organisation BioLogos, which encourages harmony between Christian faith and evolutionary biology. There is also the Faraday Institute for Science and Religion in Cambridge, which fosters interdisciplinary dialogue without demanding consensus.

Critics rightly note that many of these are not neutral platforms. Both organisations mentioned above are shaped by Christian worldviews and often pursue theological reconciliation. Perhaps closer to neutrality is The International Society for Science and Religion (ISSR), which brings together scientists, theologians and philosophers from a variety of backgrounds, though its leadership still has strong Christian representation. From a neoatheist perspective, such efforts may appear compromised. But this leads to a bigger question: why are only religious scientists attempting to build bridges between science and religion? If they are the only ones showing significant efforts to build bridges, then we should not be surprised if those bridges lean in one direction. Perhaps the space cannot remain unoccupied by secular communicators — it would be very interesting to see what may be gained if they engaged with it.

Although these efforts may appear partial, they succeed where New Atheism fails: they generate trust and dialogue. They do not require believers to abandon their faith, nor do they require scientists to abandon their rigour. They show that respectful communication can still occur even when there is disagreement. When the New Atheists reject serious attempts at dialogue, they misrepresent the ethos of science. Science is at its best when it is open-ended, self-correcting and curious. These are values that don't align well with ideological theatre. If the New Atheists wish to defend science credibly, they must also defend its methods, not only in what they say but in how they listen.

10.7 Towards a More Humane Science Communication

If neoatheism fails as a form of science communication, it is not simply because it is too blunt or too confrontational, but because it is insufficiently human. The emotional, existential, and cultural dimensions of belief are neglected, thereby limiting its own reach. Rather than cultivating curiosity or trust, it tends instead to inspire defensiveness and polarisation. A better model, especially when it comes to issues of identity, morality, and meaning, must be guided not only by clarity but also by emotional intelligence. This does not call for compromising on evidence or endorsing unscientific claims. It means recognising that audiences do not receive information in a vacuum. To be persuasive, communicators must not only explain what is true but also show that they understand why their audience believes otherwise, and why it matters.

A more humane approach would begin with empathy rather than argument. Although religion often presents itself as a set of claims or knowledge and it is certainly most easily deconstructed when viewed this way, for many it is their way of relating to the world and framing their moral lives. These important functions of religion cannot be replaced solely by moral facts. Telling someone that they are a random assemblage of atoms in a purposeless universe may be scientifically defensible, but it does not offer meaning. Communication is not just about presenting scientific truths — it is also connecting these truths to what people care about, e.g., belonging, beauty, and moral responsibility. **These matters are not peripheral; they are the emotional infrastructure of human life**. Public-facing science communication that ignores them may win arguments, but it loses hearts.

Such communication must therefore invite rather than attack. It should aim to expand understanding without demanding allegiance, to be curious not only about the natural world but also about the people trying to make sense of it. Humanising science discourse means there is no room for smugness, finality, or contempt, since science never claims to offer certainty. This is the trap New Atheism has fallen into — In its effort to defend science, it has often adopted the worst features of the religious orthodoxy. It is therefore important to try to reclaim the middle ground, rather than to replace one orthodoxy with another.

Chapter 11: Consolation and Cruelty - New Atheism, Afterlife and the Ethics of Unbelief

11.1 Fairy Tales and the Fear of the Dark: Dismissing the Afterlife

When atheists critique the afterlife, it begins and ends with derision. In a 2011 interview, Stephen Hawking declared:

> "I regard the brain as a computer which will stop working when its components fail. There is no heaven or afterlife for broken down computers. That is a fairy story for people afraid of the dark" (Sample, 2011, para. 6).

Atheists and science popularisers often use this quote to emphasise that human beings are material and that death is final. This is fully consistent with a naturalistic worldview, but there is an extra rhetorical layer here. What is being implied is that afterlife beliefs are not just false; they are held by people who are weak and childish.

Sam Harris seems to agree with this overall sentiment. He frames belief in the afterlife as a form of psychological escapism. By referring to Terror Management Theory (TMT), developed by Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon, and Tom Pyszczynski (1986, 1997), he argues that these beliefs are driven by a deep fear of non-existence rather than by

evidence. This is what Ernest Becker (1973) calls the "denial of death". In Harris's own words:

> "The problem is that most people, most of the time, are desperate to believe ridiculous and divisive ideas for patently emotional reasons. And, while rarely explicit, what they're really worried about is death" (Harris, 2012). Harris's position reflects the broader tendency among New Atheists to frame religious or spiritual beliefs purely in cognitive or evolutionary terms.

It has been suggested that belief in an afterlife emerges as a consequence of evolution, through human faculties of agency detection, theory of mind, and the inability to conceive of one's own non-existence. (Boyer, 2001, pp. 144–146; Barrett, 2012, pp. 117–120). These features of cognition explain the nature of the belief but do not verify it, and should therefore be discarded as we mature intellectually.".

For many people, belief in an afterlife supports mourning, mortality, and human relationships. More than this, it can even offer a narrative coherence across generations, supporting family cohesion (Vail et al., 2010). It is therefore not simply reducible to a theory about post-mortem consciousness. Philosophers such as Charles Taylor (1989, pp. 3–24) and Thomas Nagel (1989, pp. 216–230) warn that secular frameworks often ignore these deeper human needs. Taylor argues that these needs, which shape our identity, cannot be avoided. Nagel also discusses how hard it is to accept mortality from a purely secular perspective. The main issue is not that atheism denies an afterlife, but that some

atheists want others to give up their belief in it, even though it has cultural meaning and offers comfort.

Even if such beliefs are incorrect by empirical standards, the aggressive rhetorical style used to attack them raises ethical questions. Why should it even matter to Sam Harris or Stephen Hawking if someone finds comfort in an afterlife? Why is the need for consolation treated as cowardice? Jonathan Haidt (2012) argues that moral reasoning is not usually shaped by pure objectivity, but rather by social and emotional motives. So the problem is not reason alone, but the narrowing of the discussion to include only those who share the same moral intuitions. He also notes that diversity of perspective, particularly intellectual and ideological diversity, can help groups move closer to truth: "This is why it's so important to have intellectual and ideological diversity within any group or institution whose goal is to find truth" (p. 90).

A theme that is often repeated by atheists, which has been recently popularised by Ricky Gervais, is that death is simply a return to the same state as before birth. This argument, originating in Lucretius's De Rerum Natura (c. 50 BCE), suggests that non-existence after death should be no more troubling than non-existence before life: "Look back at the eternity that passed before we were born, and mark how utterly it counts to us as nothing. This is a mirror that Nature holds up to us, in which we may see the time that shall be after we are dead. Is there anything terrifying in the sight – anything depressing – anything that is not more restful than the soundest sleep?" (Lucretius, trans. 1951, p. 125). Nearly two thousand years later, Gervais answers the question of what happens after

death by saying, “What was it like the thirteen and a half billion years before you were born? It’s probably like that” (Gervais, 2024). This recycled reasoning may satisfy some, but for others it trivialises the emotional intensity of death and the relationships that give life its shape. As section 11.3 will discuss, even Gervais steps away from this strict view in a rare and moving moment on television. In a key scene from After Life, he tells a dying child that he believes in heaven — not because he does, but because she needs him to. In this moment, his ideological consistency is suspended, acknowledging that intellect can sometimes yield to love and compassion.

11.2 Stardust and Silence: Carolyn Porco and the Limits of Poetic Naturalism

However, some, albeit a minority, reject the conventional notion of the afterlife but still try to come up with more emotionally resonant secular alternatives. One of the most influential figures here is planetary scientist Carolyn Porco. She maintains a strictly scientific worldview but still uses language that expresses awe and wonder. In a widely quoted statement, she says:

> “All the atoms of our bodies will be blown into space in the disintegration of the Solar System, to live on forever as mass or energy. That's what we should be teaching our children. Not fairy tales about angels and seeing grandma in Heaven.” (Porco, n.d.)

At first glance, this narrative seems to soften the blow of mortality. Although there is no offer of reunion in heaven, there is still the promise of continuity. In language that mirrors Carl Sagan's, there is a return to the universe via a transformation into stardust.

However, Porco's formulation is less inclusive than it appears. Her statement, like Hawking's and Harris's, still sets up a binary between truth and comfort, with clear disdain for the latter. While her tone is more lyrical, her stance remains prescriptive: we should teach children this, not that. The child's experience of grief, or need for symbolic continuity, is not considered. The desire to see a deceased grandparent again is dismissed in favour of vastness over intimacy, atoms over angels. Unfortunately, becoming stardust does not speak to the relational pain of loss. There is no moral closure or the hope of seeing a loved one's face again. It offers only dispersal — and even when presented beautifully, dispersal is not the same as meaning.

Moreover, from a cognitive science perspective, Porco's attempt to replace the supernatural with the cosmological may miss the mark in terms of psychological function. As previously discussed, studies in Terror Management Theory and the psychology of religion suggest that people do not merely fear death as non-being; they fear it as disconnection, as the erasure of identity and love (Vail et al., 2012). Poetic naturalism speaks to the imagination but not to people. This narrative approach resonates well with adults who value science, but it may not appeal to children, individuals grieving, or those from cultures that hold personhood and lineage in high regard.

In this sense, Porco's view may not be cruel in intent, but it is narrow in vision. She takes a stance that assumes the needs of secular scientists are universal. Yet across cultures, the dead are not simply matter; they are ancestors, spirits, or remembered selves.

Anthropologist Robert Bellah (2011) observes that communities "enact stories, myths, in rituals," with participants representing humans, animals, or powerful beings — narratives that became central to the emergence of complex societies built on shared intention (p. 104). Dismissing such narratives risks cultural and emotional alienation and undermines the foundations of complex social relationships. This is not to suggest that we lie to children, but rather is an argument for humility. Honesty does not meet every human need in every context, and while some undoubtedly love Porco's offer of sublimity, others may require consolation. People still long for contact, not only with those they have loved, but also with those that they will one day leave behind.

11.3 A Tear in the Narrative: Ricky Gervais in *After Life*

While some figures may insist confidently that there is only materialism in the face of death, Ricky Gervais, despite being an outspoken atheist, provides a more conflicted representation. In his series *After life* (Season 3, Episode 6), his character, Tony Johnson, plays a grieving widower. Tony is approached by a child who is terminally ill, who asks him if he believes in heaven. Tony is visibly moved, with tears in his eyes, and, after a brief hesitation, he replies, "Definitely" (Gervais, 2022). This was an obvious departure, not only from the character's own traits, but also from Gervais himself.

