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Natural Nonbelief as a Necessary Means to a Life of Choiceworthy Meaning

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Abstract: Many have thought that certain types and distributions of apparent nonresistant nonbelief in the world are among the best reasons to think naturalism is more probable than theism. Jason Marsh has argued that one specific type of nonresistant nonbelief, called natural nonbelief in early humans, supports naturalism over theism. However, I will argue that it is epistemically possible that God has a morally-sufficient reason for permitting natural nonbelief in early humans. First, according to Axiarchism, God's goal for physical reality is to intentionally structure it so that a choiceworthy degree of moral, intellectual, and aesthetic value will be realized. Second, since theism entails Axiarchism, and it is far from clear on our total available evidence that eliminating the possibility of natural nonbelief would have led to a choiceworthy degree of moral, intellectual, and aesthetic value being realized for early humans, the degree to which natural nonbelief supports naturalism over theism is softened.

Keywords: Natural Nonbelief, Divine Hiddenness, Axiarchism, Fundamentality Theory of Meaning, Connection Building, Choiceworthy, Theism, Naturalism, Defense

Then what is it all and what are we all? What is the point of it and of us? Perhaps one clue is that we can even *ask* these questions...
Sophie's World

It is the glory of God to conceal a matter, but the glory of kings is to search out a matter.
Prov. 25:2

Introduction

Many have thought that certain types and distributions of apparent nonresistant nonbelief in the world are among the best reasons to think naturalism is more probable than theism. Jason Marsh has argued that a specific type of nonresistant nonbelief called natural nonbelief supports naturalism over theism.¹ According to this argument, untold numbers of the earliest human beings were probably *affectively*² willing

1 Marsh, "Darwin and the Problem of Natural NonBelief," 349-376. To be clear, Jason Marsh gives three reasons to think the implications of Darwinian evolution support naturalism over theism of which natural nonbelief is only one. I shall not consider his other two reasons here.

2 Schellenberg, "What Divine Hiddenness Reveals": "...in at least some of these people the absence of theistic belief is not in any way the result of their own emotional or behavioral *opposition* towards God or relationship with God or any of the apparent implications of such a relationship."

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to start a meaningful relationship³ with God, but *cognitively*⁴ incapable of beginning such a relationship because their minds were designed without the basic conceptual conditions to form theistic concepts and beliefs apart from many generations of cultural evolution. Marsh's argument draws upon recent cognitive and evolutionary accounts of religion to make his case, including Justin Barrett's acknowledgement that the earliest religious concepts were non-theistic.⁵ But, as Marsh notes, even Darwin long ago realized that belief in God did not start out as natural:

I am aware that the assumed instinctive belief in God has been used by many persons as an argument for His existence. But this is a rash argument, as we should thus be compelled to believe in the existence of many cruel and malignant spirits, only a little more powerful than man; for the belief in them is far more general than in a beneficent Deity. The idea of a universal and beneficent Creator does not seem to arise in the mind of man, until he has been elevated by long-continued culture.⁶

The observation that nonbelief in a theistic, or even in a higher God, naturally occurred among early humans can seem highly surprising to theism because it is commonly claimed that the greatest good available to a human being in *this life* is to be in a meaningful relationship with God.⁷ Moreover, even if a meaningful relationship with God is merely a great good, but not the greatest good available to human beings in this life, it's widely thought that "...a perfectly loving being would value relationship *for its own sake* and not just on account of the benefits that might thereby be conferred on the beloved."⁸

Given that a perfectly loving God would have these two reasons to be open to a relationship with the earliest human beings, and since it is logically necessary to *believe that* God exists before someone can have a meaningful relationship *with God*, then the question arises: Why, if God designed the minds of our earliest ancestors, were several generations of cultural evolution required before human beings developed theistic concepts and beliefs? If after investigation a good answer can be given to this question, it still seems clear that, before investigation, the fact of natural nonbelief is mystified⁹ by theism.

While I agree with the intuitive and widespread consensus that any form of nonresistant nonbelief in the world antecedently supports naturalism over theism, I want to argue that on our total evidence, there is a good answer to the question before us in the case of natural nonbelief.¹⁰ More specifically, on the defense I wish to argue, the atheistic import of natural nonbelief is softened by extending theism to entail¹¹ what has been dubbed the Axiarchic thesis. According to this thesis, physical reality is intentionally

3 Schellenberg, *The Wisdom To Doubt*, 201: "...suppose there are individuals whose process of maturation has seen the development of such general cognitive and affective faculties as are required to, in some measure, consciously experience the presence of God and responds positively thereto--the cognitive and affective equipment required, for example, to believe that God is lovingly present and make a response expressing gratitude or one that involves seeking a deepening of the experience of God."

4 Ibid. "...the basic conceptual conditions of so much as *entertaining* the idea of a being separate from the physical universe who created it, and who is all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good and loving in relation to it, have never been satisfied."

5 Barrett states: "Arguably the oldest and most widespread form of god concepts is the ancestor spirit or ghost, a type of afterlife belief" (Barrett, *Religious Compass*, 775).

6 Darwin, *Descent of Man*, 778.

7 Schellenberg, "What Divine Hiddenness Reveals": "...such relationship with an infinitely rich personal reality would have to be the greatest good any human being could possibly experience, if God exists. But then why this talk of some other good, for the sake of which God would sacrifice such relationship?"

8 Schellenberg, "The Sounds of Silence Stilled."

9 Draper, *Scientific Approaches to the Philosophy of Religion*, 66: "Mystification is the opposite of explanation. A hypothesis 'mystifies' a fact if it makes that fact more puzzling rather than less puzzling—if it raises why-questions about that fact rather than answering them."

10 However, I do think that my defense can easily accommodate all types of nonresistant nonbelief other than natural nonbelief, but that would make a long article, even longer.

11 Draper, *Scientific Approaches to the Philosophy of Religion*, 88. Even if theism doesn't entail Axiarchism so defined, the theist is free to nominate any specified divine goal she wants and assess it against its competitor(s) to see what follows.

structured so that a *choiceworthy* (à la Chris Trucker)¹² degree of the good (moral), the true (enquiry), and the beautiful (creativity) is realized.¹³ In support of the widely granted philosophical claim that theism entails Axiarchism, I can do no better than paraphrase Richard Swinburne who has argued that since God is perfectly good, omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly free, the only motivation God has for bringing about one state of affairs instead of another is its relative (probable) contribution to the overall moral and aesthetic value of reality.¹⁴ Since theism entails Axiarchism,¹⁵ and it is far from clear on our total available evidence that eliminating the possibility of natural nonbelief would have led to a choiceworthy degree of moral, intellectual, and aesthetic value being realized for early humans, the degree to which natural nonbelief supports naturalism over theism is softened. Put simply, on my defense, the earthly careers of early humans forms a subplot in a much larger human story that constitutes a life of choiceworthy meaning for them, whether they had the conceptual resources to grasp this reality or not. Having defined Axiarchism, and stated its implications for natural nonbelief on theism and naturalism, I will now turn to a more detailed consideration of its implications for the value of having a meaningful relationship with God in this life.

