



By Jay B Gaskill

The term *fundamentalism* has been hijacked by narrow minded literalists who lack the ability to think in principles.

Here I propose (and attempt to explain) a new “fundamentalism” in which reasonable minds are able to engage in a mutually heuristic dialogue founded on agreed fundamental ethical principles - like life affirmation and the reverence for creation and life-affirming creativity; and on agreed fundamental integrating principles, like commitment to the ultimate unity of reality, both inside and outside “our heads”, and to the unity of the merely physical and the deeper ultimate. Dialogue requires the humility and enthusiasm of an explorer sharing insights, stories and findings with other explorers.

It is fashionable to attack religion, *sui generis*, as if anyone living in the modern era, whose life is organized by a set of beliefs that cannot be experimentally proved by science, belongs to a strange tribe of superstitious neo-savages.

This business completely misses the most important problem of the human condition. What is that, you ask? Let me answer with an example:

Let's call it the hypothetical Martian anthropologist thought experiment. Imagine if you will, a stranger from a strange land who is conducting "ethical research" on us earthlings, but is handicapped by a veil of ignorance when it comes to religious affiliations and belief systems. This alien scientist is able to closely examine actual human behavior, the family and other interpersonal interactions, the presence or absence of love, honor, mutual respect, veracity, kindness, non-violence and their opposites.

A student of human social evolution might conclude that one of the most important tasks of a civilization or of any organizational ethos within a civilization is the "taming" of the male of the species, the bringing of males into their role as responsible, loving parents and as members of healthy functioning families. The Martian agrees to consider this along with other factors in a comparative study.

The study subjects include the followers of the major religions practiced in the study region, say North America, including Catholics, Protestants, Reform and Orthodox Jews, Mormons, Evangelical Christians, Buddhists, the followers of Islam, Unitarians, secular humanists and the just plain secular. These are just identified as group A, B, C and so on. The Martian is to operate in complete ignorance about what their various belief systems actually mean, just that each group is self-selected for an affinity to a particular set of norms. And our hypothetical alien anthropologist is given basic information about the human family structure, and some history of the evolution of male and female roles from ancient times to the modern era, and the care and treatment of children.

Does anyone doubt that among the better results, measured by interpersonal interactions, the presence or absence of love, honor, mutual respect, veracity, kindness, non-violence and their opposites, that some subgroups will do noticeably better than others?

I would put money, for example, on the Mormons long before I'd risk predicting a strong showing for the "just plain secular." Full disclosure: I am a Judeo-Christian with a universal perspective.

What is the most important problem of the human condition? The strongest candidate is this one:

***How can we expect good behavior out of any sub-population that chooses not to affiliate with people who take goodness seriously and remains unable to affirm "goodness" except as a personal preference?***

Leaving aside, as the Martian's study did, all the metaphysical baggage, this is my question for the critics of "religion":

***How can any decent person demean or criticize anyone who chooses set aside his or her doubts in order to affiliate with a subgroup of people who take being good seriously enough to make it part of their creed?***

Now, as you will quickly see from the balance of this essay, I am not in the "functional religion" camp, the adherents to the idea that "Because there is no ultimate truth, religions should be chosen for other reasons."

I am a "fundamentalist" of a much different stripe. And frankly, I'm a bit irritated at the casual use of the term "fundamentalist" as applied to a certain rigid-minded subset of religious adherents when what we are really talking about is ***uncritical literalism***. Regrettably, the brand "fundamentalism" appears to be taken. But there **are** fundamental moral affirmations, precepts and principles that, when adopted and accepted as true, operate to bring clarity, order and a sense of priorities to scripture, theology, philosophy and the shifting elements of our cultural ethos.

Among these most fundamental affirmations are the love of life, particularly human life, the love of reason and the happy commitment to promote and conserve the blessings of creation, both in nature and as a specifically human activity, our creative endeavors. What we call respect for *human dignity* is a conditional deference to individual volitional integrity, revocable when moral transgressions (within those ordered schemes built on life affirmation, and so on) operate to trample on the human dignity of others.

Understanding the moral order as a rationally arranged array of principles and supporting laws that require practical adjudications, differentially applying common principles and precepts to varying circumstances, is the new fundamentalism, because it a system rationally built on fundamental principles.

But morality is not self-executing. The disease of the modern (and postmodern) mind is the destructive assertion that “Morality is all made up”. This pernicious notion denies the very existence of fundamental moral principles. Worse, this destructive idea prevents us from even entertaining the possibility that the perennial “Why be good?” question can ever be answered on any ultimately satisfying level.