This scene represents more than narrative drama. It offers a hint of deeper truth: in the face of suffering, compassion may be more important than ideological consistency. Gervais has long championed a blunt, reductionist account of death, but in *After Life*, he recognises something more: the emotional inadequacy of such a stance when standing before the dying. His character does not respond with his usual insistence that there is nothing after death; instead, he says "yes," and the tension of that answer is magnified by Gervais's well-known philosophical position, making his emotional conflict palpable. This is a significant break in the narrative, where a core tension within popular atheism is dramatised: the gap between rationality and lived existence. While much of neoatheist discourse is content to reduce religious beliefs to psychological needs or evolutionary by-products, *After Life* gestures toward something more vulnerable and humane. It admits that sometimes we speak to preserve hope, connection, and dignity, not always simply to assert truth. And it does so through the very medium most effective for cultural communication: storytelling.

After Life can therefore be viewed as an ethical case study, in which withholding the truth in favour of compassion is seen to have moral value. Atheism is not abandoned in this scene, but kindness is prioritised over coherence, and although morally beautiful, some viewers may find it philosophically unsettling. By contrast, New Atheists tend to present information as though they would never face such a conflict — as though any challenge could be confidently deflected by their ideological consistency. Yet in doing so, they forget that they cannot know who is in their audience, nor what grief or mourning their words may strike against.

Watching hours of videos featuring New Atheists will rarely let viewers see them recognise the limits of their own narratives, even when they are faced with human vulnerability. This is a rarely acknowledged issue within neoatheist discourse, which is why Gervais' fictional response was so refreshing. There are circumstances in which the need to believe is a legitimate part of being human, not the intellectual defect that Porco and Harris make it out to be. This understanding is not a plea for dishonesty but simply for empathy. Sometimes, a person's need for hope is more important than ideological consistency. The comfort offered in *After Life* does not need to be justified in a cosmological sense in order to be ethically instructive. It asks the viewer if we want to build a world based on intellect alone or one that also has compassion.

As this chapter continues, it becomes clear that the question is not only whether secular voices are right to reject belief in the afterlife, but also whether they are right to do so with such force, such finality, and such disregard for human pain. Gervais's fictional act of empathy breaks that mould. It shows that even within a secular frame, there are moments when the heart speaks before the mind can silence it.

11.4 Rethinking Terror Management

As mentioned in chapter 5, there is an underlying assumption in neoatheist dismissals of the afterlife: comfort is necessarily opposed to truth. Richard Dawkins (2006)

makes the distinction explicit in *The God Delusion*, noting that many people "cannot tell the difference between 'X is true' and 'it is desirable that people should believe that X is true,'" before concluding that "…feelings, or truth. Both may be important, but they are not the same thing" (p. 353). Sam Harris also argues that spiritual beliefs last not because they are credible, but because they give people comfort during suffering and death (Harris, 2004, p. 64). As a result, beliefs that provide comfort are often viewed with suspicion since they seem based on emotion, not evidence.

Afterlife beliefs, like religion in general, have a substantial body of empirical research that demonstrates their value. Dismantling these beliefs through ridicule, or even through neuroscience and evolutionary biology, overlooks this evidence. For example, Terror Management Theory (TMT) shows that belief in a symbolic or even literal mortality can promote well-being through the reduction of death anxiety. As Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon (1986) explain, when children recognise that their parents cannot ultimately protect them from death, "a superior basis of value and protection must be found. Fortunately, the culture provides such a basis … and the possibility of immortality" (p. 197). Complementary research shows that reminders of death intensify belief in supernatural agents, even across different religious traditions, suggesting that such beliefs function to assuage existential fear (Norenzayan & Hansen, 2006). These afterlife beliefs have also been found to provide reassurance in the face of uncertainty, something that secular alternatives struggle to do (Norris & Inglehart, 2004, p. 17). Yet this evidence does not soften Dawkins's blows; he may well accept such findings and still regard the need for terror management as little more than intellectual thumb-sucking.

This raises important ethical questions for science popularisers. Should scientific educators and public intellectuals attempt to replace consoling beliefs with disenchanted truths, even when those truths may increase despair or existential trauma? Or should they try to bridge truth and meaning by trying to create narratives that are both true and emotionally relevant? There is precedent for this more compassionate approach.Carl Sagan usually spoke about death with a respectful tone. In a line often attributed to Sagan but originally written by the poet Thomas Campbell, he states: “To live in the hearts we leave behind is to live forever.” Although Sagan did not believe in an afterlife, he still chose to respond to the emotional gravity of death with tenderness. By doing so, he demonstrates a form of sensitivity that is largely absent from neoatheist discourse.

Therefore, the role of New Atheists and science popularisers is not to expose comforting falsehoods, but rather to offer something equally human in return. If they aim to replace religious narratives with their secular worldview, they cannot simply set out to destroy illusions. They also need to construct stories that resonate with the emotional complexity of being human. Until then, silence, stardust, and logic will remain a poor substitute for hope.

Chapter 12: Climate Change and Identity: Why Facts Alone Fail

12.1 The Message No One Heard

In April 2024, Senator Bernie Sanders wrote an article for Fox News titled "Climate change is a threat to the planet: We must address it" (Sanders, 2024). At face value, the piece should have been notable not just for its content, but for its context. Sanders is a prominent figure in U.S. politics and has long been associated with the political far-left. So for him to write in a flagship publication for the American Right represented a rare moment of cross-ideological engagement. The article was not attacking or forceful — it was measured in tone and argued with evidence, making a rational appeal for coordinated global action. Sanders tried to evoke strong patriotic feelings through his historical parallels to World War II and the Great Depression, times when the people of the United States worked together with strength and resolve. He framed climate change in a similar way, as a challenge that threatened the nation and demanded a unified response. Even those who disagreed with his politics might have been expected to appreciate the effort to reach across the divide.

And yet, the visible response was largely hostile. Most of the comments ridiculed Sanders' credibility, made fun of climate predictions, recalled alleged historical failures of climate

science, and portrayed the entire argument as a hoax designed to enrich global elites or control the lives of everyday Americans. Few, if any, highly visible comments expressed support or even tentative agreement. The article did not fail to reach its audience because it lacked logic or evidence. Instead, the problem was who wrote it, where it was published, and the audience's beliefs.

This case examines science communication and its limits, especially in situations where opinions are strongly divided. What makes this example revealing is not just that Sanders was ignored or contradicted, but that his identity overrode his message. Talking about climate change on this conservative platform, even with moderate language, was seen not as an attempt to build bridges but as infiltration, manipulation, and moral grandstanding. The issue was not about knowledge, but about social dynamics.

This chapter examines how science communication is influenced by identity positioning, using examples from the article's comments section. It demonstrates how the identity of the speaker (real or perceived) influences whether the message is heard, trusted, or rejected. In deeply divided societies, facts by themselves rarely change minds because people tend to interpret information in ways that support their group identities (Kahan et al., 2012; Davies & Horst, 2016, pp. 53–77). Even the most rational argument will be dismissed if it comes from someone perceived as an ideological enemy.

Although the Fox News article by Sanders was a failed attempt at outreach, it demonstrates the broader challenge facing both climate communication and science communication more broadly. By analysing the article's reception through the comments section, it becomes clear that identity cues are misaligned, and this results in the best of intentions becoming nullified. This chapter looks at the cues and the ways people respond to them, showing how belief, belonging, and knowledge are closely connected.

12.2 Identity-Protective Cognition: Why Facts Aren't Enough

The failure of Bernie Sanders' Fox News article to resonate with its intended audience was not due to poor reasoning or weak evidence. There is a broader cognitive issue that scientific messages are often rejected when they threaten a person's cultural identity. This process, called identity-protective cognition, lies at the heart of this debate and of many other polarised science debates.

Dan Kahan and his colleagues (2012) have shown that people tend to interpret scientific information in ways that align with the values of their cultural group. In experiments on climate change, vaccine acceptance, and gun control, they found that individuals with higher levels of scientific literacy were more, not less, likely to polarise along ideological lines. In other words, knowledge does not necessarily lead to consensus. In some cases, it fuels more sophisticated rationalisations that serve to protect one's group

identity. This is especially important when discussing climate change, as the topic has evolved beyond being just a scientific issue. It often serves as a substitute for group loyalty.

Several Fox News commenters show this dynamic clearly. One wrote:

"Over 10,000 years ago, a global warming trend ended the Ice Age. Without any help from fossil fuels. All the weather data used today only goes back about 150 years... So is a one degree average temperature change in 150 years really that significant?"

On the surface, the argument appears to be quite factual. It references deep geological time, questions the statistical significance of short-term trends, and invokes scepticism toward climate models. But beneath the surface, the rhetoric serves to reinforce identity. The speaker is describing modern climate science as ideologically tainted, aligning with a worldview that values self-reliance and distrusts perceived alarmism. The reference to the Ice Age really has nothing to do with palaeoclimatology; it is rather used to assert that nature operates independently of human activity. This therefore discredits calls for government-led intervention, especially those that infringe on human freedoms.

Similarly, another commenter invoked past scientific misfires:

"The scientists told us in the '70s an ice age was coming... what happened? NOTHING. Gore kept forecasting the ice melting and the cities on the coast flooding... what happened? NOTHING."

Again, the focus here is on what is perceived as a pattern of exaggeration, rather than the accuracy of the information. Scientists and progressives like Al Gore are portrayed as fear mongers who profit from panic. Here, the memory is selective. It forms part of a broader pattern of argument, where scientific authority is framed as inconsistent, agenda-driven, and elitist. It also serves to unite the audience against a common enemy — those who 'believe' in climate change and want to control others through that belief.

It is important to note how many of these comments end with affective or identity-based disclosure rather than with evidence. One commenter concluded:

"This is all a hoax to make a lot of elites rich. This is my belief."

This is an important rhetorical move. What we see here is a move from reasoned argument to an explicitly stated belief. This refers to personal entitlement, where someone's strong belief is more important to them than any evidence. The facts are acknowledged, but the worldview is rejected, so they are ignored. This is a strategic use of the word "belief," reinforcing autonomy and resistance: I am not one of them.