The Value of a Meaningful Relationship With God in This Life

It might be thought that Axiarchism supports, as opposed to challenges, the problem of natural nonbelief. After all, Axiarchism provides enough empirical content¹⁶ to render natural nonbelief antecedently surprising on theism. Specifically, it is precisely because of the great moral, intellectual, and aesthetic value that a meaningful relationship with a perfectly good God would add to the lives of nonresistant nonbelievers, not to mention that a perfectly loving God would value relationship for its own sake, that we would not predict instances of natural nonbelief in the earliest human beings. However, Paul Draper has been so bold as to question this prediction, at least indirectly:

...even if God exists, our good may very well not involve some sort of interactive relationship with God [even for its own sake], at least in this life. And if that is so, then God may have no reason to want us to be theists and so may have no reason to provide us with a *sensus divinitatis*.¹⁷

In what follows, I plan to make good on Draper's brief claim by arguing that it is epistemically possible that *God has so arranged the world* that the lives of the earliest humans were the most meaningful and choiceworthy ones achievable for them in the specific time and place they lived, compared to any other time and place they could have feasibly been placed in by God, *precisely because* of their natural nonbelief. However, notice right away that I am modifying Draper's suggestion above to apply to early humans rather than all humans in general, since it is plausible that the formation of theistic concepts and beliefs will be essential for some earthly careers to be of choiceworthy meaning.

To achieve this aim I first explicate Thaddeus Metz's fundamentality theory of meaning in life, and Robin Collins' notion of connection-building so that we have a framework for understanding what it is

¹² Tucker, "Satisficing and Motivated Submaximization" (in the *Philosophy of Religion*). By choiceworthy I mean (i) an agent A aims at getting as much of good G as A can, but (ii) A can choose a suboptimal option with respect to G because of some countervailing consideration. By the contrary of choiceworthy (unchoiceworthy) I mean that (i) an agent A aims at getting merely enough of good G for its own sake when A could have brought about more of good G, but (ii) A chooses a suboptimal option with respect to G without a countervailing consideration. This allows us to say the even if there is no best possible realization, or best possible decision procedure for God's Axiarchic goal, we would still predict a choiceworthy rather than an unchoiceworthy realization of that goal.

¹³ Of course this assumes that theism predicts God would create a physical non-abstract reality and embodied moral agents as lowly as human beings. While I think Axiarchism leads to the prediction of both of these facts, I will leave that to another paper for now, and ask that these things merely be granted for the sake of argument.

¹⁴ Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 99-106.

¹⁵ Collins, "The Fine-Tuning for Discoverability."

¹⁶ Dawes, *Theism and Explanation*, 88, and 116. Without such a value theory to aid in specifying God's goal, theism lacks enough empirical content to be testable.

¹⁷ Draper, "God and Evil," 23.

that makes a concrete human life meaningful. Then I lay out four criteria any successful defense must adequately satisfy. Finally, I explicate how it is that my defense adequately satisfies each of these four criteria while also considering objections to my defense as they appropriately relate to each of these four criteria. Also, it is important to note that I have chosen to focus on meaning rather than well-being because I take it as intuitively obvious that most persons are willing to sacrifice their well-being if what is thereby gained is the most meaningful life achievable for them.

Choiceworthy Human Lives

Recall that Axiarchism predicts that physical reality will be intentionally structured so that a choiceworthy degree of moral, intellectual, and aesthetic value will be realized. This implies that for any human person X, God will providentially place X in circumstances which best promote a life of choiceworthy meaning for X in this life and the next. Whether this requires Molinism to be true or not is something I will consider in the ‘Objections’ section of my paper. Before I begin to show that it is epistemically possible that the earliest humans were placed in such choiceworthy circumstances, I will lay out a framework for what it is that makes a human life meaningful by sketching why it is according to Thaddeus Metz’s fundamentality theory of meaning, and Robin Collins’ notion of connection building, that the degree of positive value or meaning that a concrete human life can accrue during its earthly career is *constituted* by the right kinds of *achievements, pursuits, and personal connections* (human and divine).

Fundamentality Theory & Achievements

Thaddeus Metz’s fundamentality theory claims that:

...meaning in life is a matter of positively orienting one’s and other’s rational structure towards fundamental objects, conditions of human existence that are largely responsible for many other of its conditions. I have argued that this theory plausibly captures the meaningfulness of morality, enquiry, and creativity, and that it not only avoids the major counter-examples to all other theories of life’s meaning, but also incorporates their salient kernels of truth.¹⁸

By *rational structure* Metz means all intuitive facets and *degrees* of intelligence that only human beings possess or are capable of such as cognition, intention, and judgement. For example, love is a relationship that requires a sophisticated degree of intelligence, and meaning comes from loving what is judged to be worthy. The non-rational nature would be those facets of a human being’s existence that are shared with animals (e.g. pleasure, maintenance of life).¹⁹

By *fundamental objects, or conditions* of X, Metz means something that is responsible for the obtaining of X. The fundamental conditions of human life are threefold: those of a living human person, human life as a collective, and the environment in which humans live. These three conditions are fundamental precisely because they are responsible for the obtaining of many other conditions of human life.

By *positively orienting* Metz means that one’s mental states that are capable of rationality ought to exhibit a pro-attitude towards those conditions of human existence that are fundamental, or largely responsible for many of its other conditions.²⁰ It is the positive orientation of one’s reason towards fundamental conditions that accounts for the meaningfulness of the good, the true, and the beautiful.

Outstanding *moral achievement*, exemplified by moral saints and heroes, is a matter of positively orienting one’s rationality toward conditions that account for much else of a person’s life. Promoting equality and liberty, and improving health conditions are positive responses to the rational nature of another person that also involve sharing in another’s life. This is why *the good* is meaningful.²¹

¹⁸ Metz, *Meaning in Life*, 239.

¹⁹ Ibid., 222-223.

²⁰ Ibid., 223-226.

²¹ Ibid., 226-228.

One's *intellectual reflection* and *achievement* will be meaningful according to the degree one's rational structure ascertains certain facts that are largely responsible for a wide array of other facts with respect to human nature, human reality, and the human environment. For example, knowledge of DNA, space-time, and what is metaphysically ultimate are highly meaningful. This is why *the true* is meaningful.²² It is important to keep in mind that 'the true' need not be literally the truth on Metz theory. It is enough to merely pursue 'the true' by engaging in intellectual reflection. Although meaning for early humans is connected to creating and discovering truths about fundamental conditions of human existence, I will argue in the 'Sufficiently Outweighing Condition' section below that having true beliefs about theistic concepts could have negatively impacted the meaningfulness of their lives in other important fundamental domains of meaning, so much so that forming theistic concepts and beliefs would have prevented them from obtaining a choiceworthy life of meaning.