My contention – and bedrock belief – is that the great spiritual disciplines and traditions that do answer the great question, in spite of their detailed variations, are founded on fundamental truths.

The notion of a moral deity – or its functional equivalent by the same, another name, or no name at all – is an inescapable element of any well-supported moral system.

**Every** ethical system must answer the question, “So what?”

Traditional theistic systems, the same belief structures rejected by the empiricist intellectual community as “superstitious” and “unscientific”, have relied to some degree on theologies containing extra-mortal rewards and punishments. But even in medieval times, these belief systems were not self-enforcing in the “real” world.

Civilization always has an implementing role to play: Norms need to be made into laws, and an enforcement mechanism in the “real” world needs to be deployed. The current crisis flows from the decline of the recognized moral legitimacy of such real world enforcement systems at a time when moral relativism and even nihilism give too much credence to the claim that the rules are “just made up to keep us poor people in line.”

A persuasive case can be made that there are inherent rewards “in this life” for adherence to universal ethical norms, particularly where, as here proposed, they are ultimately based on the *integrity principle*.

The prospect of post-mortal sanctions, even if ultimately real, is lost on modern sociopaths. Even in the best of times, ethical rules are never really self-executing. The law not only must rest on acknowledged universal principles, it must be enforced among members of civilization by the social mechanisms of justice. The continued integrity and credibility of this enterprise requires a critical mass of informed individuals who, as I imply at the beginning of this essay, must share a unifying framework of thought and belief.

In this century, we are still dominated by an intelligentsia for whom a narrow materialism and an excessively skeptical empiricism have produced normative paralysis sometimes bordering on soft-nihilism.

The intellectual recognition of the objective reality and benign nature of an Ultimate Being, as the living core of individual being and the source, outside space-time, of all creation, is the bedrock underpinning of moral commitment, and the inspiration of much wisdom. Life can be deepened by living into the vision of that reality.

Courage, peace, grounding, energy, inspiration, solace and joy are found in the sensed benign universal presence, in whatever terms or idiom that essentially indescribable state is portrayed.

And a creation-affirming, ethical world stance results. Transcended are the apparent antagonisms between one's own survival impulses and others, and between the felt creation imperative and other impulses toward conservation. Transcended are all of the tensions engendered in natural conflicts in the world. These conflicts not actually eliminated, but they are trumped by an inner peace. Like the grace of the master of the martial arts, the inner peace flows from a sort of dynamic bi-location, simultaneously both in the conflict and outside all conflict.

A life lived in conscious relationship with Ultimate Being is like that -- a life whose boundaries are never finite, never fully contained in space-time. What then, is the process of moral recovery? Part of the process, probably the most important, is individual and introspective. As we are born into this world and come into adult consciousness, we each must ask and attempt to answer one basic ethical question: *What is the good and why pursue it?*

I invite you to consider a general view that borders closely on the theistic.

The “good” is to discover and pursue your “calling” in the largest normative context, and to achieve this with full integrity. Full integrity embraces three dimensions: internal, external (within “the World”), and universal, i.e. beyond “the World”, or transcendent. Integrity is essential to life. Full integrity is essential to full life. Integrity is, in a very real sense, its own reward.

Your “calling” is your particular “incarnation” of the creation imperative. Here we speak of creation in its most inclusive sense, which includes: applied ethics (as in good works), applied esthetics; the pursuit of knowledge; transmission of knowledge; engagement with the natural world through discovery; preservation of the natural world; exploration; participation in fruitful relationships with civilization and / or individuals in it; and all those direct acts of creation that have been part of the human experience, mundane and not so mundane.

**Transcendence is a basic need. The life imperative gives rise to the creation imperative that supports a thirst for transcendence. Recognition of this is the basis for ethical commitment, understood in the deeper sense that includes creation as a universal affirmation of living, intelligent beings.**

Integrity is essential to transcendence but not sufficient. Without integrity, transcendence is impaired or denied.

With integrity, transcendence occurs to the degree that your life can integrate elements of the universal. In a real sense, it is the universalization of integrity, the adoption of the widest and deepest context for its operation that is the foundation for transcendence.

Achievement of a *personal* consciousness of transcendence is the best answer to the original tension between fact and value (posed by Emanuel Kant), between situation and “rightness,” and the primal conflict between life and death. This is ultimately why we need to pursue our calling(s) with integrity. When integrity incorporates the authentic universal, death is to be avoided but not feared. A personal consciousness of transcendence begins

with an encounter with the numinous<sup>1</sup> field of being, and entails a relationship with the universal center of being. The conscious integration of the universal is a bridge to communion with the center and source of all being. Conscious transcendent integrity, whether achieved through unaided introspection, the discipline of spiritual practice, or as an unbidden gift, places your consciousness, or at least the core of your personal being, where it can survive the flux and transience of “the World”.

