FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. How do you distinguish miracles from non-miraculous events? Explain why it seems reasonable or not to you to believe that miracles do happen.

2. Describe any ways in which scientific ideas about laws of nature and evolution have an effect on your religious beliefs. Should they?

3. Which position seems most reasonable to you: atheism, agnosticism, or theism (belief in a God)? Do you decide this entirely on the basis of reasonableness? Explain.

4. Does the description of Marxist thought make it sound appealing? Is Marxism an adequate substitute for religion? Why or why not?

5. Julian Huxley perceived a great cosmic pattern behind the cosmic events of the universe. Could this be evidence that there must be a Designer-God? Explain.

6. Are you optimistic about how we human beings will handle issues of war and peace, of economic justice, of the environment through our growing knowledge and our moral commitment?

SUGGESTED READINGS


Noel G. Coley and Hall Vance, eds., *Darwin to Einstein: Primary Sources on Science and Belief*, 1980.


CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Life without Religion

Twentieth-Century Skeptical Humanisms

Throughout history, people have perceived mysteries in life and have had faith nonetheless that life is coherent, intelligible, and meaningful on the deepest level that they could imagine for their time. The primitive person took it for granted that various stories could explain the pieces of life. Archaic people, who believed in larger powers at work in reality, were less sure that life could be fully happy, but they usually lived with some confidence that their myths explained the structure and events of life. Historic religions believe that notwithstanding all the chaos and evil in the world there is an underlying ultimate intelligibility and value in life.

In this twenty-first century, however, skepticism about life's intelligibility and value has increased. A variety of factors, including the end of nineteenth-century optimism, have led to increased doubts that there is any ultimate intelligibility and value to human existence.

Skepticism has a long history. In the axial age when the gods were demoted to lesser status, philosophies arose in which religion had no place. In ancient India, for example, even as classical Hindu and Buddhist and Jain thought were taking historic form, a few such unorthodox philosophies appeared. They rejected the newly orthodox belief shared by the religious traditions of India that we are caught in an endless cycle of rebirth controlled by the cosmic law of karma. The sixth-century BCE Carvaka school of thought, for example, rejected belief in the gods and in any life after death, on the grounds that there was no good empirical evidence for either of these beliefs.

One could also count Confucius (Kung Fu Tzu) as unreligious. Confucian thought more or less ignored the gods, focusing instead on social relations and on cultivating good character. (Neo-Confucian thought of the eleventh century CE and later was more metaphysical—concerned with the ultimate principles of reality—but still not really religious.)

In ancient Greece, Epicurus (341-270 BCE) declared that the gods were
uninterested in human affairs. It was useless to worship them, though one might strive to imitate their divine serenity. Gods and people alike were beings caught in the endless flow of events. The universe is composed of atoms streaming through space ("the void"), moving partly by natural forces (necessity) and partly at random (chance). So chance and necessity rule all things, not the divine Logos as the Stoics said, not the Unmoved Mover of Aristotle, not the One of the Platonists, and not the God of the Jews. There is no ultimate meaning or purpose in the universe.

And yet in all these civilizations, religious thought prevailed over skepticism. In China, popular Taoism retained a rather archaic religiosity. Buddhism spread into China, eventually dominating religious thought among intellectuals there. In India, Hindu (and Jain) traditions won out. And in the Mediterranean world, religious philosophies spread among the educated, until they were overwhelmed by the growth of Christian theology.

**EARLY ATTACKS ON TRADITIONAL RELIGION**

Modern skeptics have more than intellectual doubt about the truth of religious belief. They are often also convinced that religion is a harmful element in human life. Religion, the skeptics often say, is not merely mistaken but dangerous.

The history of religion and science in the West is a story of frequent tensions. Traditional religious authority sought to maintain the power of the theological system, while the new science promoted ideas that threatened both the system and the authority behind it. Although many histories exaggerate the conflict between religion and science, there has been conflict. Century after century, there were religious leaders who opposed parts of the new science and even oppressed those who favored it. The story of Galileo's forced recantation is a well-known instance. The Copernican astronomy that Galileo favored cast doubt on the literal truth of the Bible and undermined traditional religious authority. So religious people fought Galileo. In many lesser instances, individual religious voices spoke out against scientific innovations. The lightning rod is an affront to God, some said, for God sends each bolt of lightning to warn people or to punish them. How dare human technology intervene! Likewise, disease is a punishment from God. Some even claimed that the new medical technique known as vaccination against smallpox was ungodly.

Allied with the new science was a new political philosophy that promoted equality and the free exchange of ideas. Religious leaders repeatedly opposed these innovations as threats to traditional authority and therefore to social order. Freemasons and other freethinkers (called "libertines") had to flee countries such as Germany or France to find refuge, often in the Netherlands, from a political oppression that church authorities supported.

