

WHY I AM NOT AN ATHEIST

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This talk is a longer and more analytical account of my reversion to Christianity, presented more briefly, to students, in "Escape from Nihilism." A version of "Why I Am Not an Atheist" has appeared in Norman Geisler and Paul K. Hoffman, *Why I Am a Christian* (2001).

If you prefer to hear an audio of the talk, click [here](#).

I have been asked to tell you why I am not an atheist. For some years after deserting the Christian faith of my youth I was an atheist myself, so I know the matter "from the inside." Of course, inside knowledge isn't always superior to outside knowledge, is it? Sometimes it's even inferior to it. A drug addict doesn't understand his addiction better than the doctor does, for he is in the grip of it. Nor do we recommend suicide for the better understanding of self-inflicted death; when life flees, so does understanding. The self-understanding of the atheist has a drawback of much the same kind as the self-understanding of the addict and the suicide. Like the addict, the atheist is self-deceived; like the suicide, he cuts himself off from the means of becoming undeceived.

That is a kind of blindness, but it has become visible to me only in retrospect. I am not an atheist simply, but a repented atheist. It isn't from the experience of having been an atheist that I claim to understand something of atheism, but from the experience of ceasing to be one. You might say that I've acquired an outside view of my inside knowledge.

Now let me confess something. Although there are good and compelling reasons to believe in God, it wasn't from a good and compelling account of these reasons that I began to believe in Him. In fact, it wasn't until several years after my conversion that I was able to give a rational account of it at all. At the time, that worried me. Had my conversion been merely arbitrary? This question has an answer, but to develop it, I must fall back on the same inside-outside knowledge that I mentioned before.

And so this talk is less philosophical than autobiographical. It isn't an argument for the existence of God. It is more like a discussion of why, for so long, I was unreachable by arguments -- why they didn't faze me. The talk isn't

a conventional personal testimony either. My aim isn't so much to "tell my story" as to present an analytical reconstruction of that story with a view toward *illustrating* why atheism turned out to be something less than a good idea. I speak of "illustrating" the point because behind every instance of atheism is a different story; my own self-deception was more extreme than most. Yet I do believe that some kind of self-deception lies at the root of all atheism.

I hope that any atheists who may be here listening aren't offended by this claim. Taking offense at the claim would be a distraction from the question of whether the claim is true. I can say honestly that when I was an atheist I wasn't offended by what Christians thought of me. I merely considered them mistaken. Plainly, if I was right, then they were as foolish as I believed. Conversely, if they were right, then I was the foolish one. In such a case, the only question worth discussing is who is right. In the end – after a very long period of time -- I came to believe that they were.

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I had best start by explaining what I mean by self-deception. Atheists, please take note that I am not trying to *prove* the reality of God by calling you self-deceived. I am not trying to prove His reality at all, though there are plenty of good arguments for His reality, and we can discuss them if you like. Some good reasons to believe in Him turn up in this talk too, but they are merely incidental to it. Rather than trying to prove the reality of God, I simply recognize His reality and tell the story from the perspective of that recognition.

By the way, I am not trying to prove that you are self-deceived any more than I am trying to prove the reality of God. I am certainly trying to make my claim about self-deception more plausible. It may be that by hearing the long account of my self-deception and the shorter one of my undeception, you will come to see things about yourself that you hadn't noticed before, and by noticing them, decide that I am right; that is my hope. But there is no proof, no logical compulsion, and I am wholly at the mercy of your power to reexamine yourself, just as – I realize that you don't believe this yet – just as your power to reexamine yourself hangs wholly from the mercy of God.

What is self-deception, anyway? Self-deception is playing dumb. It

means pretending to ourselves that we don't know what we really do; it means playing at being ignorant even though we are really in the know. I suggest that we human beings play dumb with God. We lie to ourselves, and one of the things we lie about is our knowledge of His reality. Psalm 14 opens with a remark which is often misunderstood: "The fool says in his heart 'There is no God.'" In this comment the Psalmist isn't calling the man a fool for *thinking* that there is no God, but for *telling* himself that there is no God even though deeper in his mind he knows better. Unbelievers do not disbelieve, they reject. In the strictest sense, it isn't God who doesn't exist; it is atheism which doesn't exist.