These responses are not just a simple rejection of fact. There is an affirmation of identity that emerges. The science is noted, but the solidarity is more important. The evidence exists, but it is often associated with people "like them" rather than people "like us." In these situations, the identity positioning is too strong, so persuasion cannot occur, even with the strongest of arguments.

In some cases, there is a strong inconsistency in the selective use of scientific data. When the data support long-term climate cycles, it is readily accepted; however, when they implicate current warming as a result of human activity, they are rejected. This selective use of data, where palaeoclimatology is embraced and climate modelling or satellite observations are rejected, is grounded in narrative alignment rather than methodological critique. The purpose of science in such discussions is not to inform, but to reinforce a sense of belonging.

12.3 Symbolic Distrust and Historical Weaponisation

A common strategy used to undermine climate science is the selective reference to past scientific misjudgements. In the Fox News comment section responding to Bernie Sanders' climate op-ed, multiple commenters referenced the now-infamous 1975 Newsweek article titled "The Cooling World". The article, published during a period of modest short-term cooling in the Northern Hemisphere, warned of the potential for declining agricultural productivity due to declining global temperatures (Gwynne, 1975). Despite the fact that this view did not reflect a scientific consensus at the time, and was based more on media exaggeration than peer-reviewed research, it has been repeatedly resurrected as evidence that climate science cannot be trusted.

One commenter captured this sentiment succinctly:

"Does everyone remember all the doom-sayers from the '70s and '80s? Guess what all, the earth is still here. Temperature measurements began in 1850, so no one knows what the cycle was before that. They may claim they do but isn't science based on hypothesis?... I'm sure someone will say I'm clueless but I'm not buying the propaganda that has been pushed for many years."

Several rhetorical strategies are used here. First, historical scepticism is used to question the credibility of current research. Warnings today are presented as part of a repeated pattern of alarmism. Second, it undermines palaeoclimatic data by casting it as speculative or a mere guess, despite the fact that reconstructions of past climate are based on robust and multisourced evidence, including ice cores, sediment analysis, tree rings, and isotope data (Bradley, 2014). This approach uses strategic scepticism. It relies on historical records to reject current claims, while at the same time rejecting the methods used to create those same records. Finally, the statement anticipates and pre-empts criticism. It is not an invitation to dialogue, but a performance of defiance. The speaker also frames any disagreement as condescension, thereby inoculating themselves against correction.

Although this form of argumentation is common in climate discourse, it is not confined to it. As Davies and Horst (2016) note, it is quite common to anchor resistance in symbolic distrust with suspicions of the institutions and identities making the claims, rather than the claims themselves (pp. 186-212). So it is not the data that is being rejected, but rather the authority of the speaker and the cultural world they represent.

This is evident in how Al Gore, for example, is repeatedly invoked in the Fox News comments as a failed prophet. One commenter wrote:

"Gore kept forecasting the ice melting and the cities on the coast flooding... what happened? NOTHING."

This is a very symbolic reference to Gore. For many in conservative circles, Gore epitomises liberal elitism: someone who lectures others while allegedly failing to live by his own standards. Now that Gore is used as a cultural reference point, it no longer becomes necessary to engage in the broader discussion surrounding climate science. His discrediting significantly shapes the entire conversation, much like the selective invocation of historical flashpoints previously discussed. Latour (2004) described this as a collapse of trust in matters of fact. This is where resentment towards cultural elites and scepticism about authority combine to create a distrust of public knowledge.

In a particularly illustrative example, one commenter referenced both the Newsweek article and the ongoing glacial retreat in Alaska:

"Newsweek Article (04/28/1975) titled 'The Cooling World' argued that global temperatures were falling... Meanwhile, a glacier near Skagway, AL started to retreat during WWII and continues to this day."

This referenced comment appears powerful, but it is conceptually confused. The glacier's retreat actually supports the opposite argument: that warming trends continue, but the commenter uses this to demonstrate that media predictions are unreliable. The comment is also being used to present science as something that is always changing and contradicting itself.

These examples show that loyalty to a community of distrust is more important than the critical analysis of scientific facts. This loyalty is towards those who resist elite narratives by remaining unfooled and uncoerced. In this sense, history is not being remembered; it is being repurposed.

12.4 Framing, Elitism, and the Agenda Problem

Framing was discussed in Section 10.4 and is further applied here. Frames do not simply transmit facts — they shape what those facts mean. Drawing also from the chapters on storytelling (chapters 1-3), we can see how framing determines who is the hero and who is the villain, and what emotional or moral response is expected from the audience. Most readers of the Fox News article were not responding to the scientific content itself, but to the perceived framing of the message: that climate change is urgent and must be addressed through a specific ideological pathway. There was a perception that solutions were being imposed, and this triggered reactions of disagreement and resentment.

A recurring sentiment in the comment section was that Sanders' article did not offer a fair or practical discussion of how to respond to climate change, but instead advanced a predetermined political programme. As one commenter put it:

"If climate change is real why not have discussions on how to deal with it? The message seems to be 'we need to address climate change by following our agenda.' Sorry, but that approach is making things more difficult for the average person and doing so unnecessarily. It is really about the agenda and not climate change at all."

This comment demonstrates a particular challenge in science communication: when solutions to a problem are framed in ways that are ideologically inflexible or socially costly, it is not only the solutions themselves that are rejected, but the legitimacy of the problem itself. The issue is no longer epistemological, but moral and relational. Climate change has come to represent a kind of elite-imposition, and many people are not willing to change their way of life for a cause that appears remote, abstract, or politicised.

Another commenter wrote:

"Bernie is a typical socialist. He focuses on the problem and not the solutions. He devotes only one sentence of this essay to solutions and they are inadequate."

This critique focuses on narrative balance. The speaker says they want a practical and constructive discussion, but instead, they see what they think is moralising and catastrophism. Calling someone a "typical socialist" is used as a quick way to suggest utopian thinking or ideological blindness. Even if Sanders had shared detailed proposals, he probably would have been dismissed in this context because of his identity.

These responses are indicative of a broader communication failure. If scientific messages are closely linked to progressive political identities, they can end up excluding people instead of welcoming them. This represents a fundamental misunderstanding of how science communication works. As Davies and Horst (2016) point out, effective science communication is more than just the transmission of knowledge — there also needs to be an understanding of how knowledge is embedded in social relationships, and how those relationships are marked by power, trust, and cultural memory.

12.5 Alienation and the Failure of Science Popularisers

Looking at science popularisation more generally, it is unreasonable to expect science popularisers to be trusted by audiences whose cultural or religious identities they routinely belittle. This is not an incidental problem — it is central to the persistent lack of engagement with climate science across ideological lines. Yet rather than reflecting on their own cultural positioning, many science popularisers attribute the lack of uptake to a deficit in the audience. However, this view implicitly reinforces the identity divide, portraying popularisers as informed and rational, and their audience as unprepared or unworthy. In doing so, it undermines science communication as a form of public engagement by deepening the cultural gap.

This phenomenon echoes what Michael Sandel (2020, p. 5) has described as the rhetoric of meritocracy — a cultural posture in which technical knowledge and elite credentials are presented as markers of moral or intellectual superiority. This was demonstrated clearly in the college admissions scandal in the United States. Wealthy families were exposed for buying their way into elite universities, and this became an example of how credentials are more symbols of status and hierarchy than indicators of achievement. Once the scandal was exposed, resentment was directed towards the elite classes and inherited privilege. When science is embedded in this same posture, it ceases to function as a public good and becomes a marker of social hierarchy. Climate action,

when framed by this discourse, becomes not a collective challenge, but a means of moral signalling.

The Fox News comment section illustrates this alienation clearly. Even when Sanders makes a rational, fact-based appeal, many readers interpret it as a form of condescension, another example of elites dictating values and policy to people who have not been invited to the conversation. This shows how many people perceive expertise as disconnected from their lived reality, and they therefore reject expert knowledge. (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 10).

Science popularisers who hope to reach broader audiences must first understand that their perceived posture matters. Trust in science is built on perceived warmth and respect, rather than simply competence. For many disaffected audiences, the problem is not that science is wrong, but that it appears uncaring, moralising, or superior. Overcoming this requires a rethinking of presentation and posture, one that involves cultural humility. The failure to adopt this shift has left many people alienated from science, not because they reject reason, but because they feel reason is being wielded against them.

12.6 Implications for Science Communication

Popularisers must be willing to rebuild trust and engage with audiences who may not share their cultural or political assumptions. Differences do not need to be immediately framed as deficits. This requires a kind of cultural literacy that is often

underdeveloped in scientific and secular communities: the ability to speak across worldviews without erasing or ridiculing them.

A promising solution may be found in narrative-based communication, which emphasises shared values and lived experience rather than authority. (Dahlstrom, 2014; Davies & Horst, 2016). By acknowledging their audiences — their fears, traditions, and moral frameworks — communicators are more likely to establish common ground from which scientific understanding can grow. This is not diluting the science, but rather recognising that there are contexts that do not threaten the identities of the listeners.

Another important consideration is institutional reflexivity. Organisations that promote science need to be willing to look inward and ask how they might contribute to exclusion, whether by favouring certain cultural stories, sidelining less privileged voices, or holding too narrow a view of what counts as rationality or expertise. As Ahmed (2012) states, institutions often go beyond the distribution of knowledge and often unintentionally reproduce power relations.

In this context, humility becomes not a weakness but a strength. A key part of genuine engagement is recognising limitations and being willing to learn from communities that have often been marginalised or overlooked. Science popularisers who adopt this approach may find that trust is not automatically granted, but it can be earned over time. The lessons of this chapter are that audience identity needs to be understood and respected, rather than treated as an obstacle to be overcome. This can lead to a more relational and culturally attentive approach to science popularisation.

12.7 Lessons from Health Communication

If science popularisation continues to struggle with identity positioning, medicine offers a compelling example of how a science-based field can evolve to respect, accommodate, and even centre cultural identity in the delivery of its messages. While both disciplines rely on evidence-based practice and rational deliberation, only one, medicine, has institutionalised a serious effort to understand and work within the values, beliefs, and lived experiences of diverse audiences. However, it is noted that when medical knowledge is translated into healthcare communication, similar ideological issues emerge, which will be discussed later in this section.