Those who experienced oppression also became more sensitive to the amount of intolerance that religious life could foster. In Christ's name, Christians had persecuted Jews, Muslims, and one another for centuries. From 1618 to 1648 the Thirty Years' War had devastated the German-speaking states, as Catholic fought Protestant for political power. The Inquisitions burned heretics at the stake, often after first torturing them.

Concomitant with the rise of the new science in the midst of the Enlightenment, as though to stamp religiousness for good with the seal of superstition, were the great witch hunts of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (The Salem witch hunts in Massachusetts in 1692 produced one of the largest masses of witches.) The times were troubled by changes in politics, science, religion, economics. For the new scientists this was a time of glorious learning; for the new political philosophers, a time of promise. But for many religious people it was merely a time of insecurity and doubt, so they looked for a cause of all the troubles, or at least for something on which they could focus their fears. They found it in the witches. Thousands of women, along with some men and even children, died accused of being agents of the devil.

In the nineteenth-century conservative Christians attacked theories of evolution, especially Darwinism. These Christians respected the word of the Bible more than the rational arguments of evolutionists. Some Christian critics of Darwin were themselves respectful of rationality, but not all. The evidence was clear that the earth must be at least several millions of years old. The Christians who trusted the Bible more than the geological evidence helped to give faith a bad name in the eyes of the skeptics.

Throughout all this, a major point of contention was the significance of earthly existence. Even if Marx and Spencer and other nineteenth-century secular humanists had been too optimistic about earthly progress, at least they cared about the quality of earthly life and tried to promote a more humane existence for people. Many religious leaders, threatened by so much that was new, classified it all as too worldly or materialistic. They recommended instead keeping our gaze fixed on heaven, where rust and moth do not consume. One effect of this other-worldliness, as Marx pointed out, was to distract people from useful efforts to make this world a better place for future generations.

By the twentieth century, then, there was already a long list of complaints against religion. According to the harshest skeptics religion is an opponent of potentially beneficial progress in human ideas and techniques. It is authoritarian and repressive, even vengeful against its enemies. It is intolerant and even bigoted against those who disagree with it. It promotes irra-
tionality by supporting beliefs that go against reason, thereby making it seem legitimate to be irrational. It is other-worldly, calling people away from the kind of efforts that might feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and free the oppressed. In brief, although religion promises people heaven, it makes their lives more hellish.

Not all skeptics were this harsh in their critique of religion. In the early nineteenth century, the social reformer Auguste Comte (1798-1857) portrayed the religious mentality merely as intellectual immaturity. The human race was religious in its cultural childhood, Comte said. It reached intellectual adolescence in classical philosophy. But now, finally, humankind has arrived at mental maturity by turning to empirical science for concrete or “positive” evidence. Comte called these three stages the theological (religious), the metaphysical (philosophical), and the positive (scientific). His position was known as “positivism.”

Others, like Freud, classified religion as a mildly debilitating illusion, as we have seen. Still others, such as the sociologists who simply noted its social function of supporting cultural forms, spoke of it more neutrally. In general, though, the various skeptics, atheists, or agnostics had decided that religion was not only wrong but on balance harmful.

In the twentieth century some forms of skepticism about religion amount to no more than casual doubt; but there are at least two kinds of movements that are fully skeptical. Both are secular humanisms: American pragmatism and French existentialism. To understand them, it helps to begin with two other sets of ideas. One concerns a new way of understanding reality; the other is about a new way of understanding what it is to be a human person.

A NEW WAY OF UNDERSTANDING REALITY

From the time of Galileo a number of philosophers had stressed that the way to know the truth was by checking out theories empirically, which means to test them against sensory evidence. As far back as the thirteenth century, Robert Grosseteste (1175-1253) and his student Roger Bacon (1214-1294), a Franciscan philosopher-scientist, had urged philosophers to use this method. Do not simply believe what has been handed on to you. Do not believe even whatever seems to make more logical sense. Test ideas out. Test truth-claims by finding physical evidence of some sort. If necessary devise special instruments to detect what is going on. If there is no evidence that the eye can see or the ear hear or the hand touch, then you cannot claim to know what the truth of the matter is.

As we have seen, this method of empirical testing produced wonderfully reliable results, especially when coupled with Galileo’s approach to measuring matter in motion. What is measurable can stand as evidence for or against a theory; what is not measurable, such as God’s purposes, can only be a matter of speculation. Using this as the basic method of approach to knowledge, the centuries following were lighted by the results of geniuses and of ordinary but persistent researchers.

The Scientific Method
Science is a method of learning about reality. Part of the method is active doubt. No matter how many learned people have accepted an idea as true, doubt it. It might be wrong. Test it. Then when you have doubted and devised tests and have come up with a new answer fully verified, let others doubt. Let people know what your theory is, how you tested it, and what results you achieved, so that the others can doubt you and doubt your theory, your tests, your results. If your theory survives new doubts and new tests, it is more probably true in some way. By this open-ended and public testing of data, science advances. We are accustomed to thinking of science’s conclusions as certain and reliable. Those that have survived many decades of testing by constant application seem to be very reliable. But every claim of science remains open to further questioning and further testing.