Meaningful *aesthetic achievements* in creativity and art must be about those facets of human existence that are responsible for the obtaining of many other fundamental conditions of that existence. This accounts for the differences in merit warranted by a novel about excrement compared to novels about death, love, and family. This is why *'the beautiful'* is meaningful.²³

For the purposes of my argument I am going to assume along with Metz that the fundamentality theory of meaning is largely correct:

It would be presumptuous to say that the search for an adequate theory of what makes a life meaningful is over, given how few philosophers have undertaken the enquiry in earnest. However, the fundamentality theory is now the one to beat.²⁴

Fundamentality Theory & Pursuits

According to the fundamentality theory the *pursuit* of meaning itself confers meaning on one's life insofar as it:

...accounts for a wide array of human attitudes and pursuits that characterize human life as such. Indeed, it underwrites much of what we prize and are willing to make sacrifices for such as marriage, children, religion, justice, beneficence, art, beauty, education, knowledge...For another, the pursuit of meaning also explains much of human life that we abhor...the most destructive projects undertaken in the twentieth century...have been mainly done...out of...a misdirected attempt to participate in something greater than oneself...²⁵

In other words, because the drive to seek out ends beyond ourselves is fundamental to human nature, such *pursuits* themselves bring meaning into one's life.²⁶

Human and Divine Connections

A connection is a special sort of relation between persons resulting from the consequences of meaningful pursuits and achievements in the past:

The basis for hypothesizing such connections is that people commonly claim to feel deeply connected to other human beings, such as their parents, their spouses, or someone who has greatly helped them in times of suffering and hardship. For example, people who have risked their lives for each other (such as in war) often feel such a connection and attach great value to it. Such connections are often expressed by saying that the other person is "like family" or is like a "part" of one's self.²⁷

²² Ibid., 228-229.

²³ Ibid., 230-231.

²⁴ Ibid., 249.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Collins, "The Connection-Building Defense," 222-235.

For the purposes of my defense, connections of appreciation, contribution, and intimacy that are formed as the result of positively orienting one's and other's rational structure toward fundamental objects are the three types of connections that will be most *essential* to my argument. The *connection of appreciation* occurs when one has appreciation and gratitude for another person because of what that person has done. The *connection of contribution* occurs whenever a person significantly contributes to the welfare of others. The *connection of intimacy* often occurs or accompanies the connection of appreciation and contribution because it often produces a sense of intimate interconnection between contributor and recipient in that each becomes 'a part' of the other's life.²⁸ Call this set of three connections (appreciation, contribution, and intimacy), *connections of ACI*. It is important to note that though connections of ACI can objectively be formed in this life without anyone being cognizant of them, at the same time the great value they possess cannot be fully realized unless epistemic illumination of their existence is provided to natural nonbelievers in the next life. Lastly, because these connections can be formed between two kinds of persons, human and divine, it will be helpful to briefly sketch the ways in which connections of ACI are formed in relation to early humans, God, and natural nonbelief.

Type I Connections of ACI (Human-Human)

These are potential connections of ACI formed between humans that result from pursuits and achievements that correspond to the fundamentality theory of meaning. In the case of natural nonbelief, these connections could be formed by generations of early humans *being the means by which* theistic concepts and beliefs were created and discovered. Indeed, given that God's essence just is perfection, where perfection is creative (beautiful), knowledgeable (true), benevolent (good), and metaphysically ultimate personhood, it is not hard to see that the discovery and development of religious *knowledge* is indirectly related to the discovery and development of every other type of *practical* and *theoretical* knowledge pertaining to fundamental conditions of human existence.

Type II Connections of ACI (Divine-Human)

These are potential connections of ACI formed between God and humans. There are at least two ways that divine-human connections of ACI would have a bearing on the meaningfulness of the lives of the earliest humans.

First, there is a sense in which the prevention of natural nonbelief would have *negatively impacted* the potential meaningfulness of the lives of the earliest humans with respect to Type I connections of ACI afforded by natural nonbelief. If God was the means (via any possible mode of action: interventionist, non-interventionist, episodic, continuously) by which the earliest humans apprehended, or discovered and developed theistic concepts and beliefs, then had early humans never existed, they could not have been the means by which, however slowly, the discovery and development of religious *knowledge*, and every other type of *practical* and *theoretical* knowledge indirectly related to theistic concepts and beliefs, were developed and discovered. Put simply, the idea is that early humans had an important role in slowly generating such knowledge and early revelation would have prevented them from playing this meaningful role. Hence, the Type I connections of ACI mentioned above would have been eliminated.

Second, even though preventing natural nonbelief would have eliminated Type I connections of ACI afforded by natural nonbelief in early humans, there are at least three ways Type II connections could have *positively added* meaning to their lives. These three Type II connections of ACI could only be formed from within the context of a meaningful relationship with God. In increasing order of meaningfulness they are: *respecting* God, *loving* God, and *communing* with God.

Respecting God would require not treating things as though they were more worthy of one's attentions (idolatry). It would require setting aside time to reflect on God's superlative worth (keeping the Sabbath). It

²⁸ Metz, *Meaning in Life*, 222-235.

would require praying, not blaspheming, and erecting elaborate buildings to pay one's respects.²⁹

The essence of *loving* God is nothing more than an arresting awareness of God's nature and value that tends to break down emotional barriers between oneself and God. It would also include fulfilling the desires and wishes of God.³⁰

Communing with God would either involve an actual union with God, or imitating God by sharing His point of view even if you do not literally become one with Him. This would involve constantly having God in mind, bringing Him, and perhaps seeing Him into everything one does.³¹

Importantly however, early humans who were blameless for their natural nonbelief would not have been able to form these Type II connections of respect, love, and communion in *this life*.

Having outlined the achievements, pursuits, and personal connections that constitute meaning, I will conclude my exploration of meaning in life by showing how to measure the net total meaning of any given individuals existence.

Matter vs. Anti-Matter

The number line for measuring the meaning in a concrete human life constituted by achievements, pursuits, and personal connections moving from positive numbers to negative numbers will be scaled according to degrees of *matter* to the right, and *anti-matter* to the left. Anti-matter designates the concept of the dis-valuable scale of meaning that contrasts with those facets of a life that have value, or matter. For example, helping the hungry matters, but blowing up the Eiffel Tower anti-matters. The former would be given some positive degree of value, while the latter would be given some negative degree of value. Hence, the total degree of meaning that a concrete human life can have will be the net total of the positively valuable achievements, pursuits, and personal connections (human and divine) that matter, plus the negative value of the achievements, pursuits, and personal connections (human and divine) that anti-matter.

In sum, *achievements* are agent-objective goods that robustly involve the agent and her efforts in promoting goods in morally permissible ways; *pursuits* are agent-subjective goods where the agent is subjectively attracted to what she is doing; and *personal connections* are the inter-agent goods that involve promoting goods in others, or others promoting goods in herself, in morally permissible ways.³² According to the fundamentality theory of meaning, the final measure of overall meaning in a human life will be the net total of matter and anti-matter that any valuable and dis-valuable achievements, pursuits, and personal connections confer onto such a life. If there is anything else that makes a life *matter* or *anti-matter* that is not captured by the fundamentality theory of meaning, and connection building, it would have to be considered, but I would predict that it would not weaken my overall argument, and may actually make it stronger.