## Dignity Again

The “I am” at the core of each conscious being in the universe is due respect. The scientists, the artists, the spiritual minds among us, see evidence of the Mind of God in the revealed essence of the physical, the beautiful and the deep. But separated and scattered throughout Space Time Existence, is the core of the Essence itself, the Essence as Self (as though the Essence were fire shattered into a coruscating shower of individual sparks). This scatteredness that is at once separate and the same is something that is at once of the Creator and of each of us. It is the “I am” that we must respect, the Heart of God.

## Pascal’s Wager Updated

The seventeenth century French mathematician, Blaise Pascal, is probably more famous for his wager about God and the afterlife than the theory of

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<sup>1</sup> *Numinous* is another favorite term, one I first encountered when reading Karen Armstrong’s, *A History of God*. The various definitions converge in describing an apprehension of something ineffable, with great sublimity, beauty, an *encounter* freighted with spiritual implications and even a Presence. Our atheist friends might describe it somewhat dismissively as a mere esthetic state, like Carl Sagan’s rapture when contemplating the earth as a Pale Blue Dot in space. But Sagan’s experience was unmistakably spiritual. It comes down to this: Does the numinous experience evidence a numinous *reality*? Thousands of saints and mystics have reported the latter. I find it hardly coincidental, (nor particularly surprising), that the many recorded accounts of human encounters with the numinous level of experience over the last five millennia (from Moses, the Buddha, the Hasadim, the Christ, the saints, seers, shamans, mystics, artists, musicians, and scientists, the skeptics during unguarded moments, the ordinary people in their “mountaintop experiences”, and most children during their thoughtful innocence) are deeply consistent with the insights that describe two overlapping realms of reality, the material world of space-time events and an eternal realm suffused with meaning and value. Can we dismiss this body of evidence as “unscientific?” Can we ignore the data, disregard the consistent, repeating nature of the human numinous experience, or marginalize the wisdom of five millennia? We can at our peril. I submit that we need to accept this large body of information for what it is: the witnessed accounts of the contact by intelligent conscious beings with a transcendent reality level revealed directly to cognition. The seminal and life-changing experience of contact with the numinous level of reality is primary evidence of the existence and relevance of a supreme Presence who is resident in both realms.

probability and his contributions to the calculus. Crudely, the popular version of the wager is pragmatic in flavor. In the absence of conclusive proof about hell, the wager goes, prudence dictates commitment to the faithful life, since the costs of following that course are minimal compared to the risks of rejecting it only to discover, too late, that the faithful were right all along.

I have argued in other essays that all reality, including our conscious being, is integrated and essentially relational at core at some ultimate level. This seems to strongly suggest that at least some significant aspect of our conscious being may well persist outside Space-time constraints.

Even without a specifically theistic model, this raises the prospect, as I have explicitly suggested here, that no one may disregard the normative significance of creation and integrity in the conduct of one's own life without consequences. The prospect of any continuity of our being post-mortem, it seems to me, carries with it the risk of ultimate accountability.

Pascal was a wise man.

### **Reasonable Theism**

Strictly speaking, the adoption of classic theistic belief is unnecessary to this discussion. The narrow goal of shoring up the shaky foundations of ethics in the 21st Century can probably be achieved without putting a supreme life into the center of ultimate reality.

But I would be remiss if I failed to address this issue from my personal perspective.

In the sunset of the 19th century, Friedrich Nietzsche proclaimed the death of God. Martin Buber has described our experience of the ensuing era as an "Eclipse of God." Eclipse was a carefully chosen metaphor because in a solar eclipse, the sun does not die out. Buber was referring to a vast cultural blindness obscuring our view of deity, and he pointed out that this is not the first such eclipse in the great reach of human history.

I believe that Nietzsche was culturally prescient, but he was ontologically mistaken.

Certainly, the authority of ethics and the ethics of authority have withered away in direct correspondence with the fall of traditional theistic belief. A hollow, secular materialism prevailed among the intelligentsia for the entire 20th century. In this bleak setting, some humanists felt constrained to spin the idea of deity as a useful construct, a convenient organizing principle, desirable, a necessary fiction for our life and presence in the universe to make sense, for our ethics to find firmer ground than the ebb and flow of history.