Paul expresses the same view in the first chapter of the letter to the Romans. I do not ask anyone to believe it just because it is in the Bible; I only call attention to an interesting claim (which is also my claim) and ask the reader to think about it.

[18] For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth. [19] For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. [20] Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse; [21] for although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened.

Tonight we're not concerned with Paul's general claim that those who deny the Creator are wicked. But I do want to explore his more particular claim that they are intellectually dishonest. Notice that he doesn't criticize nonbelievers because they don't know about God, but ought to. Rather he criticizes them because they *do* know about God, but pretend to themselves that they don't. On his account, we are not ignorant of God's reality at all. Rather we "suppress" it; to translate differently, we "hold it down." With all our strength we try not to know it, even though we can't help knowing it; with one part of our minds we do know it, while with another we say "I know no such thing." From the Biblical point of view, then, the reason it is so difficult to argue with an atheist -- as I once was -- is that he isn't being honest with himself. He knows that there is a God; he

only tells himself that he doesn't.

We have in this passage the beginning of the answer to the question I posed in the opening paragraphs. How can one explain a conversion? By what route could someone have arrived at new first principles? To what deeper considerations could he have appealed? If the biblical account is true (yes, I know you don't yet concede this fact), then it would seem that *no one really does* arrive at new first principles; he only seems to arrive at them. The atheist doesn't lack true first principles; they are down there in his knowledge already, but suppressed. The *convert* from atheism hasn't *really* acquired new first principles; rather, things have been unearthed which he really knew all along, but had denied.

If this is so, then the purported first principles of atheistic systems of thought are not what they appear; they are merely a covering for deeper knowledge which the atheist is trying to keep from acknowledging. We might also expect that an atheist's effort to hold down what he "can't not know" would be only partially successful. Here and there, flotsam from the sunken knowledge would bob back up to the surface. Some of this flotsam might be incorporated into his system of thought -- and in fact, from these incorporated bits of flotsam would flow all of the plausibility that his system of thought might possess. For example, the atheist might seek to affirm the moral law while denying God. The fact that he affirms *one* of the things that he can't not know would make his denial of another of the things he can't not know more palatable. I'll call this sort of thing a "plausibility gambit."

Our examples of plausibility gambits could be multiplied. Each atheist employs his own. The point is that everyone really knows certain things already, including the reality of God. This is the only reason the plausibility gambits are needed in the first place -- because on the face of it, denying what we really know is implausible in the extreme. For these reasons, an adequate explanation of conversion to belief in God must be, not an explanation of how the convert acquired genuinely new first principles, but of how he came to be honest with himself; of how he came to admit the first principles he already had.

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Before turning to my own story, I must briefly consider a possible objection to what I have said about self-deception. Can't it be turned on its head? In fact, don't some atheists turn it on its head, holding that believers are the ones who are self-deceived? How are we to judge this claim? Are they committing the fallacy *tu quoque*, "you too," as in the children's rhyme "I'm rubber and you're glue, everything you say bounces from me and sticks to you?" Or am I the one committing *tu quoque*?

The test is something like those used by forensic pathologists. If one coroner says "There has been foul play" and another replies "No, there hasn't," then to find out which one is right we must look more closely at the pattern of marks on the body. In the same way, if the Christian says "You are deceiving yourself" and the atheist says "No, you are," then to know which is right we must look more closely at their respective belief systems. We then ask about each of them, "Where we find incoherencies, which hypothesis best explains them -- the hypothesis that he is trying to gain truth, or the hypothesis that he is trying to evade it?"

In this essay I ask the question about the way I thought in my own atheist days. The reader will have to ask it about himself. In the meantime we might consider the outcome of another nonbeliever's self-examination: I refer to agnostic philosopher Thomas Nagel, author of the book *The Last Word*. The purpose of his book is to defend the claim that truth can be rationally known. For our purposes, the striking thing is that as Nagel is going along, he notices that the rational knowability of truth points strongly toward the existence of God. Never mind whether Nagel is right or wrong about that; such things would be more properly discussed in another, different talk. For present purposes, the interesting thing is what Nagel says next. He says that today's denial of the rational knowability of truth may be due to "fear of religion," and as a case in point, he cites his own fear of religion. Here are his very words:

I speak from experience, being strongly subject to this fear myself: I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to

be like that.¹

If Nagel is right, then those who say that belief in God is a crutch have got the matter backwards. For our intellectuals, it's atheism and agnosticism that serve as a crutch.