Having now explicated Thaddeus Metz's fundamentality theory of meaning in life, and Robin Collins' notion of connection building so that we have a framework for understanding what it is that makes a concrete human life meaningful, I am now ready to clearly state what my defense claims, lay out the four criteria any successful defense must adequately satisfy, and then show how it is my defense adequately satisfies each of these four criteria while also considering *objections to my defense* as they *appropriately relate* to each of these four criteria.

The Central Claim of My Defense

In light of the foregoing analysis, and what is to come, the central claim of my defense will be as follows:

Since theism entails Axiarchism, and it is far from clear on our total available evidence that eliminating the possibility of natural nonbelief would have allowed early humans to realize a choiceworthy net total of matter and anti-matter in this life

²⁹ Ibid., 119.

³⁰ Ibid., 120.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 197-198.

as a result of the personal connections they formed via meaningful achievements and pursuits, the degree to which natural nonbelief supports naturalism over theism is softened.

As it stands, I have not yet provided any good reason to think ‘it is far from clear’ that natural nonbelief does not favor naturalism over theism on ‘our total evidence.’ Before attempting to show this, however, it will be beneficial to outline the four necessary and sufficient conditions any successful defense must satisfy. After that, I will use the framework of these four conditions to show why ‘it is far from clear’ that natural nonbelief supports naturalism over theism on ‘our total evidence’ while also considering objections to my defense as they appropriately relate to each of these four criteria.

Four Conditions Any Successful Defense Must Satisfy

Defenses are attempts to give a morally sufficient reason that makes it epistemically possible that God is justified in permitting some evil.³³ According to most theists, a reason counts as morally sufficient when the evil permitted is connected with a greater good in a way that meets the following four conditions:

- (i) The Necessity Condition: If God permits an evil to occur, it must be because the good that is in fact connected with it would not have been secured at a ‘lower price’ (i.e. with less evil), or the good would not have obtained without allowing either the evil in question or some other evil that is as bad or worse. For example, the necessity condition would not be satisfied by a surgeon who amputates your entire leg to prevent any further spreading of gangrene when amputating your foot would have sufficed. The good of preventing the spread of gangrene could have been achieved with less evil, or at a ‘lower price.’
- (ii) The Sufficiently Outweighing Condition: The greater good in question must be ‘sufficiently outweighing,’ rather than merely ‘outweighing.’ This prevents cases where an extra measure of overall goodness might require allowing a substantial additional quantity of evil, and that substantial quantity might well make the overall greater balance of good over evil not worth the price. This explains why a defense for some evil should seek to explain not only how evil is a necessary condition for some outweighing good, but also why it would not be better to have neither the evil, nor the good that it spawns. For example, if I smash your \$20,000 car which also has priceless sentimental value for you, but give you \$20,001 to try and sufficiently outweigh the evil of having a smashed car, this would not satisfy the ‘Sufficiently Outweighing Condition’ because it would have been better to have neither the smashed car nor the \$20,001 I gave you.
- (iii) The Rights Condition: The Rights Condition stipulates that God cannot properly permit an evil unless the following condition is satisfied:

When there are innocent victims of evil, those evils must not only be necessary conditions for outweighing goods in general, they must also be necessary conditions for outweighing goods for the victims, objectively, and the victims must prefer the outweighing goods, subjectively.

This prevents God from using someone as a mere means to an end.

- (iv) The Epistemic Condition: There is an additional epistemic condition that an explanation of some evil must satisfy to count as a defense. For example, theists often employ defenses to try to mitigate the evidential force of various facts about evil in the world. Unlike a theodicy, a defense is merely true *for all we know*. There isn’t any *independent reason* to think that it is likely true.³⁴

Thus, any adequate defense has to show how the evils that occur are necessary for sufficiently outweighing goods, and how the victims of the evil are directly and properly compensated for their role in the overall scheme.³⁵ Having shown what four criteria any successful defense must satisfy, I will now systematically

³³ Though Schellenberg wants to distance hiddenness arguments from any talk of evil, Draper speaks of the good of knowledge, and the corresponding evil of ignorance. We could also speak of natural nonbelief as a bad state of affairs, or an ‘unchoiceworthy’ state of affairs as I have defined that term if it is preferred.

³⁴ Dawes, *Theism and Explanation*, 133-135.

³⁵ Summarized and borrowed from Murray, “Defense,” 355-359.

evaluate my proposed defense against the aforementioned four conditions while also considering objections to my defense as they appropriately relate to each of these four criteria.

Necessity Condition

Just to be clear, my defense is not committed to the claim that the lives of early humans who were nonresistant nonbelievers could not have had *any* positive meaning constituted by achievements, pursuits, and personal connections without natural nonbelief. Rather, it claims that there is a specific type of positive meaning constituted by achievements, pursuits, and personal connections that are only possible for early human beings because of natural nonbelief. Even though achievements and pursuits are intrinsic positive meaning makers in the absence of personal connections being formed, they take on a significant degree of additional meaning when they combine and extend beyond themselves to form Type I connections of ACI. Keeping this in mind, I am now ready to show that the personal connections secured by natural nonbelief form a family of irreplaceable goods.

Type I Connections of ACI

To show this it will be helpful to add and defend the following two principles: Transcending Limits, and Leaving Traces.

(i) Transcending Limits: Everything else being equal, the value of a set of positive personal connections increases when they are formed via transcending limits that keep one or more persons from something finally valuable.

This principle explains why many conditions that intuitively confer meaning on life are instances of transcending limits and obtaining, or contributing to the obtaining of reaching something that is finally valuable,³⁶ rather than some aim that is regressive and/or circular.³⁷ For example, finding a cure for cancer, creating a great work of art, or achieving immortality would all be meaning conferring in virtue of transcending substantial limits. It also explains why the personal connections formed by *many generations* of human beings that contributed to the obtaining something finally valuable, such as the abolition of slavery, are of great value. The idea then is that the lives of the *many generations* of early humans who through cultural evolution,³⁸ eventually transcended the limits of their religious knowledge by *contributing* to the obtaining of theistic concepts and beliefs, is of great final value.

Indeed, given that God's essence just is perfection, where perfection is creative (beautiful), knowledgeable (true), benevolent (good), and metaphysically ultimate personhood, it is not hard to see how the discovery and development of religious *knowledge* is indirectly related to every other type of *practical* and *theoretical* knowledge. This is important because while it is unlikely that the majority of early humans were transcending limits by engaging in metaphysical investigation and reflection, it is highly likely that they were actively engaged in mastering practical and theoretical knowledge of the environment, expanding the circle of altruism, creating new and interesting cultural artifacts, and so on, which are all part and parcel of what constitutes a meaningful life on the fundamentality theory of meaning. So then, early humans would significantly lose out on opportunities to obtain meaningful lives by transcending

³⁶ Metz, *Meaning in Life*, 130.

³⁷ Such as in the mythological tale of Sisyphus.