In contemporary clinical practice, it would be inconceivable to tell a patient that "medicine doesn't care what you believe." While medicine has a theoretical basis in science, such a statement would still fail from both an ethical and a practical perspective. Firstly, this approach overlooks the placebo and nocebo effects. Belief can significantly affect treatment outcomes, particularly in the areas of pain and anxiety, but also in more general symptom management. Dismissing a patient's concerns because they are not 'scientific' would be a violation of the ethical and professional norms of medicine. As a medical doctor with clinical experience, I have seen how effective care requires caring for the human being rather than the condition, taking into account the patient's lifestyle, belief systems, and complex identities. Listening is as important as speaking, and

communication is not simply about providing medical evidence, but involves a two-way discussion of the patient's needs and preferences.

This is particularly evident in the structure and culture of modern hospitals. For example, in the birthing unit at Royal North Shore Hospital in Sydney, the word “welcome” appears in more than 20 languages. This shows that the hospital values cultural and language diversity. Interpreters are available for non-English-speaking patients. Indigenous liaison officers support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. Maternity care pathways include options that incorporate family, spiritual, or traditional practices. Spiritual services are routinely offered in hospitals, particularly in palliative care and at the time of death, and the patient’s religious affiliation is formally recorded in their medical information. These gestures are not just symbolic. They show that culture and belief are essential components of effective care.

This commitment to culturally sensitive communication is also reflected in medical education. Australian medical students receive training in a variety of cultural competence modules, as well as in indigenous health and religious considerations. The aim is to develop culturally aware doctors who can deliver more holistic healthcare. Of course, in the real world, medicine is not practised perfectly. Like all systems, medicine involves fallibility, bias, and time constraints. However, the key point is that cultural humility is embedded within the institutional framework and is an explicit part of what good care is supposed to look like.

The contrast with the popularisation of science is stark. While academic science communication is a serious field where identities and worldviews are recognised as

central to public engagement (Davies & Horst, 2016), many science popularisers appear not to be trained in this field. They instead rely on intuition, personal charisma, or rhetorical force and do not ground their strategies in science communication theory. They therefore do not use the tools that could help them deliver their messages more effectively. Moreover, popularisers continue to position science as epistemically neutral, while describing religious or cultural perspectives as obstacles to be overcome. Audiences who are religious, politically conservative, or from non-academic backgrounds are frequently described in deficit terms — uninformed, irrational, or anti-science. It is the audience who has the responsibility to adapt, since the populariser is a neutral bearer of truth.

It is essential to recognise the distinction in the evaluation of communicative practice between the fields. In medicine, if a patient does not follow advice, the clinician is encouraged to reflect: Was the plan explained clearly? Was trust established? Were the patient's cultural or religious values understood? In science popularisation, however, any resistance from the audience is often used as evidence of their inferiority, or rather, the moral and intellectual superiority of the communicator. The idea that scientific messages might fail because they disregard identity is rarely entertained.

Yet the stakes are comparable. Climate action, like medical treatment, depends not only on the dissemination of evidence but on changes in behaviour, belief, and trust. In both domains, success hinges on the communicator's ability to enter the world of the listener. Medicine has acknowledged this, albeit imperfectly, through reform of curriculum and institutional policies. They have also implemented shared-decision-making models, a recommendation that has been made in science communication theory. Science

popularisation, by contrast, often continues to frame cultural accommodation as a concession, rather than a necessity. While it is widely accepted in healthcare that the relationship between practitioner and patient is central to the healing process, the assumption in science popularisation is that science is culturally neutral.

Medicine also offers a model of humility, again, not always perfectly practised but increasingly so. Patients are not seen as passive recipients of expertise, but rather as co-authors of their care plans. Shared decision-making is increasingly being seen as best practice, so treatment must be negotiated in light of the patient's values, beliefs, and priorities (Elwyn et al., 2012). Science popularisation lacks a parallel ethic. The populariser's role is not collaborative, it is explanatory. But without moral respect and epistemic humility, no amount of explanation will produce trust.

It is perhaps unfair to compare the practice of medicine with science popularisation. It would be more appropriate to compare science popularisation with health communication more generally, and the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated how the latter can fail miserably across ideological divides. Even more stark is the current health advice being disseminated by Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who, as a mouthpiece for Donald Trump and right-wing politics, promotes medical information—particularly regarding vaccines—that contradicts current medical guidance. Health communication in Australia is more measured, and COVID-19 divides were less pronounced, but strong ideological identities still existed. The point is that the practice of medicine has historically translated well into effective health communication, and that the institution of medicine itself offers a potential

model for better communication, embedded within its practices and ongoing efforts at improvement.

It is not inevitable that science popularisation should fail across cultural divides, but there needs to be a change in professional assumptions and rhetorical habits. Medicine has shown that it is possible to integrate scientific rigour with cultural sensitivity, and that doing so improves both uptake and outcomes. Science popularisers are not being encouraged to dilute their message, but to deliver it with greater cultural sensitivity and increased awareness of how identity influences its reception. In short, they must learn to speak as people to people, rather than as neutral arbiters of truth to a flawed public.

Returning to the themes of this chapter, we can now see more clearly that identity resistance in climate communication is not simply a cognitive or ideological failure. It is often a relational rupture, produced when messengers refuse to see the audience as morally or culturally worthy of accommodation, just as we have seen in the rhetoric of prominent New Atheists. Medicine, by necessity, is learning to repair these ruptures. If science popularisers are to be trusted by those outside their own echo chambers, they must begin to do the same.

12.8 New Atheists and the Deepening of Identity Divides

This chapter began with an analysis of moderate voices in climate change communication demonstrating how even measured tones supported by facts can still lead to rejection of the message when faced with strong ideological opposition. The conversation then turned to science popularisers, who play a key role in sharing scientific knowledge but sometimes take a more confrontational approach with their audience. The New Atheists go even further, using science not just for communication but as a tool in wider cultural and existential debates. Their communication style is centred around confrontation rather than disseminating information, particularly when religious or traditional moral frameworks are in the firing line. New Atheists not only support evolution, cosmology, and neuroscience, but also present these fields as replacements for religion in terms of knowledge and morals. In doing so, they describe science as a rational and superior worldview standing in opposition to faith. Religious or conservative audiences are therefore directly positioned as opponents to their message.

Where science popularisers like Carl Sagan or Brian Cox might invoke awe, New Atheists invoke antagonism. This type of framing goes far beyond science communication; it becomes a cultural provocation. As a result, messages that may contain valid scientific insights are rejected not on the basis of their content, but because of the hostility with which they are delivered. By linking scientific agreement with religious renunciation, New

Atheists routinely activate defences. Even when such messages are logically sound, they are interpreted as existential threats rather than intellectual claims.

This argument is not a defence of scientific ignorance. It is a recognition that the style and intent of communication matter. We need to ensure that science does not become entangled with the narrative of cultural superiority, which is exactly what it does when presented as a civilisational struggle against backwardness or superstition. The effect is not increased scientific understanding, but rather deepened polarisation. All forms of science communication need to disentangle themselves from confrontation so that science can be taken seriously across ideological and cultural divides. While New Atheism, in its current form, often galvanises in-group solidarity among the secular, it does so at the cost of alienating others from the scientific enterprise itself.

Chapter 13: The Limits of Rational Persuasion — Free Will, Determinism, and the Ethics of Scientific Discourse

13.1 Freedom as a Fault Line

At the intersection of science, ethics, and metaphysics lies the concept of free will. It is a concept that has long been foundational to moral responsibility, legal accountability, and theological explanations of suffering. It describes the idea that humans are autonomous agents capable of choosing between alternatives, and it justifies divine goodness in the face of evil. Despite the concept of free will appearing self-evident, it has been subject to sustained critique from both the cognitive sciences and the philosophy of mind. The denial of free will is often a scientific conclusion, but for figures such as Sam Harris and others within the neoatheist movement, it also becomes an essential component in the intellectual dismantling of religion and moral illusion. From this position, it becomes viewed as a psychological artefact of a species slow to abandon comforting fictions.

This chapter examines its implications, arguing that the free will debate represents one of the most consequential limit cases for the rationalist project. While previous chapters have examined how science popularisers often overestimate the persuasive power of rational argument in matters of identity and belief, this chapter shifts focus to the

philosophical and ethical consequences of presenting determinism as an empirical truth. Unlike broader issues of science denialism or public misunderstanding, this is a case in which the rationalist claim may be intellectually compelling yet existentially corrosive. There is a growing body of evidence that shows when people start to disbelieve in free will, they may become more dishonest and less empathetic. The Enlightenment assumption that scientific truth and moral progress are always aligned is therefore challenged by these studies.

Of all the New Atheists, Sam Harris targets free will most explicitly. In his 2012 book, *Free Will*, he describes free will as being incoherent and scientifically indefensible. This position has been further advanced by Robert Sapolsky in recent years. In *Determined* (2023), he argues that free will is an illusion and that the denial of free will can have significant implications for criminal justice, ethics, and the broader concept of moral praise or blame. Although he admits that living life without the illusion of free will is not easy, he still insists on its abandonment, and that this will lead to a more humane world.

At the same time, the debate over free will has long played a critical role in theological reasoning, particularly as a defence against the problem of evil. In many Christian traditions, the idea that suffering entered the world because humans freely chose to disobey God (often called the Fall) is central. The undermining of free will raises questions about one of the central defences of divine justice. However, the removal of agency creates a paradox — while one aspect of religion, relating to suffering and evil, is undermined, the deterministic vision of cosmic order and predestination is reaffirmed.

Free will thus remains a pivotal boundary concept, shaping both our understanding of moral responsibility and the wider dialogue between science and theology.

The sections that follow explore this tension in five parts. First, the scientific history of determinism is explored through the lenses of physicalism, neuroscience, and evolutionary psychology. Second, recent experimental work on the behavioural consequences of free-will disbelief is examined. Third, an examination of how freedom remains essential for ethical and psychological coherence, given the narrative structure of moral agency. Fourth, the chapter returns to the problem of rational persuasion, using determinism as a test case for how truth claims can produce destabilising effects. Finally, different narrative-based approaches are examined, including compatibilism and emergentism, and how these approaches have tried to reconcile human agency with naturalistic worldviews.

This chapter reiterates that scientific truth can become a source of epistemic harm, particularly when it is detached from its narrative and moral context. This is what can happen when the free will debate is placed within the broader examination of rational persuasion. The scientific rejection of freedom may result in greater internal coherence, but rationalism alone may struggle to account for its narrative consequences.