Nagel comes close to agreeing with the biblical view. To be sure, he doesn't concede that God is real, but he agrees that there is something not quite honest in his rejection of God. I admire him for this concession. It couldn't have been easy. The biblical view that the atheist or agnostic isn't being honest with himself -- that He knows that God is real, but only tells himself that he doesn't know -- is looking better and better.

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I spoke above of the "plausibility gambits" which an atheist must employ in order to make palatable his rejection of truths that he really knows. Such gambits have two great disadvantages. The first is that they do not bear close examination; the second is that they slip from our control, taking on a life of their own.

For illustration of the first disadvantage, consider the plausibility gambit I mentioned earlier -- affirming the moral law while denying God. One reason it doesn't bear close examination because every law presupposes a Lawgiver; how can I affirm the moral law while denying God? Of course sophisticated replies may be given to this question, for a good many contemporary moral thinkers do regard morality as something other than real law. For instance James Q. Wilson, author of the book *The Moral Sense*, makes it a central premises of his theory that morality isn't about laws or rules, but about "sentiments."² Yet over and over

¹Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 130.

²James Q. Wilson, *The Moral Sense* (New York: Free Press, 1993), pp. xiii, 10-11, 18, 72, 82, 218, and 225-226: "Let me ... stress that these are four aspects of the moral sense, not rules or laws." "[M]y saying that people have a moral sense is not the same thing as saying that they have direct, intuitive knowledge of certain moral rules." "If we find such common inclinations, we will not have found a set of moral rules." "Deciding that mankind has at some level a shared moral nature is not the same thing as deciding that men are everywhere in possession of a set of moral absolutes." "[T]he existence of a natural moral sense does not require the existence of universal moral rules." "[Parents care for children] not because a rule is being enforced, but because an impulse is being obeyed." "I agree that there is a universal human nature, but disagree that one can deduce from it more than a

he slips back into the language of laws and rules -- even to explain what he means by a "sentiment" in the first place.³ The atheist, I think, will face similar difficulties.

The second disadvantage needs more explanation. Atheistic plausibility gambits slip from our control because, at bottom, they are lies, and the universe is so tightly constructed that in order to cover up one lie, we must usually tell another. This applies with just as much force to the lies we tell ourselves as to the lies we tell to other people. One could imagine a universe so loosely-jointed that lies didn't require the support of more lies, but the one we live in isn't like that; deception begets deception, and self-deception begets more self-deception. For example, because of the difficulty of affirming the moral law while denying the moral Lawgiver, I may just have to deny morality as well. Of course that isn't the only possible covering lie -- but it is one of the commonest.

Suppose I do use it. Are my difficulties over? Far from it. My new position that there is neither law nor Lawgiver is more nearly self-consistent (and in that respect more plausible), but it is even farther from what everyone really knows (and in that respect less plausible). Not only that, but without either God *or* the moral law, my life is likely to become more and more disordered, hence more and more marked by pain. This too poses problems of plausibility, which prompt still more gambits, which produce still more problems. And so it goes.

I am an instance of this loss of control; eventually I denied not only God but the very distinction between good and evil. But another loss of control had preceded it. This is because atheism is often the result of a pre-atheistic plausibility gambit taking on a life of its own, and so it was with me.

handful of rules or solutions to any but the most elemental (albeit vitally important) human problems." "I am reckless enough to think that many conducting [the search for moral universals] have looked in the wrong places for the wrong things because they have sought for universal rules rather than universal dispositions."

³"By a moral sense," he says, "I mean an intuitive or directly felt belief about how one ought to act when one is free to act voluntarily." As though to remove any doubt that ought means rules to him too, he adds "by 'ought,' I mean an obligation binding on all people similarly situated." On a later page he seems to concede the point himself. "What [researchers] find to be binding everywhere," he comments, "are those rules governing the fundamental conflicts of everyday, intimate life -- keeping promises, respecting property, acting fairly, and avoiding unprovoked assaults -- that have been the subject of earlier chapters in this book." *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 142, emphasis mine).