As the previous chapter noted, this was not fully apparent in the early days of modern science. Scientists who became angry at the dogmatic stubbornness of religious authority developed their own dogmatic attitudes. Sometimes they were modest in their claims. Copernicus’ theory was first published with an introduction that said it was only an interesting, different way of describing how the sun, planets, and stars might move. But the early success of the new scientific method led many people to forget about doubts and become convinced that science was going to provide people with the complete, final, fully accurate truth about everything.

Another dogmatic aspect of some early science was the conviction that all human problems could be solved by the application of scientific reasoning. The confidence that science could provide the final, fully accurate truth fit nicely with the evolutionary hopes for a steady progress into a glorious future. Dogmatism, naturalism, and optimism were a potent combination in some early science.

By the late nineteenth century scientific dogmatism was sometimes allied with a radical reductionism. We can understand this reductionism by comparing it to its opposite in Julian Huxley’s theory of cosmic evolution. Huxley celebrated the development of matter-energy into atoms and then compounds and then life-forms and cells and multi-celled organisms and eventually conscious processes in us and our cultures. Reductionism stands on its head by emphasizing that culture and consciousness are, after all, only the product of brain activity; that brains are only organized cells, that
cells are only chemical processes, and that chemicals are just atoms. The reductionist attitude warns us not to get too impressed with consciousness and life because they are just variant forms of matter-energy.

This thorough-going reductionism done in the name of science had the effect of excluding religion and philosophical speculation from the scientific effort to understand reality. In the nineteenth century some philosophers had argued that science would have to admit to the existence of souls or some cosmic Spirit in order to explain life and consciousness. Many scientists treated these spirit-centered ideas as threats to their methodological naturalism, and therefore as impediments to the progress of science. So they responded by reducing life and consciousness to nonliving and nonconscious atomic and chemical activity. This left no room for souls or a cosmic Spirit, with the unfortunate result that the human spirit manifested in noble thoughts, great moral concerns, and grand works of art, is reduced to nothing more than chemical processes. The radical reductionists may be said to have thrown out the baby with the bathwater.

It is possible, though, to adhere to naturalism without also being reductionistic. Julian Huxley’s thought was fully naturalistic. But Huxley admired the higher and higher levels of complexity that have arisen through cosmic and biological evolution. He respected each new level as a special achievement of nature. He was especially impressed with the qualities of human thought. He was not a reductionist of the sort who says thought is just biology in general. He said that the power of thought is instead an extremely special form of biology. He was not a reductionist of the sort who says that biological life is just chemistry. He thought life was a very special form of chemistry.

Even religiously-minded scientists are methodological naturalists. They say that science can attain to real understanding only of what is natural. That is because only natural causes and effects are part of a reliable and regular pattern that can be discovered through scientific study and testing. If there are indeed supernatural causes (God or other non-natural beings) at work, they are causes that cannot be studied and tested. There is no way to predict what God will do. So there is no use in trying to have a science about divine activity. Certainly theologians would agree that it is not the job of science to study God.

The End of Dogmatism in Science

The twentieth century administered shock treatments to shake science into a different frame of mind. Even as World War I sped doubt about human reasonableness and the beneficence of science, new ideas jolted scientists out of dogmatic attitudes. Newton had drawn a basic picture of the universe as stable and predictable. Evolutionary theory removed a little of the stability, but many physicists at the turn of the century thought the universe’s laws were now settled, once and for all.

Then came the new physics, like that of Albert Einstein (1879-1955). Suddenly the whole universe had been taken apart and put back together in a new kind of unity. Newton had been accurate enough about certain events in the universe, but in order to include such extreme phenomena as light or energy particles at one end, and the interrelation of time, space, and energy at the other, a new set of theories was needed. Einstein said strange things. If you travel in space, for example, at extremely high speeds relative to your friends back home, when you return they will have aged more than you. The physicist Werner Heisenberg (1901-1976) declared that though the universe had once seemed fully predictable and therefore fully intelligible, it turned out that aspects of the subatomic level are unpredictable, except statistically.

In subsequent years there were enough new, odd ways of looking at the universe to get scientists accustomed to treating their own theories more critically. As far back as 1790 the philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) had carefully pointed out that the ways in which we see the world, even in our most reasonable and well-tested interpretations, are still interpretations to some extent. This tentative approach to knowledge was actually recommended by ancient Greek philosophers called “skeptics” some two thousand years ago. But it is only in modern times that have accepted this approach and found a very positive use for it in science.

It was especially in the twentieth century that science found out for itself that Kant and the ancient skeptics were onto something. The theoretical scientists of today are accustomed to the idea that when they describe electrons and gravity and the furthermost edges of the universe and black holes in space, they are not stating the whole truth. Instead they are providing good working models of how things might well be, based on the available evidence. Science provides models, tentative maps, of reality.