That fiction has proved inadequate. All extant moral systems constructed solely on secular humanist foundations are dying like flowers in a cellar. Ultimately, secular humanism is crippled by its parochial perspective, its lack of deep connections with the ultimate and its inability to integrate the universal in reality: too little space, too little air, and too little light.

This is my vision of how, in the 21st century, the eclipse will end.

As the eclipse passes, an original Torah insight<sup>2</sup> returns to us. We rediscover that universal creator being is replicated (albeit incompletely) in human consciousness -- that the "image" of the Creator is the master template for all living consciousness. Just as human consciousness is a reflection of the image of the universal-archetypal-consciousness, human potentiality must contain the seeds of Creator-exemplar-directed development. Reality is integrated, unitary, consisting of material and non-material phases, and at core, is relational in character.

The theistic implication is very clear: the individual "I am" exists in relationship with the Ultimate "I AM."

This Creator-created relationship is the best single account for our remarkable capacity for rational interaction with the physical universe, for our innate capacity for moral interaction with other sentient beings, and for the fact of creative inspiration

We reach the full understanding of the implications of creation as a presence within conscious living intelligence and of the subtle hand of creation as a presence operating in the physical universe, in relationship with aware

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<sup>2</sup> That the deity of creation is the author of the fundamental moral law, properly understood is a universal gift to all humanity in its deepest aspects, an instrument of human liberation.

conscious individual being only through a final insight. This insight entails full recognition of the reality, centrality, and normative power of one “universal being,” one creator presence; however named or unnamed, this presence lives.

I submit that it is a natural and ordinary feature of conscious being that deity, in the sense just described, is encountered within one’s own conscious field as a living presence within the numinous level of being. I suggest that the reality of these encounters is denied among epi-skeptics because of the intellectual intimidation prevalent among “serious” scientists who have (properly) rejected the primitivist views of the anti-evolution creationists and other anti-scientific theologies. We are as far beyond that reaction as mature adults are beyond the reactions of their teenage years.

The scope of this short excursion does not allow discussion of the experiences of intelligent persons who have described their encounters with the numinous level of experience. There are important insights in Albert Schweitzer’s *Philosophy of Civilization*, Albert Einstein’s *Out of My Later Years*, and Karen Armstrong’s *A History of God*. In Max Jammer’s *Einstein and Religion, Physics and Theology* the author makes a strong case that Albert Einstein was no atheist.

In the current intellectual climate, it is easier for someone to “come out” as a non-heterosexual, than as one who believes in God. It should be plain from this discussion, and frankly from my own experience, that I have concluded that the numinous experiences of intelligent people are real, that is, that this level of experience represents the interface of cognitive intelligence with the ultimate level of consciousness in Reality, in short the experience of the presence of the God mind.

I also believe that the implications of the integrity imperative for this issue are as interesting as they are serious:

- ❖ If the numinous level of experience is authentic, as I believe it to be, therefore it must be a primary feature of reality.
- ❖ The explanation for this feature of reality must be integrated with the explanation of all reality.
- ❖ That explanation must necessarily include an account for the existence of the subjective being of all sentient actors.

- ❖ That account places us in relationship with Universal Being, as living creator presence.

I should note here in passing that Martin Buber's powerful ethical contribution, the I-Thou relationship and its implications, was a triangular one that included G-d. All attempted "definitions" of G-d are inherently inadequate. But (with this limitation acknowledged) we can say that G-d is (at least) that living center of the universal realm of being without which the (indisputable) reality of our own individual internal being cannot adequately be explained.

Full recognition of this insight comes in interleaved stages. Like the pivotal journey of the Greek speaking Pharisee, Saul/Paul, on the road to Damascus, somewhere along these stages a profound realization strikes. At that moment, the hidden and exposed natures of Universal Being are fully integrated. This is when the personal G-d-eclipse ends. Various universal aspects of inner and outer reality first reappear separately, then in a cascading series stunning individual realizations, they present in a unified whole: The "I am" & the "Thou," the "creation vector," the ground of consciousness, the center of meaning, are all but facets of One, the unified and fully integrated meta-reality which is conscious, alive, and universal. This is a Reality that we can all directly access through introspection, a reality discovered and rediscovered since the dawn of human consciousness, the reality of G-d-in-the-world, the reality of the G-d whose name to Moses was "I am with you."