Not many people disbelieve in God and then begin to sin; most of us adopt some favorite sin and then find reasons to disbelieve in God. In this common sequence of intellectual events, the individual doesn't begin by denying God, or even by denying the whole moral law. Rather he begins by denying a *part* of the moral law, perhaps even a *single* moral law. Perhaps he denies only the precept of chastity -- that the sexual powers are the privilege of the marital union. Perhaps he denies only the precept of fidelity -- that vows are to be kept. Perhaps he denies only the precept of filial reverence -- that parents are to be held in respect. Or perhaps he denies only the precept of justice -- that one must not seek unfair advantage.

Just which precepts I denied is unimportant. One loses control of the "No to Just a Part" gambit because it is impossible to reject just a part of the moral law. To affirm that the unitive and procreative power of sexuality may be used outside of matrimony is to deny a great many things about human nature besides. To affirm that a vow may be broken is to call into question the very idea of personal responsibility. To deny to one's parents their due is to reject the chain of obligation that links all generations from dimmest past to unborn future. To maintain that one may seek unfair advantage is to unleash the gods of the jungle.

One may try to forestall these consequences by monkeying around with the meanings of "matrimony," "vows," "respect," or "fairness," but monkeying with meanings carries consequences too. To keep these consequences from swamping the rest of one's knowledge, one may build dikes between this thought and that, but dividing the mind is a radical deed which also has consequences. The very means by which we limit the flood causes flood; denial spills, it slops, it spreads. Eventually it may reach the knowledge of God -- as it did with me. Because the plausibility gambit by which the individual protected his favorite sin has slipped out of control, he now needs new gambits to fortify his disbelief in God.

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Atheists come in several kinds. I wasn't a "theoretical" but a "practical" atheist. In other words, I didn't claim that I could prove that there was no God; I understood the near-impossibility of proving a universal negative. In this sense I conceded that there could be a God, and when the mood struck me, I called

myself only an agnostic. But I didn't think there were any good reasons to believe that God *did* exist, and I lived as though He didn't.

Here again we meet an incoherency. My pretense, when the agnostic mood struck me, was that we cannot know anything about God or His existence. Now there is a great difficulty in dogmatically asserting God's unknowability. To say that we cannot know anything about God is to say something about God; it is to say that if there is a God, He is unknowable. But in that case He isn't *entirely* unknowable, for the agnostic certainly thinks that we can know *one* thing about Him: This one thing is that nothing *else* can be known about Him.

Unfortunately, the position that we can know exactly one thing about God -- His unknowability in all respects except this FL -- is equally insupportable. For why should this one thing be an exception? How could we *know* that any possible God would be of such a nature that nothing else could be known about Him? On what *basis* could we rule out His knowability in all other respects but this one?

The very attempt to justify the claim confutes it, for the agnostic would have to know a lot of things about God in order to know that he couldn't know anything else about Him. In fact, doesn't he actually have a rather elaborate picture of God in his mind, full of all sorts of colorful details, details which render God either impossible, or unknowable, except for the colorful details themselves?

Details like what? Like this. First, the agnostic must suppose that any possible God is infinitely remote -- because otherwise he couldn't be so sure that he couldn't know anything else about Him. Second, the agnostic must suppose that any possible God is either powerless to make Himself known, unwilling to make Himself known, or unconcerned about whether He is known or not -- because otherwise He would have provided the means for the agnostic to know of Him. Third, the agnostic must suppose that any possible God is completely unlike the Biblical portrayal of Him -- because in that account, God is anything but remote, He desires to be known, He has already provided the means for the agnostic to know of Him, and in fact the agnostic does know of Him.

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You see why I prefer the term "practical atheist," for the so-called agnostic has a theology after all -- not a thin one either, but quite thick. In his theology the Heavenly Father is like so many absentee fathers of our own rock 'n' roll generation. He isn't there, He doesn't care, or He's impotent.

My own practical atheism focussed on the first and third prongs of the doctrinal fork -- that He isn't there or He's impotent. I began by asserting the same dilemma about *myself*, and then argued that God must be in the same boat. *I* was either not there or impotent. If to deny God's reality I had to deny my own, so be it. As in the proverb, I would cut off my nose to spite my face. My thinking went something like this.