³⁸ Cruz and Smedt, "Reformed and evolutionary epistemology," 17-18: "Many human cognitive capacities are underspecified, and require cultural input for their proper functioning. To name but two, our evolved number sense and language faculty require a sustaining cultural environment for their proper functioning. Few would argue that these faculties are defective or broken because they want cultural input for their proper development. Likewise, an untutored *sensus divinitatis* needs to be supplemented with other sources of knowledge, such as culturally transmitted Scripture." Of course, this assumes that Scripture is inspired, if at all, from the bottom-up rather than top-down. Fortunately for my defense, this assumption is supported by the majority of Biblical scholars.

limitations in *all fundamental* domains of human knowledge if God had instead been the primary means by which early humans formed theistic concepts and beliefs.

Straightforwardly then, the human-human connections of ACI that resulted from the many generations of the earliest humans that eventually transcended the limits of natural nonbelief directly, and all other fundamental domains of theoretical and practical knowledge indirectly, increased the value of the set of positive connections between the earliest humans and the rest of the human race. As a result, the meaningfulness of the lives of early humans was increased precisely because of the design of their minds.

(ii) Leaving Traces: Everything else being equal, the value of a set of positive connections increases when the contributions in the set leave long standing traces.

Meaning, unlike pleasure, can continue to increase long after we are dead. This principle explains why it seems to most of us better that 5,000 people benefit from and recognize one's accomplishments now, and another 5,000 also do so in the next generation, than that 10,000 do so now, but none do so posthumously. One's life tends to matter more the greater its earthly impact. We tend to want to make ripples that extend far into the future, or leave long standing traces behind upon our deaths.³⁹

Straightforwardly then, the greater the long standing traces left behind by the earliest humans directly related to the creation and discovery of theistic concepts and beliefs, and indirectly related to all other fundamental domains of theoretical and practical knowledge, the greater will be the meaning of the lives of natural nonbelievers. Indeed, because 98 percent of the entire human race lived after the time of Jesus,⁴⁰ a percentage which will only continue to rise, it would seem that the two percent of early humans that directly contributed to the creation and discovery of theistic concepts prior to Jesus, and indirectly related to all other fundamental domains of theoretical and practical knowledge, left behind some of the longest standing, and most significant traces one could hope for! As a result, the meaningfulness of the lives of early humans was increased precisely because of the design of their minds.

In sum, looking at the issue historically and evolutionarily, had the earliest human beings formed theistic concepts and beliefs from the start, then, according to the Transcending Limits, and Leaving Traces Principles, the positive increase in value of the set of human-human connections of ACI afforded by natural nonbelief and formed between the early humans and the collective human race would have been eliminated. While it is hard to know what the most choiceworthy balance between the degree of limited religious knowledge for the earliest humans and the set of achievable human-human connections of ACI is, it seems plausible to think that what Cognitive Science of Religion and Darwinian evolution imply about the first humans, and their beginning points, allowed for a choiceworthy set of these types of personal connections to be formed.

However, the question that arises at this point is: why was natural nonbelief best for early humans, but not for others? This question will be fully answered over the course of the next three sections: Sufficiently Outweighing Condition, Rights Condition, and Epistemic Condition.

Sufficiently Outweighing Condition

According to this condition, the extra measure of overall goodness that natural nonbelief secures might not explain *why it would not have been better to have neither natural nonbelief, nor the good that it spawns*. In other words, limited religious knowledge may only come at the cost of other positive goods that are so great that the goods secured by natural nonbelief are not worth the price. That alleged price is to miss out on Type II connections of ACI in *this life*:

... [a] relationship with an infinitely rich personal reality would have to be the greatest good any human being could possibly experience, if God exists. But then why this talk of some other good, for the sake of which God would sacrifice such relationship?⁴¹

³⁹ Metz, *Meaning in Life*, 50.

⁴⁰ Kreps, quoted in D'Souza, *What's So Great About Christianity?* 64.

⁴¹ Schellenberg, "What Divine Hiddenness Reveals."

This is the most serious objection that can be brought against my defense.

Recall that according to my defense, the sufficiently outweighing good secured by natural nonbelief for early humans was to live an earthly career that was the most meaningful and choiceworthy one achievable for them in this life. But is it plausible to think this sufficiently outweighing good can require hiddenness? Wouldn't early humans necessarily have lived the most meaningful and choiceworthy ones achievable for them by forming Type I and II connections of ACI rather than just Type I connections of ACI afforded by natural nonbelief in this life? In order to answer yes to the first question, and no to the second, my general strategy will be to argue that the earliest humans were in the:

...unusual circumstances in which a lover [God] may lack the resources to accommodate the possible consequences of openness [i.e. valuing relationship for its own sake], that is, to make them consistent with the flourishing of all relevant parties [i.e. the greatest good of natural nonbelievers]...⁴²

If I can show that it is plausible that God as lover could have been in the unusual circumstances of not being able to achieve the most meaningful and choiceworthy earthly careers for early humans by being open to a relationship with natural nonbelievers, then this would imply that a perfectly loving God could have the very best reason to remain hidden from them. Now, it may initially sound plainly false that the earliest humans could have had the most meaningful lives available to them in this life only if God remained hidden from them, but that this claim is in fact plausible should be clear from the following three relatively uncontroversial observations.

(i) The fact that it is possible, and indeed actual, that persons who do not have a meaningful relationship with God have lived lives more meaningful than those who do, or did, means that people who have formed Type II connections of ACI to varying degrees in this life do not necessarily live more meaningful earthly careers than those persons who only form Type I connections of ACI to varying degrees in this life. This implies that even if Type II connections of ACI are sufficient for a meaningful life, they are not necessary. Moreover, it would also show that the best objection to my defense is weakened, namely, Type II connections of ACI *do not* account for what makes a person's earthly career *superlatively* meaningful, or the most meaningful it can be in *this life*.

(ii) Even more important to realize is the fact that some people who have formed Type II connections in this life to varying degrees are *distracted* from forming superlative Type I connections of ACI to varying degrees largely *because of* their access to theistic concepts and beliefs. Owing to this fact, it is plausible to think that some nonresistant nonbelievers could have earthly careers that are more meaningful apart from having cognitive access to theistic concepts and beliefs than they otherwise could have lived in the midst of a meaningful relationship with God in *this life*.

In the West, the typical theist goes to church and respects, loves, and communes with God, but by and large does not live a life that is significantly more meaningful than several non-theists with respect to Type I connections of ACI. Even more interesting is that typical adherents to theism in the West are not nearly as concerned with pursuits and achievements relating to fundamental conditions such as feeding the hungry, eradicating human slavery, advancing medicine, and the like. Instead, the typical theist is distracted from these pursuits and achievements precisely because of their cognitive access to theistic concepts and beliefs that narrow their focus to be primarily on religiously oriented activities such as making converts, and attending church gatherings that are not of superlative meaning in this life. This implies that a nonresistant nonbeliever in the West may be better off in terms of having an earthly career of choiceworthy meaningfulness by not becoming a theist if they would instead form deeper and more intense Type I connections of ACI apart from forming any Type II connections in this life.