Imagine a map of the Amazonian jungles of Brazil that is based on reports from a few explorers, sightings from a dozen hot air balloons, and some examination of debris taken from the river at its mouth. Many highly reliable claims could be made about the jungle on the basis of this evidence, but the overall map might have to undergo serious changes as new evidence came in. Scientific theories are like such a changeable map.

Scientific theories are sometimes like practical instructions telling a person how to get certain results. Treat light as though it were collections of tiny particles, say the instructions, each particle having a certain minimum size. If that is true, then you should be able to get certain results. And you do. The problem is that if you treat light not as particles but as waves of energy, you could get a different sort of result. And you do. What is light, then: particles or waves? Scientists are accustomed to saying that the particle-model is a
useful one to predict some results, and that the wave-model is useful for predicting others; but it is not possible to say which is more "true."

The method of science seems rather arcane at times, but it is just a refinement of the everyday method of verifying the reliability of a truth-claim. This checking can be done by comparing the claim with the relevant evidence available, especially evidence that would really put the truth-claim to the test (that could "falsify" it, as the philosophers of science say). The checking can also be done by comparing the truth-claim with all other relevant truth-claims that fit well with the evidence relevant to them. The method of science takes this ordinary method further in two ways. One is to devise extremely precise and ingenious ways of determining how well the truth-claims fit with the evidence. The means of measuring and testing have grown exceedingly careful and complex. The second is to make the process of testing the truth-claim a matter of public record so that anyone, even those with opposing viewpoints, can try things out for themselves and look for any flaws in the fit among evidence, logic, and conclusions.

This method might sound like a recipe for chaos. Everyone can challenge everyone else, and the potential challenges are endless. It sounds like a rather unpromising method for obtaining reliable results. That may explain why it took two thousand years from the early search for rational knowledge in the axial age, before a particular culture—Europe of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as it happened—stumbled upon a recognition of the extraordinary effectiveness of this seemingly unpromising method for the particular task of evaluating hypotheses and models to see whether they function so reliably that they can be regarded as true.

The twentieth-century experience of scientific work has reinforced the idea that a person should only accept truth-claims that are well tested, but with a heightened awareness that even a well-tested theory is still a working model that must always be left open to challenge. This is not an expectation that science will always be changing its conclusions, but rather the conviction that scientists must always be prepared to accept changes in their conclusions if someone devises a better interpretation of the evidence.

The public nature of the scientific method imposes a critical honesty on the part of scientists. Every once in a while deliberate dishonesty shows up in a scientific work nonetheless. A cancer researcher makes certain results in the skin condition of laboratory mice because he is certain he is on the right track and needs impressive results to get the grant money to continue. A noted psychologist falsifies data about identical twins raised in different environments in order to support his firm belief that intelligence is inherited. In addition to deliberate dishonesty, unconscious bias also leads scientists to overlook or misread data that would lead to an uncomfortable conclusion.

Yet the public and open-ended nature of modern scientific inquiry counterbalances fairly well the dangers of dishonesty and unconscious bias. Every truth-claim must be published publicly with the evidence. Any person, friend or foe of a theory, has a right to challenge it and test it again. All theories must stand up to ongoing testing, review, and critical analysis, regardless of who likes the theory or who does not, regardless of the impact of changes in theory on social, economic, political, and even religious beliefs. The scientific method works well because it forces scientists to be more honest than people are usually inclined to be. Scientific questioning has broken traditional beliefs that supported harmful superstitions such as belief in witches. The methodical honesty of science has broken many prejudiced claims about religions, races, cultures, and the sexes. The honesty of science, however unsettling in its unwinding willingness to doubt, seems to be morally constructive.

The result has been a new way of understanding what the world is like. Traditional societies, primitive and archaic, rely on the authority of the past, whether recorded in folktales and customs or in sacred texts. Traditional authority remains a powerful force everywhere today. Early philosophy and theology, however, produced a competitor to tradition in the form of rational analysis. Philosophers especially relied on systems of thought that appeared to make overall coherent sense of many aspects of life and reality, even when these systems were in conflict with tradition. Early modern science added increased attention to precise measurements of empirical evidence. But it eventually became clear that it was the public and open-ended testing of ideas against the evidence that made science successful. So this scientific method now challenges not only tradition but also philosophical or rational analysis done without adequate checking. It is not enough for an idea to be old and revered, nor to be rationally systematized into a coherent theory. It must also fit with the evidence through public and open-ended testing.

Is Science Based on Faith?

Some have argued, however, that even science is based on faith. As noted at the beginning of Chapter Eleven, there is some truth to this claim, though it can be misleading. There are several ways in which a kind of faith appears in science.