First, I insisted that if the principle of causality is true, then the chain of causes and effects is an unbreakable fetter. It followed that free will must be nonsense. It would be useless to say, as the Stoics did, that what happens is foreordained but that I am free to choose my attitude toward it; my attitude would itself be foreordained. Nor would it make a difference whether causality were probabilistic or deterministic; the outcome of a coin toss is as adamant as fate, if it rules me.

Of course this understanding of causality was completely mechanical. It amounted to treating myself -- and everything else -- as a machine. My mind, I supposed, was nothing more than an activity of my brain, my brain nothing more than a computational device. Of course we do not experience ourselves as a machines, but I told myself that we are machines under a double curse -- the illusion of being more than machines, and the desire for the illusion to be true.

How a machine could suffer such things as desires and illusions deeply troubled me. In fact all of the phenomena of consciousness troubled me. I was troubled by the redness of red, the deliberateness of choice, the preciousness of my loves, the sense I sometimes had of exerting my will against an inclination -- I was even troubled by the experience of being troubled. I knew that I couldn't fit these things inside the theory that I was a machine, and that the intuition that I was more than a machine made a better fit with reality. To get around this fact, I told myself that a machine is something that I know, whereas a soul is something that I do not know -- conveniently forgetting that I experience

myself, unlike machines, directly. *What* it is that I experience when I experience myself is the question, and I was begging it. I had reached my conclusions not *because* of the data, but in spite of it.

If I was in the grip of a blind causality, it followed that whether I thought something, did something, or felt something, I was merely executing a program. To be sure it must be an "open" program because it could be reset by experience, but I was responsible neither for the experiences (for they just came) nor the programming (for I came with it). Psychologists might quarrel over whether nature or nurture was more important to the determination of behavior, but the argument seemed pointless; however such causes might interact, they would remain causes, with everything about me merely their effect. I had no free will, no personal responsibility, no self. All those things were part of the illusion. What I called "I" didn't produce my activity, it was its product. In a sense, I thought, I didn't exist.

Having asserted that the dilemma "He isn't there or he's impotent" applied to myself, it was but a short step to apply it to God. If God existed at all, then He couldn't escape what I called "causality" any more than I could. He was no more free than I.

That fact, I thought, showed that something else about Him was like me too. For if I have no free will, then I am no more responsible for what I believe than for what I do; I believe what I believe, not because I recognize its concordance with reality, but because it is cranked out by a mental mechanism over which what I call "I" has no control. To be sure, that mental mechanism may have evolved to accomplish certain functions, but there would be no reason to think that arriving at The Truth of Things would be one of them; unlike narrower intellectual capacities, such as finding food or outwitting predators, such a capacity would make no contribution to its own survival.

And so, I thought, I am really in the dark about everything -- and the same must be true of God. He too must be in the dark about everything. How could He make Himself known if He didn't even know Himself? You see where this reasoning led me: Although I couldn't quite prove the nonexistence of God, I thought I could prove the nonexistence of a God that mattered. I pictured God like the blinded monarch in *King Lear*, helpless, raving, a pawn to fatalities he

didn't understand. It wasn't Satan who was frozen in the ice at the center of hell, as Dante would have it; it was God.

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There were two great holes in the argument about the irrelevance of God. The first is that in order to attack free will, I supposed that I understood cause and effect; I supposed causation to be less mysterious than volition.

If anything, it is the other way around. I can perceive a logical connection between premises and valid conclusions. I can perceive at least a rational connection between my willing to do something and my doing it. But between the apple and the earth, I can perceive no connection at all. Why does the apple fall? We don't know. "But there is gravity," you say. No, "gravity" is merely the name of the phenomenon, not its explanation. "But there are laws of gravity," you say. No, the "laws" are not its explanation either; they are merely a more precise description of the thing to be explained, which remains as mysterious as before. For just this reason, philosophers of science are shy of the term "laws"; they prefer "lawlike regularities." To call the equations of gravity "laws" and speak of the apple as "obeying" them is to speak as though, like the traffic laws, the "laws" of gravity are addressed to rational agents capable of conforming their wills to the command. This is cheating, because it makes mechanical causality (the more opaque of the two phenomena) seem like volition (the less). In my own way of thinking the cheating was even graver, because I attacked the less opaque in the name of the more.