13.2 The Scientific Assault on Free Will

The debate over human agency dates back to antiquity. *Oedipus Rex* dramatised the struggle between destiny and human choice, and Aristotle's work on ethics showed that moral accountability has long stood at the centre of philosophical reflection. Today, critics often rely on physicalism, neuroscience, and evolutionary psychology to support their arguments. Much of this discussion is based on the principle of causal closure, which says that every physical event has a physical cause and nothing non-physical causes physical events. According to this view, there is no room for metaphysical freedom or uncaused choices, since all human behaviour is fully explained by prior physical causes.

Sam Harris presents perhaps the strongest argument within the neoatheist movement. In *Free Will* (2012), he argues that the belief in personal agency is not only scientifically untenable but also ethically misleading. He argues that human thoughts and actions are determined entirely by neurobiological and environmental processes beyond our control. "Free will is an illusion. Our wills are simply not of our own making" (Harris, 2012, p. 5). Harris argues that abandoning the belief in free will could lead to the rejection of retributive justice, and this in turn would allow society to adopt a more compassionate and rational approach to morality.

The widely-cited experiments from the 1980s by Benjamin Libet have always been controversial, and Harries uses evidence from these studies. In these studies, participants

were instructed to flex their wrist whenever they chose while watching a special clock. Libet measured the onset of electrical activity in the motor cortex, known as the readiness potential, and compared it to when participants reported becoming aware of deciding to move. The readiness potential began about 350 milliseconds before people reported their conscious intention (Libet et al., 1983). Harris and others argue that the results of these experiments undermine the concept of free will, as the aforementioned gap suggests that the brain initiates actions before the conscious mind becomes aware.

Still, there is considerable debate about what these findings mean for philosophy. Some critics, like Mele (2009, pp. 21–48), say that Libet's experiments do not measure important decisions that are linked to agency, but only simple, unimportant impulses. Libet never actually claimed that his experiments disproved the existence of free will. What he did suggest was something rather intriguing: that we might have a kind of conscious veto, sometimes called 'free won't,' which allows us to stop ourselves from carrying out an action, even if the process has already begun. In other words, while an action may be started by our unconscious mind, it may be our conscious mind that decides whether or not to go through with it. So Libet's work did not settle the free will debate, but rather led to more questions about what neuroscience can tell us in relation to causation and voluntary action.

Though he does not spend a lot of time arguing the existence of free will, Richard Dawkins nonetheless contributes to a deterministic worldview through his discussions on genetic evolution. In *The Selfish Gene* (2016), he describes human beings as "lumbering

robots" programmed to serve the reproductive success of their genes (p. 25). The implication here is that human behaviour is shaped by evolutionary pressures alone rather than by personal choice. Unlike Harris, however, Dawkins does not systematically engage with the metaphysical or ethical implications of this view. He remains suggestive and does not attempt to develop the ideas, but often draws conclusions from those who have.

Neurobiologist Robert Sapolsky offers one of the strongest scientific challenges to the idea of free will. In *Determined* (2023), he traces human choices to layers of biology and environment, suggesting that what we call decision-making may simply reflect the workings of these underlying forces. These factors include hormones, brain circuitry, genetics, and social context. His determinism is unapologetic. "We are nothing more or less than the cumulative biological and environmental luck, over which we had no control, that has brought us to any moment" (Sapolsky, 2023, p. 4). Like Sam Harris, he also wants society to move away from moral blame, arguing that this would help create a more compassionate and rational legal system. However, Sapolsky takes a different approach. While Harris sees the loss of free will as a chance for personal moral growth, Sapolsky does not offer any existential comfort. He rejects compatibilist views as intellectually dishonest and argues that if concepts such as moral responsibility, guilt, and punishment rely on genuine agency, they need to be reconsidered. As he remarks, "a lot of these compatibilists are actually saying that there has to be free will because it would be a total downer otherwise, doing contortions to make an emotional stance seem like an intellectual one" (Sapolsky, 2023, p. 386).

Sapolsky's argument is thorough and well-reasoned, but it brings up some important challenges. If all human actions are determined, then on what basis can we evaluate accountability and agency? Sapolsky suggests that we could use ethical frameworks based on compassion and understanding, but it is unclear what would support these norms. Given that free will and human agency are so self-evident, and that this self-evidence has shaped society's understanding of human accountability, it is difficult to imagine how society could find motivation for responsibility without them.

The above arguments do not state that determinism is necessarily false, but there are still broader implications when considering the communication of this position. It is not simply a rational claim about human nature; it also acts as a philosophical intervention, challenging long-standing assumptions about personhood, freedom, and justice. It is therefore necessary to study what happens when people begin to deny agency as a guiding worldview — how it affects their individual behaviour and state of mind, and how it shapes the behaviour of society as a whole.

13.3 The Behavioural Cost of Disbelieving in Free Will

The real-world implications of rejecting free will and agency are ethically and psychologically complex. In this section, we transition from theory to research, examining whether belief in agency is not only a philosophical concept but also a stabilising force in both personal and social moral life.

There have been experimental studies that have demonstrated a possible connection between ethical behaviour and belief in free will. A Vohs and Schooler (2008) study showed that participants were more likely to cheat on a set of tasks if they were experimentally induced to question free will. This shows that an exposure to deterministic ideas, even if short or fleeting, can change people's ethical behaviour. In another study, Baumeister et al. (2009) reported increased aggression and reduced willingness to help others as a result of this disbelief. These results lead to early optimism of a correlation between free will belief and the maintenance of social norms. The effects may have been modest, but they were consistent across multiple methodologies. Recent meta-analyses show that anti–free-will manipulations tend to lower belief in free will ($g = –0.29$) and raise belief in determinism ($g = +0.17$). However, their effects on behaviour are inconsistent when small-sample effects and publication bias are considered (Genschow et al., 2021). The behavioural consequences of free-will disbelief remain contested, but are perhaps more subtle than initially proposed.

As the mixed results of this research indicate, there are no consistent, measurable behavioural changes produced by disbelief in free will, at least not in experimental contexts. Yet the absence of uniform effects does not mean the issue is normatively trivial. Certain communities may be more vulnerable to disbelief, especially those that ground moral responsibility in free will. If such beliefs erode, these communities may be more vulnerable to destabilisation. And even if the effects are modest at an individual level, there may be an encouragement of outlier behaviours in individuals who are no longer embedded within morally reinforcing institutions. This raises concerns that, despite the

lack of evidence for short-term individual outcomes, there may still be more long-term societal consequences. The logic of rational persuasion assumes that truth is inherently valuable and that people should be disabused of comforting illusions, regardless of the cost. But in the case of free will, the cost may be precisely the erosion of the motivational structures that sustain ethical life. As Shariff et al. (2014) have shown, disbelief in free will reduces people's support for retributive punishment, even while leaving consequentialist approaches intact. This suggests that widespread disbelief in free will could trigger profound shifts in our legal and moral frameworks. But if all were being honest, there is no way of knowing whether or not such a realignment would result in a more humane system or destabilise the foundations of social order. This remains an open and unsettling question.

Some researchers suggest that belief in free will serves an important psychological purpose, even if it lacks firm metaphysical grounding. In his early compatibilist work, Dennett (1984) described free will not as an escape from causality, but as a set of human capacities—freedom, foresight, and deliberation—that make responsible action possible. From this perspective, agency may not be a mysterious force standing outside causal chains, yet it remains essential for navigating life in meaningful ways. Baumeister (2008) similarly argues that belief in free will supports self-control, long-term goals, and moral behaviour by allowing people to see themselves as responsible agents within social life. Similarly, Nahmias et al. (2007) found that many people have intuitions that match compatibilism. They distinguish between determinism and coercion, and believe that people remain responsible if their actions come from their own desires instead of outside

pressure. These insights challenge the view that only metaphysically libertarian free will is important in terms of ethics. They also suggest that dismantling belief in human agency is not as psychologically neutral as some scientific determinists assume. While the metaphysical question remains open, the evidence increasingly points to the practical importance of free will—for ethics, mental health, and civic life. In this light, belief in agency may be less an illusion to abandon than a necessary framework for human meaning and moral responsibility.

The above arguments demonstrate that the belief in free will is prevalent across both cultures and developmental stages. This suggests that these beliefs may not be simply reducible to pragmatic utility, but rather they appear to be a deep-seated feature of human cognition. Developmental studies indicate that by around age four, children can distinguish between constrained and unconstrained actions, and by six, they begin to endorse the idea that agents can "do otherwise," even against their own desires (Kushnir et al., 2015). Nichols (2004) likewise argues that our sense of moral judgment grows out of both emotional and cognitive mechanisms that naturally lead us to see human behaviour in terms of agency and responsibility. So it is important that this is not considered to be simply a philosophical stance — rejecting free will challenges the fundamental ways our minds make sense of human action. However, Roskies (2006) argues that worries about neuroscience undermining our notions of freedom are misplaced, since responsibility judgments have proven resilient to such challenges. If determinist arguments are to gain wider acceptance, they cannot simply remain surface-level arguments about ideology.

They will need to engage with the deep cognitive and developmental foundations that support belief in free will.

There is a deep dilemma here for science popularisers and New Atheists who are committed to promoting scientific naturalism. The communication of deterministic ideas is likely to have psychological and ethical implications, and therefore, it must be handled with sensitivity. This is to ensure that while religious and metaphysical beliefs are being challenged, there is no hindrance to human flourishing as a result. The denial of free will may be logically consistent within a naturalistic framework, but this does not entail that it should be presented without regard to how it will be received and interpreted. Rational persuasion is never neutral, especially when it challenges deeply held beliefs. These issues will be addressed later in the chapter, where the strategic choices of science popularisers and the role of narrative in communicating disruptive ideas will be examined more closely.

13.4 The Last Theist Refuge: Why Free Will Matters to Religious Belief

Free will is vitally important in many theistic traditions. It often serves as an important doctrinal foundation that forms a bridge between the divine and human moral responsibility. If free will exists, then the cosmos can be coherent, despite the existence of evil being overseen by a just God. In Christian theology, for example, it is difficult to make sense of sin and salvation without human agency. Therefore, attacks on free will are often seen as direct threats to religious belief. The undermining of free will often functions strategically, as a way of eroding one of religion's remaining defensible positions.

One of the clearest philosophical articulations of the theological significance of free will is found in Alvin Plantinga's response to the logical problem of evil. While not intended as a defence of theism against scientific determinism, Plantinga's free will defence demonstrates the explanatory role that human freedom plays in reconciling divine omnipotence with the existence of moral evil. "To create creatures capable of moral good," he writes, "God must create creatures capable of moral evil" (Plantinga, 1974/1992, p. 167). In this account, the existence of suffering is a necessary product of meaningful moral agency, and does disprove the existence of a good God. There is no ontological grounding here, but the moral coherence of theism is addressed, showing how religious commitments are often underpinned by free will.