First, the everyday scientist certainly has some faith that the scientists who have gone before have actually done the experiments they claim to have done and have collected the evidence they claim to have collected. But the scientist also knows that this faith can be put to the test by further scientific work. Even if no one sets up a formal test of a theory, every time someone applies the theory in practice, results that conflict with what the theory predicts provide evidence there may be something wrong with the theory.
Second, and more basically, scientists in general have a faith that the world they study really exists. This is contrary to what some Hindus seem to say, following Shankara. Similarly the Chinese wise man, Chuang Tzu, dreamed that he was a butterfly; and when he awoke he asked how he could be sure that he was not a butterfly dreaming he was a man. We cannot prove that we are human and not butterflies. But the everyday evidence makes it very reasonable to believe that we are, and rather unreasonable to believe that we are really butterflies instead. Similarly, the belief science has in the reality of the world seems also to be reasonable. It is a belief that works consistently in practice as though it were the simple truth. When science tests its theories against what seems to be the real world, this testing process works as though the world is indeed real.

Third, scientists also operate by a faith that they can understand the intelligibility of reality. This is a faith in themselves and their methods and their powers of observation and analysis and criticism. But this faith also seems quite reasonable in that it has proved to be an exceedingly effective faith. Science seems to have achieved a great deal of highly reliable knowledge about how reality operates.

Fourth, science also has a kind of faith in certain criteria of reasonableness. "Reasonable" is a word with many meanings, of course. We use the word most loosely (and perhaps inappropriately) when it stands for whatever we want to think is correct, without applying any further tests to determine whether we are right. We use the word a little more precisely when we claim that we find an idea reasonable because it fits with our ongoing experiences. Experience, after all, is a kind of evidence. Yet we also know that we have made what we later acknowledge to be incorrect judgments on the basis of our own prior experience. A scientific conclusion is said to be reasonable only if it has the double "fit" described earlier. First, it must fit with the available relevant evidence; second, it must fit with other conclusions that fit well with their relevant evidence. This double fit must also have been exposed to public challenge over time to make it more fully reasonable to accept the conclusion.

So there is some truth in the claim that science rests on a kind of faith also, in fact on various acts of faith. But science demands that its own various types of faith be tested, publicly, rationally, and empirically. A scientist can claim that it is more accurate to describe these acts of faith as confidence rather than faith. It is a confidence based on the evidence of the effectiveness of science in the important work of devising and testing truth-claims about the world to see which best explain the data.

Nevertheless, scientific theories are still interpretations of reality that are produced by human beings. Scientific theories are models of reality, even symbols of reality, not reality itself. It is also important to note that it is a human person who has the ongoing job of interpreting reality and testing the interpretation, and who must be honest and open to change in understanding things. This has provided a basis for a new understanding of what a person, a self, is.

A NEW WAY OF UNDERSTANDING THE SELF

From the late eighteenth-century writings of Kant to the experience of modern science, we have become increasingly aware that we are responsible for our interpretation of reality. How we think of the world and ourselves, how we think of what it all ultimately means, and how we actually live and believe because of this, are all very much in our own human hands.

One way of illustrating this is to imagine that you suddenly had an overwhelming spiritual vision and saw an image of God or heard God's voice, so to speak, telling you the truth about life and how to live. What would your response be? One possible response would be to accept gratefully this revelation and follow it. But there is an alternative response.

The human person has some capacity to step back from such a religious experience and, as with all experiences, treat the instructions from God and the experience of God both as something to be questioned, as a scientist might question certain test results and their meaning. A person might not want to do this or be in the habit of doing it, but a person is capable of doing it. Was that really God? How do I know? How honest am I being in examining this? Even if I conclude it was the voice of God, should I just agree? Or should I make my own analysis of how wise or good or useful these ideas are? These questions represent the human ability to take personal responsibility for the ideas and values we live by.

A word often used to represent this human potential is "autonomy," the power of conscious self-ruling. There are many ways we are not consciously self-rulled. Our biological characteristics determine some of our behavior. Our social conditioning has a very strong influence on us. In moral behavior we normally tend to be heterosexual, i.e., ruled-by-another, rather than autonomous. The taboo moralist obeys others who can reward or punish. The allegiance moralist follows group standards. A universal laws moralist looks for the ultimate objective set of standards to follow. These are all instances of heterosexual morality.

It is not enough, however, that a person obey his or her own inner rules rather than external rules or standards in order to be called fully autonomous. The inner standards must also be those the person has consciously chosen on the basis of his or her own consciously evaluated morality. A person who just follows inner habits or conditioning is not autonomous but is under the control of habits or psychological and sociological conditioning. True autonomy is inner freedom.
We often call ourselves free when in fact we are acting out of habit or unreflectively responding to an impulse or desire. We may well be free from external restrictions, free to act on our desires or habits. But this is not the same as inner freedom. Philosophers argue strenuously about whether there can be true inner freedom. We can dispense with long arguments by saying that we are inwardly free to the degree that we are able to make consciously reflective choices. We have some real ability to be aware of various influences acting on us. We can develop in ourselves the useful habit of reflecting on our possible choices in order to foresee their probable consequences, and let this awareness of consequences influence us also. We can consciously compare these potential consequences to values we have carefully chosen. The more we make our choices in this consciously reflective manner, the more we are behaving autonomously.