The other hole in my reasoning was cruder. If my imprisonment in a blind causality made my reasoning so unreliable that I couldn't trust my beliefs, then by the same token I shouldn't have trusted my beliefs about imprisonment in a blind causality. But in that case I had no business denying free will in the first place.

Granted these ragged flaws in my reasoning, what made a mechanical picture of the universe so attractive in the first place? The answer isn't simple.

At one level, the explanation is that I had been strongly influenced by the mythology of our age that confuses scientific rationality with materialism or physicalism -- with the view that matter is all there is. If that were true, then

there *couldn't* be such things as minds, moral law, or God, could there? After all, none of those are matter.

Let us be clear what is at stake in materialism. "Matter alone" has always been a difficult slogan to swallow. If matter is the pure potentiality to receive form, as Aristotle thought, then at least, besides matter, there must be form. The formula of the ancient materialists, who disagreed with him, was that the universe is nothing but particles of matter in motion. But this presupposes that matter moves, so there must be space and time for the matter to move in. Viewed another way, all matter has spatial and temporal properties -- and numerical ones too, because "particles" denotes more than one. But in that case (to use Aristotle's language) the forms of space, time, and number are built into it already; it isn't a *pure* potentiality after all.

The materiality of matter has been even further compromised in our day. Once upon a time, materialists insisted that there is no such thing as action at a distance; to affect each other, particles must touch. It has been a long time since materialists gave up that battle. Today they routinely concede the reality of "forces" like magnetism, arranged in "fields" like magnetic fields, a concession which by the ancient standards means they are not materialists at all. It gets worse. Biological materialists speak of a genetic "code" which carries "information," and these concepts are plainly semantic. According to one standard interpretation of quantum mechanics, the theory cannot even be formulated without reference to conscious observers -- observers who cannot be consistently explained within the system because the system itself depends on them.

It seems that these days, materialism can concede anything you want it to -- except God. Excluding Him, which critics always suspected of being its main point, now seems to be its only one.

But such a materialism is self-destructing. Nothing beyond matter is real? Really? If you say so; but considering that not even the properties of matter are matter, it becomes hard to believe in matter either, and so it became for me. I realized that in my fondness for this self-destructing theory, I had committed yet another incoherency. Did I then reject it? Not in the way that you would expect. I concluded that reality itself was incoherent, and that I was pretty clever to have

figured this out -- even more so, because in an incoherent world, figuring didn't make sense either. I decided that the philosophy of what is real is a blanket too small for the sleeper. Too cold in one place, he shifts the blanket to cover himself, only to expose another one. He can never get warm everywhere at once. If he reduces everything to matter, he leaves mind in the cold; if to mind, he leaves will in the cold; if to will, he leaves matter in the cold.

It never occurred to me to ask why my philosophy had to be reductionist in the first place -- why I couldn't accept the equally basic existence of matter, mind, will, and any other realities that might cross my path. In retrospect, I know the answer. Matter, mind, and will require explanation. There must be a *reason* why there is something rather than nothing. Just beyond the passage I quoted earlier, in which Paul explains that nonbelievers are not ignorant of the truth about God but suppress it, he says that they exchange the truth for a lie, worshipping and serving the creature rather than the Creator. That was what I wanted. I was looking for something *within* the created order to which I could plausibly attribute the creative power that belongs only to God.

The materialistic mythology of the day didn't make me an idolater; I was that already. It only offered me an idol. I used the idol of matter until it broke, and then made an idol of the breakage. Did nothing make sense? Then I would make an idol of Nothing.

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Though a million idols are adored by the sons of men, in the end there is only one -- the million idols are all masks for the single idol of Self. Finding that we are made in God's image, we worship the image in place of God.

Our own time is unusual in its tendency to adore the Self openly, according to its proper name. As a best-selling New Age writer recommends, "Let each person in relationship worry about *Self* -- what *Self* is being, doing, and having; what *Self* is wanting, asking, giving; what *Self* is seeking, creating, experiencing Let each person in relationship worry not about the other, but only, only, only about *Self*."⁴ The classical pattern, however, is to disguise the

⁴Neale Donald Walsch, *Conversations With God*, Bk. 1 (G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1995), p. 124.

adoration of Self under the adoration of some reflection or representative. The idol Reason, beloved of the Enlightenment, is the self as represented by its rational powers; the idol Priapus, as represented by its animal powers; the idol Duty, as represented by its moral powers; and the gods Race and Nation, as reflected in the group.