The neoatheist critique targets the concept of free will at a deeper level and generally bypasses the moral-theological defence. If human behaviour can be explained fully by physical causes and evolutionary conditioning, then God becomes totally unnecessary. Humans are no longer morally accountable souls, but causally determined organisms. There is no longer any need for God as a moral judge, and free will does not need to be questioned on ethical grounds — it is rendered superfluous within a fully naturalistic worldview.

Discussions of free will did not start with modern science. It is therefore useful to consider earlier theological and philosophical ideas. In Western Christianity, free will is seen as an important part of moral responsibility and salvation. In the late fourth century,

Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo, taught that people are responsible for their own sins but also depend on divine grace for redemption. In *On Free Choice of the Will*, he writes: "The very fact that anyone who uses free will to sin is divinely punished shows that free will was given to enable human beings to live rightly, for such punishment would be unjust if free will had been given both for living rightly and for sinning" (Augustine, 1993/388–395, p. 30). Centuries later, Calvin's doctrine of predestination rejected the idea that people could earn salvation through their choices, emphasising instead divine election (Calvin, 1960/1559, II.2.8, p. 296). The debates persisted, even among Calvinists, over how there could be coexistence between divine control and human responsibility. Many turned to positions that were compatibilist. These positions describe actions as being free when they are an expression of the person's inner desires, even though these desires could be shaped by God.

Forms of determinism, especially those promoted by Harris and Sapolsky, share more in common with these theological doctrines than is usually acknowledged. Hard determinism, which is the idea that all human actions are caused and therefore not free, is similar in important ways to predestinarian theology. This theology teaches that moral outcomes are set in advance by divine will. In both systems, the individual is not the primary cause of their actions, and moral outcomes are predetermined by antecedent conditions — whether natural or divine. Rather than a total departure from theological thinking, we can still see its influence. This link becomes even more obvious in early modern metaphysical determinism. Spinoza, though a secular philosopher, articulated a monistic system in which everything — including human decisions — followed

necessarily from the nature of God or Nature. “Men are deceived in thinking themselves free,” he wrote, “and this opinion consists in the fact that they are conscious of their actions and ignorant of the causes by which they are determined” (*Ethics*, IIp35s; Spinoza, 2022/1677). Harris reaches a similar conclusion in the name of scientific progress, but he does not recognise its deep historical roots. This is not hypocritical, but it is important from a philosophical point of view. Denying free will may try to free us from religious illusions, but it can also bring back the same fatalism found in some religious systems.

It is often overlooked that these new scientific discoveries underpinning a deterministic worldview promote similar ethical outcomes as longstanding religious beliefs. These outcomes include less blame, more compassion, and focus on reform. Christianity has long taught the importance of holding back from judging others. For example, the Bible says, “Judge not, lest ye be judged” (Matthew 7:1), “Let he who is without sin cast the first stone” (John 8:7), and “Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). These are not minor feelings, but key moral principles of a worldview that neoatheist discourse often labels as morally backward. The irony is that scientific determinism not only reflects theological fatalism, it also repeats the main ethical stance of religion while claiming to move beyond it. That this reintroduction comes cloaked in the language of brain science and behavioural psychology, rather than theology, makes the rhetorical borrowing all the more striking. This tension — the disavowal of religion alongside the rediscovery of its most humanising values — will be explored further in a subsequent section.

13.5 The Contestability of Determinism

Although Harris and Sapolsky speak confidently against free will, the scientific and philosophical basis for determinism is still widely debated. Assumptions that the universe operates under strict causal laws underpin all arguments that suggest human will is an illusion. Yet this view of causality, inherited from classical physics, has been fundamentally challenged — not only by developments in quantum mechanics, but also by general relativity, where singularities such as black holes and the hypothesised Big Crunch pose challenges to the extension of physical law to all regimes. The ongoing debates in physics are reflected in the continuing uncertainties within the philosophy of mind. Any claims that determinism is an absolute scientific fact do not hold up when subject to closer examination. It may be a convincing argument, but its supporters are far too certain of its implications.

From a scientific standpoint, quantum theory has undermined the strict determinism of the Newtonian worldview. At the subatomic level, events are not fully determined by prior states; they exhibit probabilistic behaviour governed by wave functions and the principle of uncertainty. While interpretations of quantum mechanics vary — ranging from the indeterminism of the Copenhagen interpretation to the apparent determinism of the Many-Worlds interpretation — none straightforwardly restores the mechanical certainty of classical physics. Although quantum effects may not directly influence macroscopic brain processes in any obvious way, their existence challenges the claim that all natural systems are fundamentally deterministic.

In response to this line of argument, Robert Sapolsky has publicly downplayed the relevance of quantum indeterminacy to human behaviour. During an interview with Robert Wright, Sapolsky stated that the quantum randomness that exists in the subatomic world does not "bubble up" to become meaningful when describing the gross neurological and cognitive processes associated with human choice. He argues that if someone uses quantum randomness to defend free will, then they are just “desperately clutching” at an illusion (Sapolsky & Wright, 2023). However, this view raises a philosophical issue: if quantum mechanics is considered the basis of physics, its implications should not be ignored when they are inconvenient. It is true that indeterminism is not supported by all interpretations of quantum theory; for example, in the Many-Worlds interpretation, there is full determinism, and observed probabilities are treated as epistemic uncertainties within branching universes. But this only sharpens the issue. If indeterminacy is real, then it either matters all the way up or it doesn't. If it does matter all the way up, then strict causal narratives are destabilised. If it doesn't, then purely physical grounds are unable to defend determinism. The determinist cannot have it both ways.

This issue is further highlighted by the apparent lengths to which physicists will go to preserve a deterministic framework. The Many Worlds Interpretation (MWI), for example, describes all possible outcomes of quantum events as being realised in branching parallel universes. This restores causal continuity without collapsing the wave function. While elegant in its formalism, MWI comes at an extraordinary metaphysical cost. Although the MWI is often defended on the grounds of internal coherence (Wallace, 2012)

this seems to be at the expense of economy, since the theory of 'infinitely multiplying worlds' appears ontologically extravagant. If avoiding indeterminacy requires adopting a theory with near-infinite branching realities, it undermines the argument that determinism is the more rational, simpler, or more self-evident view. In these cases, the commitment to determinism appears to be a metaphysical preference rather than an empirical necessity, and this is maintained despite, rather than because of, observational constraints.

Even apart from quantum mechanical interpretations, determinism is often not a scientific discovery but rather a metaphysical assumption embedded in certain models of explanation. As Earman (1986) observes, Newtonian physics is often imagined as a paradigm of determinism, yet "Newtonian worlds provide environments that are quite hostile to determinism" and require artificial assumptions to appear deterministic at all (pp. 1–2). More recently, Ladyman and Ross (2007) emphasise that models should not be taken as literal descriptions of reality, since they are often idealised or incomplete (p. 1). Determinism often functions more as a background philosophical stance that is woven into explanatory conditions, rather than a verified feature of reality. So when scientific popularisers present determinism as a truth that has been established, they are confusing methodological usefulness with ontological finality. This obscures the degree of uncertainty that is present even within the foundations of physics.

The history of science is full of examples where premature confidence in scientific applications has led to disastrous consequences. In the nineteenth century, skull shape and facial features were used within the fields of phrenology and physiognomy to offer

objective scientific measures of intelligence, criminality or morality. These theories are now discredited, but in the past they influenced hiring decisions, educational tracking, and even supported colonial justifications.(Gould, 1981/2006, pp. 105–140). There was also the rise of eugenics as a scientific movement in the early twentieth century, with major figures such as Francis Galton and Charles Davenport promoting sterilisation and racial segregation in the name of genetic 'improvement'. Across the United States, Canada and Europe, these policies had the significant backing of the scientific community (Kevles, 1985/1995, p. 169). Even within mainstream psychology, concepts such as agency and moral judgement were marginalised. This was under the assumption that all human behaviour could be explained by conditioning (Skinner, 1953). These cases show that even well-accepted scientific ideas can lead to moral mistakes. They highlight why we should be careful when pushing for big changes based on ideas that are still being debated by philosophers and scientists.

Alongside the more troubling historical misapplications of science, there are also instructive examples of theories that proved immensely useful yet did not correspond closely to the underlying structure of reality. An example of this is the Bohr model of the atom. While this model was extremely useful for balancing chemical equations and predicting spectral lines, the planetary model of electrons orbiting the atom was later replaced by the quantum mechanical model, in which electrons are described as probability clouds. Similarly, while Newtonian physics continues to provide accurate calculations in engineering and astronomy, its assumptions about space, time, and gravitational forces have been superseded by relativity. In both cases, comprehensive

accounts of reality became relegated to limiting cases within a broader framework. Deterministic views of human behaviour may one day occupy a similar position, valuable within specific explanatory contexts, yet ultimately provisional, awaiting integration into more fundamental accounts of nature and agency.

So to insist that free will is nullified by determinism is to potentially overstate the science. This also risks significant misjudgement, both intellectually and socially. Even if determinism is ultimately vindicated, there are implications for ethics, law and identity that require careful consideration and not simple mechanical application. Without a resolution of the metaphysical and scientific debates, determinism cannot be used as a foundational part of science. If it attempts to influence institutional or moral reform, it risks inviting the very dogmatism that it seeks to overcome. What is needed is not the abolition of reason, but its recalibration in light of uncertainty.

13.6 The Evolutionary Irony of Neoatheist Determinism

New Atheists often use evolutionary biology as part of their explanatory framework. Richard Dawkins, as mentioned previously, has made evolution the centrepiece of his naturalistic worldview, famously describing human beings as "lumbering robots" programmed by selfish genes (Dawkins, 2016, p. 25). Sam Harris takes a similar position, arguing that evolution and neurobiology can explain consciousness and morality. Yet despite their reliance on evolutionary theory, both thinkers reject a crucial

implication of its logic: that beliefs and behaviours that persist over time may have done so because they conferred adaptive advantages. So free will, even though it is an almost universal intuition, still gets treated as a psychological illusion to be proven false, rather than as an evolved trait with important functions. It celebrates evolutionary explanation while dismissing one of its most socially and ethically consequential outcomes.