This means that a fully autonomous person accepts full responsibility for his or her own moral standards and decisions. This is a person who believes it is not enough to obey orders or be loyal to the group or live up to supposedly objective external standards for their own sake. The autonomous person may well obey social rules, be very loyal, and honor high standards, but only because these fit with his or her best moral vision. This person might sit in judgment even on God’s instructions, therefore, and ask whether those instructions lived up to the person’s own best moral standard.

There is a dangerous kind of free-wheeling behavior that sometimes goes by the name of “autonomy” also, that of the taboo moralist who has found how to avoid punishment and simply chooses to grab all the pleasures available no matter who gets hurt. Most people who recommend autonomy actually have in mind not this taboo autonomy, but an autonomy built on a basic value morality. This kind of autonomy would lead a person to listen to God’s voice and then ask whether agreeing with God would promote human well-being. This type of autonomous person would be responsible for accepting or rejecting God’s instructions, a religious tradition, various civil laws, a group’s standards, or any other guides to life, on the basis of compassion and concern for others.

Existentialist philosophers (whom we will discuss soon) call this sort of responsible autonomy “authentic existence,” a shorthand expression for “authentically mature human existence.” Children cannot take autonomous responsibility for their own lives. They are dominated by emotional drives, societal conditioning, and short-term practical judgments on how to get along. Only adults have a chance at coming into the kind of reflective self-possession that enables them to choose the very foundation of their moral orientation through careful conscious reflection. As we mature, the distinctively human capacity for conscious reflection on our lives becomes stronger.

We develop an increasing ability to take personal responsibility for our ideas, biases, values, and behavior. The more we do this, the more we are doing the thing that sets us apart from other animals. Those who favor such autonomy can therefore claim that it is an exercise of real humanness, that autonomous freedom constitutes authentic human existence.

This idea of authentic existence presents a challenge because we humans often try to escape from our own peculiarly human capacity to be responsible for our own values and decisions. The psychologist Irvin Fromm (1900-1980) summed it up nicely in the title of his book, Escape from Freedom. We all tend to say we want to have freedom, yet real inner freedom can make us nervous. Do we really want to carry individual personal responsibility for every one of our decisions? It would often be more comfortable to be able to let someone else make the decisions and be responsible for the consequences. There is security in obedience and conformity. Even if that should include bigotry, intolerance, persecutions, and war, at least someone else is to blame. (There is evidently danger in a lack of autonomy as well as in autonomy.)

The emphasis on authentic existence, on personally responsible autonomy, can be dangerous, then, when misinterpreted by a taboo moralist, whose only concern is to do what feels good. This emphasis is also meaningless to the allegiance moralist, who needs to have group rules to follow. A strong emphasis on autonomy will make only limited sense to a universal laws moralist, who is convinced there are objectively and universally valid rules that no one has the right to disobey.

Those who most stress responsible autonomy, though, are usually convinced that all our interpretations of reality, including even our ideas about morality, are interpretations, models, symbols. Alternative interpretations and models and symbols are available. Because we have the capacity to reflect on these interpretations and evaluate them in an ongoing way, we have the capacity to be responsible for them. To refuse to reflect and choose is to be responsible for avoiding personal responsibility. Dangerous and difficult as it is, therefore, authentic human responsibility is an ideal that has gained a great deal of support among humanists.

That, in turn, means that there is a new emphasis in the way modern culture understands what it is to be a self. The “authentic human existence” of the modern person would not sound authentically human to other cultures: primitive cultures seek to do what the ancestors established; archaic cultures obey the gods of their people; historic cultures know that ideal human life is one of submission to the single, universally correct way of things. Modern culture is not sure of the final truth or the single truth or the universal truth, so it defines the ideal person as one who accepts individual responsibility for the interpretation of reality that person lives by, including responsibility for
how that affects others.

Modern culture has thereby become even more explicitly conscious that human life is lived in the presence of mystery, that all our beliefs, values, traditions, and lifestyles are encompassed by a larger field of mystery, by an infinitely receding horizon of mystery. There are religious interpretations of life based on this awareness. Chapter Fourteen will describe some of them; but there are also nonreligious interpretations. Here are two of them.

**Two Skeptical Philosophies**

Contemporary skepticism, which grew out of earlier attacks on religion, includes the new scientific understanding of how to know reality, and the understanding of the human person as autonomous. It also accepts the basic view of the universe suggested by the astronomers' big bang theory and the evolutionary theory of life as random variations. We can see all this in two philosophies about life, American pragmatism and French atheistic existentialism.

**American Pragmatism**

American pragmatism is the approach found in the writings of John Dewey (1859-1952) among others. (A more recent form of pragmatism, as exposed in the thought of Richard Rorty [1931- ] is really postmodern, a topic for Chapter Fifteen.) It is a school of thought that is generally agnostic, cautious about making unsubstantiated claims. The universe is a vast and somewhat confusing place, the pragmatists say. We have learned a lot about it. We have a lot to learn. We will never know all there is to know. The most honest and reasonable thing to do is to learn what we can when we can, and to make the best use of it we can.