One great example of this to my mind is Lisa Kristine; a humanitarian who photographs cultures around the world bringing awareness to moral evils such as human slavery. Her photographs of human slavery have been shared during her TED talks, online, and in her photo gallery in Sonoma, CA. These photographs are very emotionally gripping and stir people to take action against such evils. Assuming Lisa Kristine is

⁴² Schellenberg, "Divine Hiddenness and Human Philosophy."

a nonresistant nonbeliever (which to all appearances she seems to be), it is not at all improbable to think that had Lisa Kristine become a typical Western theist that her life could have been far less meaningful than her actual life because she might not have entered into the same vocation, but instead pursued something less meaningful like setting up social gatherings at her local church, spending lots of money on food to try and entice people to come to her local church, and so on, precisely because of her beginning a meaningful relationship with God in this life.

The crucial point is that it is possible that if natural nonbelievers entered into a meaningful relationship with God in this life by having cognitive access to theistic concepts and beliefs, then certain salient cultural, psychological, environmental, and biological features could have distracted, or even hindered them from living a choiceworthy earthly career of meaning in this life by forming superlative Type I connections of ACI. In fact, there is an even stronger reason to think this could be the case based on certain historical facts about those who did have a meaningful relationship with God in *this life*.

(iii) There have been persons who formed Type II connections of ACI in *this life* who not only ended up having an earthly career constituted by such a high degree of *anti-matter* that it is unclear whether their lives were overall positively meaningful, even given Type II connections of ACI, but who also seemed motivated to perform egregious acts of anti-matter *precisely because of* their cognitive access to theistic concepts and beliefs coupled with whatever salient cultural, psychological, environmental, and biological features that were at work. Here I am thinking of events in history ‘done in the name of God’ such as the Crusades, witch hunts, the Inquisition, and so on. In the case of natural nonbelievers then, it is easy to see how it is plausible to think that they could have had earthly careers that were much more meaningful in terms of Type I connections of ACI without having cognitive access to theistic concepts and beliefs in *this life*, especially if having such cognitive access to theistic concepts and beliefs would have been part of the difference making features that led them to perform such egregious acts of anti-matter such as witch hunts, and the like.

In sum, it is plausible to think cognitive access to theistic concepts and beliefs can distract one from forming Type I connections of ACI which are superlatively meaningful in this life. Worse still, some theists have performed such egregious acts of anti-matter precisely because of their theism that it is unclear whether the net total of meaning in their lives is positive even given their meaningful relationship with God in this life. Moreover, given the Type I connections afforded by natural nonbelief above, and the fact that it is possible that natural nonbelievers could have been in one or both of the two unusual circumstances I have outlined above, if they had cognitive access to theistic concepts and beliefs, then this implies that a perfectly loving God would have the best motivation to remain hidden from natural nonbelievers in *this life*. That motivation is to avoid being open to relationship with natural nonbelievers *for its own sake* if it would result in sacrificing a life of choiceworthy meaningfulness for them by forsaking a whole brilliant world of value for the earliest humans by reducing the complexity, diversity, and particularity of countless Type I connections of ACI formed by means of:

...new opportunities for the exercise of moral freedom and responsibility, cultivating character, making choices that affect one’s destiny, cooperation with others, meaningful investigation and intellectual development [in the good, the true, and the beautiful], not to mention the need for awareness of one’s moral/spiritual deficiencies and for the nurturance of a deeper spiritual maturity.⁴³

Hence, if part of being an excellent lover is awakening to such particularities, beholding the rich diversity and individuality of goods that less-skilled lovers are prone to miss or conflate or reduce, then to suppose that God, the greatest lover of all, would be deficient in that is necessarily false.⁴⁴ Moreover, it is characteristic of the highest forms of human love we know of to either withdraw from an already existing meaningful relationship with another, or to not enter into a meaningful relationship (perhaps until some future time) with another so long as they realize that the person they love can live a superlatively meaningful life by not

⁴³ Schellenberg, “What Divine Hiddenness Reveals.”

⁴⁴ Decosimo, “Intrinsic Goodness and Contingency.”

being open to a relationship with them. Indeed, Type I connections of ACI afforded by natural nonbelief can confer eternal value on the lives of the earliest humans:

Suppose our future life can be divided into small successive units of time, Δt . Now suppose that for each Δt , the conscious experience of some particular positive connection has an intrinsic value of ΔG . Assuming that these successive intrinsic goods can be summed, the sum will continue to grow as long as the connection remains part of one's ongoing experience. Even if the good of these connections only sums to a finite value in an infinite time, that finite value is larger than the total disvalue of any costs that [the possibility of natural nonbelief] for a finite time brings with it in order for these connections to exist. And certainly this is plausible.⁴⁵

Admittedly, in order for these connections to be of eternal value in a person's life there would have to be an afterlife in which all relevant parties were granted epistemic illumination of these positive connections. Surely it is plausible to think God could arrange this to be the case in the afterlife. However, the challenge that remains is to show that it is not improbable to think that all the natural nonbelievers among the earliest humans were *actually* in the unusual circumstances outlined above. Meeting this challenge is *essential* to the success of my defense. However, before meeting this challenge in the 'Epistemic Condition' section below, I will first show that my defense satisfies the 'Rights Condition.'

Right Condition

The Rights Condition raises the question of whether or not God had the right to subject the earliest humans to natural nonbelief. This condition can be formalized as follows:

For any natural nonbeliever S, God has the right to allow S to lack access to a meaningful relationship in *this* life only if there's some outweighing good that S wouldn't enjoy if God didn't allow S to lack such access, and S would prefer the outweighing good over having a meaningful relationship with God in this life.

As mentioned once before, it is important to note that I have chosen to focus on meaning rather than well-being because I take it as intuitively obvious that most persons are willing to sacrifice their well-being if what is thereby gained is the most meaningful life achievable for them. This implies that natural nonbelievers would have chosen to forgo any gain in well-being a relationship with God would have conferred on their earthly careers in this life if what was gained was a life of choiceworthy meaning. Given this, and the fact that the fundamentality theory of meaning quite clearly does not conflate well-being with meaning, there are at least two reasons to think that my defense satisfies the Rights Condition.

First, even though we tend to have a bias toward the future with respect to pain and pleasure in the sense that from any given standpoint in time we want our future to be as good as possible, we lack such a bias in the case of meaning.⁴⁶ In the case of pain, suppose you could either be (A) someone who experienced a great amount of pain yesterday, or (B) someone who will experience a small amount of pain tomorrow. Most would prefer to be (A) even though (A)'s pain is larger. Hence, we have a bias toward the future with respect to pain.

In the case of pleasure, suppose you could either be (A) someone who experienced a great amount of pleasure yesterday, or (B) someone who will experience a smaller amount of pleasure tomorrow. Most would prefer to be (B), even though (B)'s pleasure is smaller. Hence, we have a bias toward the future with respect to pleasure. However, we lack such a bias toward the future with respect to meaningfulness and anti-matter.⁴⁷

In the case of meaningfulness, suppose you could either be (A) someone who did something superlatively meaningful yesterday (i.e. discovery the Theory of Everything), or (B) someone who does something sufficiently meaningful tomorrow (i.e. write a novel). Most would prefer to be (A), rather than (B).

⁴⁵ Collins, "The Connection-Building Defense," 222-235.