So if evolution is a powerful filter for adaptive traits, why should belief in free will be an exception? These beliefs have persisted across all cultures and time periods as near-universal features of human life. They are not only embedded in our legal and ethical systems, but also in everyday decision-making and interpersonal relationships. They are functional in the sense that they contributed to social cohesion and the enforcement of norms, so to dismiss them as illusions is to apply selective evolutionary reasoning.

The same argument may be extended to religious belief itself. While Dawkins (2006) characterises religion as a maladaptive meme — a by-product of cognitive tendencies like hyperactive agency detection (p. 200) — this view underestimates the potential adaptive role of shared religious narratives in fostering group cohesion, trust, and prosocial behaviour (Wilson, 2010, p. 143; Norenzayan, 2013, p. 11). Just as belief in free will may serve to reinforce moral restraint and social order, belief in a higher moral authority or transcendent purpose may stabilise group dynamics and enhance cooperation. From an evolutionary perspective, these traits probably would not have lasted if they offered no advantage. Therefore, rejecting both free will and religion does not only operate as a

metaphysical critique; it also acts as a deliberate rejection of evolved psychological structures. Removing these could have important social and ethical consequences.

Neoatheist determinists now begin to reintroduce the moral teachings of the religions that they reject, which leads to a deepening irony. Harris argues, as discussed earlier, that abandoning the concept of free will can lead to greater compassion and less moral condemnation. Following this abandonment to its logical conclusion, we may find something that is indistinguishable from the Christian teachings of "judge not" or "forgive them, for they know not what they do". These teachings are now re-emerging under the guise of neuroscience, with the suggestion that they represent a radical innovation, but are actually just repackaged and stripped of their theological scaffolding. So agency is denied, but the ethical beliefs of religion are repurposed. The moral outcomes of religious culture are reclaimed without any acknowledgement of their origins.

The neoatheist position is weakened here through the selective application of Darwinian principles. Certain aspects of the human condition are accepted as valid outcomes of natural selection, whereas others are dismissed as aberrations that must be eliminated. But dismissing them as illusions may be maladaptive, especially when considering that these traits have persisted across cultures and eras, shaping the very capacity for cooperation that underpins civilisations.

13.7 The Failure of Rational Persuasion: Identity, Bias, and the Limits of Scientific Discourse

Much of this chapter has already shown that determinism is not only scientifically and philosophically contested, but that arguments against free will often fail to persuade. Previous sections have also shown that, no matter how clear or well-supported a rational appeal may be, the extent to which belief is tied to identity, intuition, and emotion remains underestimated. Presenting challenges to free will solely as logical arguments may not only fail to persuade, but it may also be perceived as a threat to agency, belonging, and moral order.

In this respect, the denial of free will offers another case study in rhetorical failure. It once again attempts to discard a foundational moral intuition without offering a viable alternative framework for understanding meaning, dignity, and justice. The response, predictably, is resistance. For many, the denial of free will is not intellectually incomprehensible; it is existentially unacceptable. There is no longer any moral vocabulary to accompany this huge existential shift, and so the persuasive power of science is weakened.

What then happens is that scientific discourse tries to replace existential language rather than dialogue with it, and by doing so, it creates its own form of dogmatism, or what Mary Midgley terms "scientism". Scientism is the inappropriate extension of the scientific method and authority into domains where they cannot, on their own, do justice to the human condition (Midgley, 1992/2013, p. 37). Susan Haack (2007) similarly warns

against the idea that science is a self-validating system immune to its own limitations. She states that this is an epistemological overreach that fosters confusion rather than clarity. Scientific reductionism can erase human perspectives, and it has moved on from simply denying God to also denying any sense of what it means to be human.

This is more than simply a rhetorical failure. The deeper philosophical oversight is that there is a conflation of explanation with understanding and description with meaning. While scientific accounts of behaviour can describe it in terms of neural activity or evolutionary pressures, these are no substitute for the lived experience of making a choice or seeking forgiveness. These are human realities that do not require correction, and perhaps they do not even need interpretation. When science loses sight of this, it ceases to inform and begins to erase.

So it is very narrow to assume that rational persuasion is defeated by ignorance alone. There is also the unwillingness to engage with the frameworks, both cultural and psychological, that make belief possible in the first place. If neoatheist and determinist thinkers want to be more than just critics of belief, they must acknowledge that belief is not only about what people think, but also about who they are. When a belief system is challenged, so are moral landscapes and social worlds. This is the real limit of rational persuasion: not that reason fails, but that it often overlooks the conditions that allow it to work.

Chapter 14: Conclusion - Beyond Critique, Toward a More Humane Rationality

14.1 From Critique to Constructive Vision

This thesis explores the widening gap between rational argument and existential meaning. Human beings are storytelling animals who have been engaged with meaning across millennia, and neoatheist thinkers have failed to address the deeper human needs of belonging, identity, and purpose. There are few rhetorical failures here, but there are vast philosophical, cultural, and psychological ones.

There are significant deficits within secular narratives, and notable limitations exist with rational persuasion. These drawbacks relate to the fact that critique alone is insufficient. To resonate more deeply with people, there needs to be less confrontation, less reductionism, and more relation and compassion.

It is important to note that these critiques are not directed at science communication as a field. Within this field, there are theoretical frameworks that recognise how important it is to engage audiences emotionally and acknowledge their identity. However, more popular versions, particularly those entwined with neoatheist ideologies, often show little concern for empathy and tend to focus on provocation and spectacle.

This final chapter shifts analysis to action. It offers principles and strategies for a more humane science popularisation — one that honours truth while respecting the structure of human consciousness. For those who speak on behalf of science and secularism, the task is no longer just to inform, but to inspire. No longer just to explain, but to connect.

14.2 Foundational Principles for Meaningful Popularisation

There are underlying principles that should guide a more humane form of science popularisation, and these need to be considered before proposing any concrete strategies. These principles come from the critiques developed in this thesis and are supported by the cognitive and social sciences. They show not only how identity operates, but also how belief is formed and meaning is constructed.

i. Reason is not enough

Beliefs cannot be changed by 'bombing' the audience with facts. Facts alone do not change beliefs. Audiences contain diverse groups of people with pre-existing values, emotions and group identities. Conclusions are often already reached through identity or allegiance, and reason is often used as a post-hoc justification. To assume otherwise is not only naïve — it is ineffective.

ii. Meaning precedes belief

People do not adopt beliefs in a vacuum. Worldviews that offer coherence and purpose are more likely to draw people in. Religious traditions have long recognised this. They embed people within a larger story by offering cosmologies, rituals, and narratives. Secular popularisers need to consider doing the same if they hope to reach the same psychological depth.

iii. The audience is not an empty vessel

The deficit model of science communication has been widely discredited. It assumes that expert information delivered to an audience that presumably lacks knowledge will be enough to change their minds. However, for communication to be effective, it must start not with what the audience knows, but with what it values. Messages are received based on religious beliefs, cultural customs, and social belonging.

iv. Narrative is epistemologically valid

Stories are essential for humans to understand their world, and they should never be considered a failure of intellect. They allow individuals to organise experience, interpret values, and imagine futures. Without a compelling narrative, a worldview, even if true, is unlikely to inspire any form of loyalty. On the other hand, stories that resonate can bridge ideological divides and deepen emotional engagement.

v. Secular humility is vital

While it is valid to criticise religious dogmatism, it is equally valid to criticise its secular counterpart — scientific triumphalism. Many science popularisers fall into the trap of assuming that the empirical method can answer all meaningful questions and that those who disagree are simply irrational. But even science can reveal the limits of knowledge. A more humane secularism needs to seek shared truths and a shared human future based on understanding and compassion, so that it can be defined by more than what it scorns.

14.3 Actionable Strategies for Science Popularisers

If science popularisation is to resonate beyond academic audiences and do more than simply confirm identities, it needs to evolve in both tone and character. The following strategies are practical ways for popularisers to engage more diverse audiences. Scientific content need not be diluted, but communicated in ways that reflect how people think, feel, and believe.

i. Lead with Wonder, Not Dismissal

One of the clearest distinctions between effective and alienating science popularisation lies in the emotional register of its opening move. Figures like Carl Sagan and Brian Cox are known to open with wonder. They often marvel at cosmic beauty, discuss the evolutionary improbability of life, or describe the interconnectedness of all things. Neoatheist figures and some of the more confronting science popularisers, on the other hand, often begin

with dismissal. They discuss what religion gets wrong and how believers are deluded. They often use science as a weapon that proves them to be irrational.

Such framing can close off the mind before any rational arguments are heard by triggering identity-defence mechanisms. Research by Kahan et al. (2012) and others has shown that people are more open to new ideas when their identities are affirmed, not attacked.

✅ Action: Begin presentations, articles, or videos with what is awe-inspiring, beautiful, or meaningful — not with what others incorrectly believe. If intellectual positions are to be challenged, first establish shared emotional grounds.

ii. Respect the Narrative Function of Religion

In a philosophical debate, it may be appropriate to critique religious claims as though they were empirical hypotheses. However, if the aim is to popularise science, this approach misunderstands the role religion plays in most people's lives. For many people, religious stories are less about explaining the universe and more about giving purpose, shaping identity, and offering moral guidance. When these functions are ignored, popularisers risk appearing not only hostile but out of touch.

✅ Action: Acknowledge the psychological and cultural value of religious stories, even when critiquing their truth-claims. Also consider how secular narratives may help fulfil existential needs rather than trying to ridicule or erase the narratives of religion.

iii. Integrate the Audience into the Story

Science is often presented as something that is abstract and removed from human experience. Galaxies are distant, laws are impersonal, and principles are theoretical. While intellectually accurate, this framing leaves the audience as passive observers. In contrast, the most compelling religious narratives invite people into the drama: You are part of the story. Your life matters.

The same can be true of science. Humans are not merely observers of the cosmos; we are conscious participants in it. The story of science is not complete without the human capacity to ask, wonder, and act.

✅ Action: Popular science narratives can be reframed to include the audience and their role. Individuals can be an important part of the universe to know itself, as well as caretakers of biodiversity and co-authors of their future.

iv. Avoid Tribal Framing and Binary Logic

One of the most destructive habits of neoatheist discourse is the tendency to divide the world into rational versus irrational, science versus superstition, and enlightened versus ignorant. This approach may be rhetorically satisfying, but it activates group identities and reinforces polarisation. Effective communicators frame ideas in ways that allow people to see themselves in the new narrative, without feeling they must abandon everything they value to do so.