In this full integration, the ancient insight reappears, towering on the stage of human thought - this is one universal Being, with us, and in us. This is the same insight that gave birth to stage-one monotheism. In next stage monotheism, the relationship between individual living intelligence and deity, and between deity and the general physical universe, is seen to operate in a much less rigidly deterministic milieu. The Newtonian clockwork universe model is dead. Yet G-d lives.

It is through cumulative individual encounters, intellectual and existential, observational and introspective, that deity-in-reality is revealed to us. It will be through such encounters, that the existence of G-d, post-eclipse, however named or unnamed will be recovered by the culture at large as the primal fact.

To be re-discovered as the core reality of conscious being, re-encountered as the Mediator of the relationship between I-and-thou, and re-acknowledged as the engine of creation in a developing universe, Deity awaits our recognition. At the end of the eclipse, we awake to the ultimately real, the “I am,” the Thou, and the creation imperative, as aspects of Ultimate Being.

These fundamental reorientations in our view of and our relationships with reality lead to a renewed vision of the whole of existence, deeply linking sentience, physicality, and potentiality. In this integration, we see reality as fully tri-phasic, consisting of: material, non-material, conscious being (which inheres or emerges in the boundary between the first two.)

This critical stage of our reawakening is like the explorer who first encounters well-wrought artifacts of a great, ancient intelligence, then is stunned by the discovery that these fragments are integrated in a work of magnificent beauty. After further investigation, our explorer is felled by the realization that the entire corpus, beyond anything she has encountered in human art or literature, is a mere footnote to a greater work.

Then she learns that the author is still alive. She looks up. A still small voice speaks to her. “My child.”

Deity’s exposed triune nature -- rational, moral, and creative is to be recognized, honored, and integrated with our new understanding of physical reality, itself seen a phase state of the universal reality that embraces the material, the non-material, and conscious being.

A subtler, but more robust theism emerges from this post deterministic, post mechanistic view of nature. Visions of Thor-like thunderbolts give way to the less strident, but infinitely more persistent and effective presence of true creation. Our expectations about the nature and quality of deity’s actions change fundamentally. The footprints of G-d’s active relationship with physical reality, present within any immediate time-space framework, are seen as fine traces, elusive, discoverable, but actually seen, their outlines boldly visible from a distance.

Consider another implication. All-important facets of reality are within the grasp of all conscious intelligence. Fact and value are endowed with context by deity’s attention.

The reach of conscious intelligence necessarily includes, at the most intimate level, the awareness of deity's actual living presence in space-time. In other words, the active real-time sense of the attention of deity is not an illusion. This, itself, is no radical break with tradition, but validates the most ancient world view that the attention and love of deity is felt as numinous presence, as grace, as the action of the *Ruach*, the Holy Spirit. And this sense of contact with deity inevitably leads us to the practical insight, which we intuitively understand to be true because of our understanding of the nature of deity: All morality (defined as adherence to conduct which is consistent with the nature of deity and consonant with deity's presence in the world) must itself be within the realm of the discoverable truth.

Thus, when Moses apprehended the vision of the bush that burns but is not consumed, he saw a vivid representation of deity's creation-ordering relationship with physical reality, the relationship of conscious being to physicality, the relationship of ultimate being to transitory physical reality. And when he heard the voice of deity asserting ultimate moral authority over his people, he experienced a G-d-mediated insight into universal moral truth. That Moses rendered these core truths concrete, in the context of his people's traditions and culture, does not for a moment make them "merely human" or "only cultural.

Reconnection with Deity is not a matter of logical proof. Rather it is one of discovery. The rebirth of ethics is deeply connected to the rediscovery of the reality of Deity as we discover and recognize aspects of the deity-nature reflected in the deepest ordering of the physical universe. And we re-discover the various aspects of the deity-nature residing in each conscious being as innate potential, as the capacity for inspiration, and the capacity for deep connection with other conscious beings.

The Creator's full nature is latent in the physical world, but absolutely uncontained by its temporal-spatial boundaries.

In the broadest sense, all species of aware beings must exist in a kind of time-lapse snapshot, caught in the eternal process of growth, engaged in the epic struggle of all life, seeking to travel the available developmental paths toward the Creator-meta-archetype. Because of our G-d-creature coherence, we enjoy the capacity not only for rational interaction with the physical universe, but also for moral interaction with all other sentient beings.

With this realization, our ethics take on the capacity to transcend the parochial limitations of our earth bound humanity. Finally, we are ready to encounter the rest of the universe, and to deal ethically with the rest of Creation.

Or so it seems to this one mind, on the third planet, in a particularly blessed solar system, in a universe wherein such things are possible.

JBG

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