Pragmatists have usually been suspicious of religious belief. The history of humankind is a history of unsubstantiated beliefs, they say, many of them religious. Adherence to these beliefs has usually prevented the growth of genuine well-tested knowledge and has bred intolerance and hatred. It is good to be wary of such beliefs. Even the belief systems of a Marx or Julian Huxley claim more than can be verified rationally. There is no adequate evidence for the existence of any ultimate Power, neither God nor history or evolution turned into minor God-equivalents. The pragmatists conclude that there is little profit in trying to argue out all the ultimate questions about the origin, pattern, or purpose to everything. There is no need to take such questions too seriously. It is reasonable to act as though there is no God, to live as practical atheists without being dogmatic in our denial of God’s existence.

There is nonetheless a faith we can all live by, says Dewey, a common ded-

ication to meeting our human needs for material sustenance and ethical ideals, a dedication to honesty and cooperation in order to achieve what we can for our fellow human beings. We live in a changing universe, open to progress; we are free beings, open to development. Let us learn to cherish the openness of things and selves in order to improve life.

This faith is a form of secular evolutionary humanism, but its emphasis is much more practical-minded than the quasi-religions of Marx and Huxley. Dewey was willing to live with a great deal of uncertainty about the basic thrust of history or the ultimate answers to life's direction. Make do as you go along, Dewey said: much can be achieved this way if we just try to be honest, reasonable, and deeply concerned with the well-being of human life on this planet.

This has been the major contemporary atheism or agnosticism in America. Groups such as the American Humanist Association or the Ethical Culture Society reflect many of the same views. There is another and more radical contemporary atheism, however, that takes ultimate questions with great seriousness. That is the perspective associated with the French existentialist, Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1984).

**Atheistic Existentialism**

The pragmatist turns away from the ultimate mystery in order to pay attention to practical possibilities for improving the human condition. The atheistic existentialist, on the contrary, keeps an eye fixed resolutely on the unendingness of mystery as an awesome but important reality. The fact of infinite mystery reveals to the existentialist the strange situation of the human person.

Central to existentialism is the concern to define who we humans are, both immediately and ultimately. Even on the everyday level, says Jean-Paul Sartre, we humans are terribly odd. We are the beings with self-consciousness, able to take our lives into our own hands to some extent through our conscious decisions. This is the power of free self-determination. It is inner human autonomy. That means that in contrast to all other living beings, we “ex-ist,” meaning that we stand out. We stand apart from the unfree and unthinking patterns of inanimate nature. We stand out from all the animals, who have a kind of conscious awareness but not the self-consciousness that would allow them to make decisions about themselves and their lives.

Our identity is in our own hands, Sartre says. We can look ourselves over and see how we act and think. We can measure our acts and thoughts by various rules, standards, values, or goals. We are responsible for how well we measure up to our standards, and even for choosing the standards. All this is a terrible burden because we are the beings with the capacity for the infinite. Our capacity to question and reflect and then question again makes it.
impossible for us to arrive at the final and complete truth. That is true also in moral matters. And yet we must do our best to choose standards of morality and truth, to live and treat each other with honesty and love. The great blessing of our freedom is therefore also a difficult burden.

There are no preset limits on how far our minds can range in our quest for the answers to life. When we begin to seek the purpose of our existence, that which makes it truly worthwhile and will tell us how to live, we are on an exploration without apparent end, because we can raise the ultimate questions. Perhaps ultimately all is mindless randomness, as some scientific theories suggest.

The historic religious traditions have answers for those who worry about such things. Our ultimate purpose is to belong to the infinite, the Tao, or Brahman, or God. By learning the Tao of nature or the path of contemplation or the mystical way we conform to the eternal fullness, these traditions say. But Sartre sees a great threat to our humaneness in these traditions. Our human selfhood lies in our self-possession as consciously free existents. To hand ourselves over to some ultimate path, or Being, or Power, he claims, is to give up responsibility for ourselves; it is to lay down the burden of having to choose for ourselves the identity, belonging, thoughts, and actions that together make up our life stories.

Perhaps Sartre might have been able to accept the idea of handing over one’s life to the infinite Mystery only by a basic trust that it is fullness and not emptiness. This trust might be sufficiently general that it could give confidence that life is ultimately worthwhile, without taking away individual responsibility for each decision made in a lifetime. But Sartre feared that the religious impulse is always to sacrifice responsible autonomy on the altar of the security. Faced with endless options about who to be, how to live, where to find a sense of certainty, we are all too eager to submit to the specific beliefs, roles, rules, rituals of a religious tradition. So Sartre believed.