✅ Action: Replace binary framing and instead highlight common goals (e.g., justice, curiosity, human flourishing). Use metaphors that invite reflection rather than provoke defence. Rather than model superiority, encourage curiosity.

v. Rehabilitate Ritual and Community in Secular Spaces

Religions have emotional and communal aspects that secular worldviews often overlook. Rituals, symbols, and shared spaces help people feel connected to something greater than themselves. While neoatheist culture has often rejected ritual as irrational, psychological research indicates that rituals — even stripped of their supernatural elements — can reduce anxiety, strengthen group cohesion, and enhance meaning (Hobson et al., 2018).

People who seek a sense of belonging often feel left out of secular movements that focus on argument and individualism. Secular cultures need to create shared opportunities, not only for reflection and gratitude, but also for moral commitment.

✅ Action: Encourage or create secular rituals, such as hosting public lectures with shared meals, making ethical pledges at the start of scientific projects, or introducing reflective practices in schools and workplaces. Design popularisation events that foster community, not just transmission.

14.4 Implications for Neoatheist Figures

The rise of neoatheism in the early 21st century brought renewed visibility to secular perspectives, but also entrenched a style of discourse that often alienates more than it enlightens.

This thesis has shown that while this rhetorical posture may energise like-minded audiences, it fails to resonate as much with those whose worldviews are shaped by religious or cultural traditions. Rather than fostering dialogue, it creates tribal polarisation and reinforces the very resistance to science and secularism that it seeks to overcome.

What would it mean for these figures — and those who follow in their intellectual footsteps — to rethink their approach?

i. Richard Dawkins: From Dismissiveness to Depth

Dawkins' contribution to evolutionary biology and popular science is undeniable, but he uses rhetorical posturing to portray religious believers as intellectually inferior. This framing limits the scope of his influence. Increasingly, Dawkins has softened some of his positions, referring to himself as a "cultural Christian" who values cathedrals and hymns. He is perhaps finally hinting at an emotional awareness of the cultural and emotional aspects of religion, something that a younger Dawkins may have dismissed.

✅ Action: If Dawkins continues to integrate aesthetic and emotional respect for religious traditions, he may be able to expand his reach without abandoning his scientific

scepticism. Recognising the role of religion in producing meaning, identity, and beauty would mark a shift from polemic to humane persuasion.

ii. Christopher Hitchens: From Polemic to Moral Imagination

Hitchens was perhaps the most rhetorically gifted of the New Atheists, but his strength was also his limitation. His usual approach of ironic detachment, moral outrage, and sharp criticism earned him respect but not much affection. In his final years, especially in Mortality (2012), Hitchens revealed a vulnerability and depth that resonated with readers on a deeper level.

His critique of religion was most powerful when he described it as a moral failure that supports tyranny and blocks justice. However, he rarely suggested how people might find moral improvement without religion.

✅ Action: Future secular thinkers inspired by Hitchens could retain his ethical passion but pair it with constructive narratives of moral formation. The focus cannot simply be on dismantling old structures, but on creating new ones that secular frameworks can support. These structures could articulate visions of compassion, justice, and solidarity.

iii. Sam Harris: From Reductionism to Reflexivity

Sam Harris is recognised for combining neuroscience and philosophy in a way that is easy to understand. he tends to downplay the role of lived human experience in favour of rational and neuroscientific explanation. There are times when he does discuss the ethical implications of the rejection of free will, but he only touches on the associated deeper existential questions. However, of all the New Atheists, he appears to most understand that human needs cannot be met by reason alone. This is clear in his interest in meditation and Eastern traditions.

✅ Action: Thinkers like Harris might recognise that their interest in meditation, awe, and consciousness reflects a deeper human drive for transcendence and self-understanding. If he can accept this openly without cynicism or reductionism, he could help create a more unified form of secular spirituality.

iv. Moving Forward: A New Kind of Secular Voice

The neoatheist movement succeeded in breaking cultural taboos and defending the legitimacy of secularism. But to remain relevant, it must evolve. The next generation of secular voices must be storytellers as well as scientists, ethicists as well as empiricists, companions as well as critics.

Truth claims do not need to be diluted and reason need not be abandoned. But rationality needs to be coupled with compassion, humility, and shared meaning so that the communication does not risk becoming sterile and self-absorbed. It is not enough to be right; one must also be heard — and to be heard, one must speak in a register that acknowledges the full spectrum of human experience.

14.5 A Reconciled Vision: Truth and Meaning Together

Truth and meaning are too often positioned as opposites, especially in the modern era. Science provides facts that can be measured and tested, while religion shares stories that are symbolic and emotional. Neoatheist discussions have made this divide stronger by often portraying the search for meaning as a weakness to be criticised rather than something to be respected and understood.

This is not a sustainable dichotomy. Humans flourish when they live within narratives, and these are often untethered from reality. This thesis argues that the most resonant forms of science popularisation are those that resist the temptation to choose between truth and meaning. This integrated vision has been achieved, at least in part, by figures such as Carl Sagan and Brian Cox, who describe the cosmos as astonishingly beautiful and as a stage for human reflection and responsibility. When Sagan wrote that "we are a way for the cosmos to know itself," he was locating science within a grand narrative that humans could inhabit and explore, without diluting scientific facts. The real challenge, therefore, is not about knowledge but an understanding of how to communicate

scientific truth in ways that honour human meaning. This requires imagination more than compromise, where popularisers are narrators as much as they are educators.

Earlier in this thesis, it was stated that some truths may be comforting precisely because they are aligned with the deep structure of human existence. This is not a call for sentimentalism, but for resonance. It recognises that truth can become informative when it aligns with how humans naturally relate to the world. So uncomfortable truths may still be told, but human frameworks of emotion and relationships need to be addressed. If reconciliation between science and religion is to occur, science needs to recognise its place not outside of culture, but within it.

14.6 Expanding the Limits of Awe

Despite the growing efforts of science popularisers to infuse their communication with poetic wonder, a persistent problem remains: awe alone is not enough. Although stories related to cosmology and evolution can create a sense of meaning, it is often brief. These narratives rarely offer the lasting sense of purpose that religion has given people throughout history. Ritual, myth, and shared storytelling not only inspire us but also shape the foundation of our emotional lives. They sustain individuals within narratives that affirm human worth and endure suffering.

Brian Cox once responded to general existential concerns with the frustrated question, “What more do you want?” It’s a revealing moment — showing how meaning is drawn from within a scientific worldview compared to how it is sought outside of it

(NebulaByte, 2023). He explains: “The ingredients in our bodies are assembled in the hearts of long-dead stars over billions of years and have assembled themselves spontaneously into temporary structures that can think and feel and explore, and then those structures will decay away again at some point and in the very far future there will be no structures left... why do you want any more?”

Some of the comments under the video, used as examples and not to represent the overall feelings of the commenters, help to make the issue clearer. One viewer wrote, “If there weren’t more to want or to understand, our minds and bodies wouldn’t seek it. What is the evolutionary purpose of that instinct?” Another remarked, “Ninety-five percent of people wouldn’t even understand what you’re on about, Brian.” Together, these replies show the gap between scientific wonder and existential hunger — between explanation and meaning.

Even the most well-meaning attempts at universal narratives, such as David Christian’s Big History, illustrate this point. These stories make sense intellectually and are useful in teaching contexts. They often work well in classrooms or with people interested in science. They clearly show humanity’s place in the cosmos, but for some, they struggle to be personal, as they do not address death, suffering, and moral identity. It would therefore be difficult for these narratives to become cultural mythologies that bind diverse communities across generations. Viktor Frankl (1985) argued that people need systems of meaning to help them deal with suffering, mortality, and moral uncertainty.

14.7 Integrating Narrative, Ritual, and the Arts

Secular worldviews need not be bereft of symbolic richness. But doing so requires a deliberate engagement with the emotional and psychological dimensions of human meaning-making. One practical approach is to create secular rituals based on natural cycles or scientific achievements. For example, people might mark the seasons by observing planetary movements or celebrate important discoveries and progress. These could function analogously to religious rituals — not as dogma, but as symbolic anchors of shared identity and moral purpose.

Moreover, secular storytelling could form partnerships with the arts and humanities. Abstract ideas can be converted into emotionally resonant experiences through the power of cinema, literature, and music. The success of films such as *Interstellar* (Nolan, 2014) and *Arrival* (Villeneuve, 2016) demonstrates that films, for instance, can succeed where essays and lectures often fail by embedding wonder within narratives of love, loss, and ethical struggle. These stories do not abandon science, but humanise it.

Finally, any humane form of secularism should encourage a variety of ways to find meaning. Charles Taylor's concept of "moral sources" (2007, pp. 26–30) demonstrates that meaning is always grounded in history, culture, and imagination. To make the approach more inclusive, there should be an acceptance of many symbolic paths, with a focus on shared humility and respect. This does not mean giving up on reason, but rather making it deeper by recognising the full range of human needs.

14.8 In Short: Towards a More Humane Rationality

When New Atheists and some science popularisers tried to elevate human reason, they did so by marginalising the very elements that make us most human. This was the paradox that began this thesis. The enemies of truth were emotion, belonging, and story, but these were actually the context of truth rather than its rivals.

Yet the findings of this thesis suggest otherwise. From neuroscience to narrative psychology, from evolutionary biology to philosophy of religion, the evidence points to a single, consistent insight: human beings are not abstract rational calculators. We are storied creatures. We navigate the world not only with logic, but with longing. And any worldview — secular or religious — that fails to honour this reality is destined to fracture, isolate, or alienate.

What, then, must change?

Science must reach further rather than retreat, conveying meaning rather than just describing mechanisms. It does not need to answer every existential question, but acknowledge the questions with dignity. Audiences need to be viewed as fellow seekers of meaning, not just minds to be filled with facts and reason.

New Atheism also needs to evolve. While its influence has declined recently, this waning should not be used as an excuse to double down on criticism. It should not interpret this moving away as a result of decreased intellect, but rather use the experience to better understand the theories of communication and the complexities of belief. There is no point just copying the worst parts of religion, such as dogmatism, tribalism and

exclusion, as it would be better to learn from religion's strengths in bringing people together and creating meaning.

If science popularisers and secular thinkers can do this — if they can integrate reason with resonance — they will not weaken science. They will humanise it.

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