⁴⁶ Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 165-166.

⁴⁷ Metz, *Meaning in Life*, 70.

In the case of anti-matter, suppose you could either be (A) someone who is humiliated behind your back (i.e. by having your friends reveal your embarrassing secrets to work colleagues), or (B) someone who will be humiliated only to a small degree in the future (i.e. your spouse flirts with someone else at a party).⁴⁸ Most would prefer to be (B), rather than (A). Both of these thought experiments lend intuitive support to the hypothesis that humans lack a bias toward the future with respect to meaningfulness and anti-matter.

This implies that the earliest humans would have consented to living the most meaningful lives available to them, even if they would have to sacrifice their well-being in this life in various ways such as not experiencing a meaningful relationship with God until the next life. Thus, it is quite plausible to think my suggested solution to natural nonbelief would satisfy the subjective preferences of the earliest humans.

Second, it is possible that the earliest humans were only those humans who, objectively speaking, *lived an earthly career that was the most meaningful and choiceworthy one achievable for them in the specific time and place they lived, compared to any other time and place they could have lived*; and who as we have just seen, subjectively speaking, would have preferred to obtain this outweighing good in this life by not entering into a meaningful relationship with God until the next life.

While I think this is a possible way that God could satisfy the Rights Condition in the case of natural nonbelief, the challenge remains to show that this suggestion is not implausible, which will be addressed in the following section.

Epistemic Condition

Recall that a defense, unlike a theodicy, is merely true *for all we know*. Keeping this in mind, there are six important objections to my defense that try to show it is false, for all we know, and to which I will respond in kind.

Objection 1

In light of my argument thus far, a defender of the argument from natural nonbelief might point out that I still haven't shown the logical compatibility of God's being perfectly loving and the earliest humans lacking access to theistic concepts and beliefs because I have yet to show for any natural nonbeliever X, X was placed in circumstances which best promoted a choiceworthy life of meaning for X in this life. Indeed, if history is any indicator, a meaningful relationship with God in this life can often provide *extra* motivation for someone to form Type I connections of ACI, and hence live earthly careers rife with superlative meaning. Thus, it seems plausible to think that people with access to theistic concepts and beliefs often live lives of seemingly choiceworthy meaning by forming connections of Types I and II. This implies that the defense I have offered is probably not true for all we know. However, I have three responses to this objection that reestablish my defense as being true for all we know.

Reply 1

First, as we have seen, the history of Christianity also contains a sizable number of people who live lives that have a high degree of anti-matter precisely because of their access to theistic concepts and beliefs. Here I am referring to the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Witch Hunts, and the like. Indeed, we might even wonder if such persons would have lived more meaningful lives if they did not have access to theistic concepts and beliefs.

Second, even if nonresistant nonbelievers who would obtain the most choiceworthy lives of meaning in this life apart from a meaningful relationship with God are the exception rather than the rule, then this would be quite consistent with my defense since only two percent⁴⁹ of humanity falls under the category of natural nonbelief as Jason Marsh defines it.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 71.

⁴⁹ Kreps, quoted in D'Souza, *What's So Great About Christianity?* 64.

Third, we can concede that it would be fantastically improbable that by *sheer happenstance* it just turned out that all those who were natural nonbelievers are those same persons who would not have had earthly careers of choiceworthy meaningfulness in this life if they had access to theistic concepts and beliefs. But that is not my defense. My defense is that a *provident God has so arranged the world* that the lives of the earliest humans were the most meaningful and choiceworthy ones achievable for them in the specific time and place they lived, compared to any other time and place they could have feasibly been placed in by God. Because:

...such a world would not look outwardly any different from a world in which the circumstances of a person's birth are a matter of happenstance...⁵⁰

it is not at all implausible that God has ordered the actual world in the way described. Perhaps someone would claim that God can only arrange the world this way if He has middle knowledge and that makes my defense implausible. However, even if that is true, most scientists and philosophers do not think humans have libertarian free will, and most philosophers are compatibilists or semi-compatibilists which implies that my defense is consistent with 'Laplacian providence.' If a Laplacian demon could providentially order such a world of morally responsible creatures, then, after all, so could God.

Objection 2

There is an old adage: a hypothesis which can explain everything can't explain anything. To say that this defense can explain why those who have lost their theistic faith because that is what would result in a life of choiceworthy meaning for them risks becoming an unfalsifiable defense.

Reply 2

It's important to keep in mind that I am only offering a defense. I am simply saying that, for all we know, relationships that are cut off early could in reality contribute to the very relationship in question, later on. Moreover, I already argued that it is consistent with the highest forms of human love we know of for two lovers to be involved in a meaningful relationship with one another for some period of time, and then for one lover to withdraw from that meaningful relationship even if the other party doesn't want to, or if life becomes difficult in some way for one or both parties after the cessation of the relationship. For example, in the movie *the Notebook*, Noah ended the meaningful relationship he had developed with Allie because he knew that she would live a more meaningful life apart from continuing a relationship with him. Of course Allie did not want the relationship to end and even refused to end it, but Noah loving and admirably let her go because he knew that her future would be more meaningful for her without him in it. Interestingly, Noah's decision to sacrifice some time in his relationship with Allie only contributed to the flourishing of a future meaningful relationship that was started again between the two of them later on in life. However, it wouldn't be God *per se* that is hindering people in this life, it would be the formation of theistic concepts and beliefs along with other salient cultural, psychological, environmental, and biological features distracting, or hindering persons who once had a meaningful relationship with God, but no longer, from living a choiceworthy earthly career of meaning in this life. Simply because such nonresistant nonbelievers do not currently prefer the absence of a meaningful relationship with God they once had does not mean that they are not objectively living an earthly career of choiceworthy meaning, and that they wouldn't prefer such a life; at least in hindsight.

Nonetheless, there are certain observations which would count against my defense—for example, if lots of nonresistant nonbelievers committed suicide, didn't live meaningful lives, couldn't live more meaningful lives than theists—but the fact that we do not have such observations bodes well for my defense. After all, I am willing to grant that the probability of natural nonbelief is extremely high on naturalism, and very low

⁵⁰ Craig, "How Can Christ Be the Only Way to God?"

on theism relative to certain background knowledge, and that my defense only offsets this comparative probability to some extent in favor of theism so that natural nonbelief still favors naturalism over theism; just not as much.

Objection 3

Although it might be true that being part of a cultural story that eventually gives rise to theism might be valuable, does it have to last so long? If we suppose that anatomically-modern humans have been around for, say, 100,000 years and that theistic belief is about 10,000 years old, is there not a huge lack of proportionality here? Isn't the theistic part of the narrative taking too long to really get going?

Reply 3

Even though the *temporal duration* of the many generations of anatomically modern humans who couldn't form theistic concepts and beliefs is very long relative to the total amount of time human beings have lived on Earth, the *actual number* of anatomically modern human beings that lived between 100,000 and 10,000 years ago only constitutes about *two percent of the total number of modern humans that have ever lived on Earth!*⁵¹ As time continues into the future, this percentage will only continue to shrink. Of course two percent still amounts to millions of people, but it's important to keep the larger perspective in view.