What Sartre proposed as a philosophy of life for the being that exists is a life of courageous affirmation of selfhood in a universe where selfhood is ultimately meaningless. To Sartre, it was clear that the processes of this enormous universe are indeed mindless and purposeless. He was surprised that anyone could find a purposeful direction buried within the evolutionary process, which has been a long and messy one, built on the bones of countless species that failed and died. History has scattered countless bodies killed by starvation, flood, disease. For the last fifty thousand years of human existence, war and torture and suffering have been the rule, so much so that it all seems natural. If there is some God behind this process, Sartre concludes, it must be a grossly evil or incompetent one to set in motion all that misery and chaos.

To Sartre, sheer reasonableness requires that we must all accept the possibility that in the end nothing really means anything. Life may seem meaningful in the short run, but ultimately it is absurd. Since we need not merely mean but ultimate meaning to satisfy the endless reach of our consciousness, the ultimate meaningless of the universe stands over against us as a crushing emptiness. In a sense, it becomes irrational ultimately to live for anything.

Sartre, like other atheists (most less extreme in their atheism) did find something to live for: his own existence as an authentic self, a self-conscious self, willing to be responsible for his own life. To Sartre this emphatically includes responsibility to value authentic existence wherever it is or might be. So Sartre tried to live by a deep moral concern for the selfhood and freedom of every person. He proposed a basic value morality of unrestricted concern for authentic human existence. For this reason, he called his own existentialism a humanism.

This is atheistic existentialism’s challenge to religion. It is a very fundamental challenge. Any religion that focuses its attention on asserting that miracles do happen, that there is a divine guide and helper, or that there is life after death, may be a very satisfying religion, but it does not yet meet the full challenge of atheistic existentialism.

The Deepest Challenge to Basic Faith

Imagine that you live in a universe where there is a high god, filled with loving concern for all people (a sort of all-good super-Zeus). This would be a god who can work miracles, reveal the right path of life, bring people to a paradise after death. As comforting as this sounds, the atheistic existentialist has the same sort of questions about it as a Hindu or Buddhist might about a paradise: What is the ultimate meaning? Perhaps the high god and all people are trapped together in an ultimately meaningless reality. Whether a person’s life ends in death after seventy years or endures eternally in some sort of paradise with a high god, what is the value of it? The question of ultimate meaning is present again.

And further modern concerns arise. First of all, there are the scientific theories which suggest that the best evidence points to a model of the universe as an aimless series of events without meaning. Secondly, there is still the modern awareness of our need for ultimate meaning because of our existence as the self-conscious and therefore free being. To respond to this adequately, religion must somehow be able to see the possibility of truly ultimate intelligibility and value to human existence. The basic faith that humankind has lived by from the earliest times, at least implicitly, has finally been challenged in modern times: Does it all ultimately make sense? Is it all ultimately worthwhile?
These questions we can individually choose to ignore. If there is a God who works miracles and offers life after death, perhaps we can worry about the ultimate meaning of everything after some few billion years in heaven or paradise. But modern religion, whatever else it does or does not say about such things as miracles, divine guidance, and life after death, has been challenged to look at the universe and human existence and show how a reasonable and honest person, willing to take responsibility for his or her own life, can find good reason to affirm that the mysteries we all face are signs not of ultimate meaninglessness but of a divinely numinous Ultimate, which somehow is the meaning of everything.

Language becomes abstract and difficult when we talk about these things because it is talk about the Ultimate. It is talk about how the civilizations of the world have found to be the infinite and incomprehensible God or Tao or Brahman. For the atheistic existentialist it is not merely difficult to talk about any such Ultimate; it is difficult to show that a reasonable person could believe in it. That is a challenge modern religion faces. The next chapter will describe the responses of modern religion.

Summary
In recent centuries religion has been severely criticized. At the same time agnostic or atheistic alternatives to religion have gained currency. The developments of science have convinced many that modern scientific honesty, self-criticism, and openness to change constitute the only legitimate kind of knowledge. This has brought about an emphasis on the responsibility of the individual person not to follow traditional authority unthinkingly, but to be freely self-determining. Scientific honesty and responsible autonomy are two ideas that inspire modern unreligious humanisms, such as American pragmatism and atheistic existentialism.

The ultimate mysteries of life still exist, however, and the attitudes of agnosticism or atheism towards them can be much less than satisfying. Modern religion has tried to provide a religious humanism as an alternative. That is the topic of the next chapter.

For Further Reflection
1. Do the criticisms of religion made early in this chapter seem accurate and fair to you? Why? Why not?
2. Give any reasons you can think of why a religious person could be fully dedicated to human progress in this world.

3. Find examples in your own life of beliefs you hold that seem very reliable to you but which, like scientific knowledge, are open to change if the evidence demands it. Which of them, if any, are religious beliefs?
4. Do you share the belief that ideal adult authentic existence is a willingness to take full personal responsibility for one’s own values and choices? Explain.
5. If Sartre is wrong about the absurdity of life, explain what you think is the ultimate purpose of human existence.

Suggested Readings
Thomas Henry Huxley, Science and Christian Tradition, 1986. Includes Huxley’s comments on agnosticism and his response to critics of the idea.