Objection 4

The defense would be more plausible if, given theism, non-theistic concepts were on the way out. But the demographics do not support this position, since the fastest growing religion is nonbelief, and many religions remain non-theistic.

Reply 4

All that my defense is claiming is that it is epistemically possible that *God has so providentially arranged the world* that the lives of all natural nonbelievers (and even any future nonresistant nonbelievers) turn out to be the most meaningful and choiceworthy ones achievable for them in the specific time and place they lived, compared to any other time and place they could have feasibly been placed in by God, *precisely because* of the unusual circumstances the formation of theistic concepts and beliefs would have created for them with respect to living a life of choiceworthy meaning. As such, my defense isn't inherently committed to there being any specific time and place in human history in this life where non-theistic belief has to be on the verge of extinction; maybe it never will be!

Objection 5

This defense seems to contradict the Abrahamic Scriptures which take a dim view of nonbelief. If natural nonbelief was part of God's providential plan for human history, then why don't we see any indication of this in the Abrahamic Scriptures? Moreover, these Scriptures seem to explicitly condemn belief in all other gods that aren't the Abrahamic god.

Reply 5

This objection assumes that the plenary, confluent, and verbal theory of inspiration - which entails inerrancy - is the correct theory of inspiration to apply to the Abrahamic Scriptures. If the Abrahamic Scriptures were

⁵¹ Kreps, quoted in D'Souza, *What's So Great About Christianity?* 64. This assumes a start date of about 100,000 years ago for anatomically modern humans as well.

inspired in this manner, then everything contained in them would coincide with divine speech, and verses like Exodus 34:13-14 would be problematic for my defense. However, there are good independent reasons that have convinced the majority of Biblical scholars that the Abrahamic Scriptures do not take a divine point of view on everything (if at all), even if some specific brand of theism is true. While this may create other questions and problems, they would not be questions and problems for my defense. In fact, my defense can actually help make sense of why God would have given us Scriptures which are, to all appearances, inspired from the bottom up. Religious traditions in general, and the Abrahamic Scriptures in particular, would just be another channel of cultural evolution that gave certain providentially-placed human beings the opportunity to obtain lives of choiceworthy meaning by being the means by which limitations in various fundamental domains of knowledge as covered in the Scriptures were overcome.

Objection 6

A common view in the Christian theological tradition is that salvation requires an explicit act of faith, but this defense presupposes that nonresistant nonbelievers who have not had the opportunity to perform such an act of explicit faith in this life will be saved nonetheless. Theologically speaking, this makes the defense on offer implausible.

Reply 6

While it is orthodox to believe that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus atoned for the sins of mankind, there has never been an orthodox theory of *how* or *why* Jesus' life, death, and resurrection saves mankind. Due to this fact, there are at least four different positions that Christian theologians take with respect to the scope and appropriation of Jesus' atoning life, death, and resurrection for individual or corporate salvation: universalism, inclusivism, accessibilism, and exclusivism. My defense is consistent with the first three out of the four of these positions and is therefore, by no means theologically implausible. In fact, even exclusivists maintain that persons who existed before Jesus (which are the very persons my defense is concerned with) will be judged according to the amount of revelation they had and how they responded to it. It seems to me that if they responded to the amount of revelation they had by living a life of choiceworthy meaning then God could have no better reason for saving them than that.

Having reestablished that my defense is true for all we know—given the kind of theism I have in mind—I can now summarize and conclude my overall argument.

Summary and Conclusion

The central claim of my defense is as follows:

Since theism entails Axiarchism, and it is far from clear on our total available evidence that eliminating the possibility of natural nonbelief would have allowed early humans to realize a choiceworthy net total of matter and anti-matter in this life as a result of the personal connections they formed via meaningful achievements and pursuits, the degree to which natural nonbelief supports naturalism over theism is softened.

In support of my defense, we already saw that theism entails Axiarchism which means the Axiarchic thesis has a probability of 1, if God exists. Given Axiarchism, and if Thaddeus Metz's fundamentality theory of meaning, and Robin Collins' notion of connection building are true, then the reasons I gave for thinking that my defense satisfies the necessity condition, the sufficiently outweighing condition, the rights conditions, and the epistemic condition imply that it is correct to think that 'it is far from clear' that natural nonbelief supports naturalism over theism on 'our total available evidence.' The reasons I gave in support of my defense were as follows:

First, natural nonbelief afforded the earliest humans the opportunity to be *the means by which* a positive set of Type I connections of ACI could be formed that were also *irreplaceable* in their value according to the Transcending Limits, and Leaving Traces Principles.

Second, we saw that it is not improbable to think that the earliest humans were in the unusual circumstances where they actually would live lives of choiceworthy meaningfulness only if they did not have cognitive access to theistic concepts and beliefs since such concepts and beliefs could have (i) motivated them to perform egregious acts that have a high degree of anti-matter, and/or (ii) distracted and hindered them from forming deep and intense superlative Type I connections of ACI afforded by natural nonbelief in this life directly related to theistic concepts and beliefs, and indirectly related to all other fundamental domains of theoretical and practical knowledge. We also saw that these Type I connections of ACI are *sufficiently outweighing* because of the mathematical argument that showed how the positive value of this set of connections can last as ongoing eternal realities between early humans and the rest of the human race in the next life which outweigh the 'evil' of limited religious knowledge of early human beings in this life. I also showed that my defense is consistent with the highest forms of human love.

Third, we saw that the Rights Condition and the Epistemic Condition were adequately satisfied by my defense because it is not implausible to think that a *provident God has so arranged the world* so that the earliest humans had earthly careers that were the most meaningful and choiceworthy ones achievable for them in the specific time and place they lived, compared to any other time and place they could have feasibly been placed in by God, and that God knew that these same natural nonbelievers would consent to being placed in the specific time and place they actually lived because of their lack of bias toward the future with respect to meaning and anti-matter.

Therefore, given that my proposed defense adequately satisfies the four necessary and sufficient conditions, I conclude that I have successfully fleshed out a theistic evolutionary defense for the necessity of humans gradually coming to more and more cognitive knowledge of theistic concepts and beliefs which softens the problem of natural nonbelief.⁵²

In closing, I would like to mention that the fundamental logic of my argument can be applied to all types and tokens of nonresistant nonbelief there may be in this life. Specifically, it is epistemically possible that *God has so arranged the world* that the lives of any and all nonresistant nonbelievers turn out to be the most meaningful and choiceworthy ones achievable for them in the specific time and place they lived, compared to any other time and place they could have feasibly been placed in by God, *precisely because* of the unusual circumstances the formation of theistic concepts and beliefs would have created for them with respect to living a life of choiceworthy meaning.

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⁵² Leech and Visala, "Scientific Approaches to the Philosophy of Religion," 179: "... if God could have enabled true, deeply meaningful, direct relationships for all humans, why did he not do so? Perhaps here the theist would have to develop some defense of the necessity of humans coming to more and more adequate knowledge of God gradually. Possibly a version of theistic evolutionism applied to humans' cognitive and affective capacities might work here."

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