My idolatries of Matter and Nothing followed the classical rather than the New Age pattern. I didn't consciously think "I shall adore myself"; nevertheless, the real significance of my idolatries was that they seemed to annihilate God so that I could be God. This explanation of their significance may seem unbelievable, for as we have seen, my road to deicide was through suicide -- in order to annihilate God, I had to annihilate myself. The solution to the paradox is that we misunderstand what suicide is about.

Killing oneself isn't an act of supreme self-resignation, as we often think it is, but an act of extreme self-assertion. G.K. Chesterton put it best:

The man who kills a man, kills a man. The man who kills himself, kills all men; as far as he is concerned he wipes out the world. His act is worse (symbolically considered) than any rape or dynamite outrage. For it destroys all buildings: it insults all women. The thief is satisfied with diamonds; but the suicide isn't: that is his crime. He cannot be bribed, even by the blazing stones of the Celestial City There is a meaning in burying the suicide apart -- for it makes even crimes impossible.⁵

God may have called everything into being, but the suicide imagines that he can make it all go away. My suicide was just like that, but more violent still. The conventional suicide can destroy the universe only once, but for me each day was suicide. There was no need to bother with the taking of poison or the slashing of wrists, because it was all going on in my mind. In one long, interminable prolongation of nightfall, the light went out and went out and went out, all without the inconvenience of physical death.

Besides, to commit suicide *was* to commit deicide, symbolically. I said

⁵G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: John Lane, 1909), Chapter 5, "The Flag of the World."

above that self-adoration is the worship of the image of God in the place of God. So strong was my own wish to replace Him that I resented even His image in me. Visualize a man opening up the access panels of his mind and pulling out all the components that have God's initials on them. The problem is that they all have God's initials on them, so the man can never stop. No matter how much he pulls out, there is still more to pull. I was that man.

Because I pulled out more and more, there was less and less that I could think about. But because there was less and less that I could think about, I thought I was becoming more and more focussed. Because I believed things that filled me with dread, I thought I was smarter and braver than the people who didn't believe them. I thought I saw an emptiness at the heart of the universe that was hidden from their gauzy eyes.

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Nietzsche too had thought like this. This prophet of the "death of God" had written that given the meaninglessness of things, nothing was left but to laugh or be silent. Pop culture transcribes the two attitudes as the Cool and the Tough. The Cool say that meaning is a drag and they prefer the world pointless. The Tough say that meaning is indispensable -- but that they are brave enough to dispense with it.

Unfortunately for Nietzsche, he failed to carry his premises to their conclusions. He never seemed to recognize that both attitudes are poses. The Cool don't really like life pointless; they seek meaning in seeming to like it that way. Nor can the Tough really live without meaning; they seek it in the idea of being brave. For the former the problem is that in a pointless life, being cool is as pointless as everything else; for the latter the problem is that there is nothing to be brave about.

I thought I had outdone my master, for my fancy was that I did carry his premises to their conclusions. Here in the void, I thought, not even laughter or silence are left. One has no reason to do or not do anything at all. This is a terrible thing to believe, but like him I imagined myself one of the few who had the strength to believe it -- who could walk the rocky heights where the air is thin and cold. Which merely shows that I had not outdone him at all, that I too was

adopting a pose. It was a bluff.

How then did I become undeceived? Not because anyone called my bluff. When I told the faculty of the University of Texas that there is no rationally knowable difference between good and evil and that we aren't responsible for our deeds anyway, they gave me a job teaching the young.

Nor was it through recognition of my own incoherence. I saw the holes in my arguments even at the time, and covered them over with elaborate nonsense like the need to take an ironic view of reality.

Nor through love. I loved my wife and children, but it is difficult to keep up a commitment to the true good of another person when one denies the reality of good, denies the reality of persons, and denies that his commitments are in his control. My wife's love more me did something for me; but my love for her had become so incoherent that it did nothing for me.

Nor through learning. When I taught my students the theology of law of Thomas Aquinas, I wanted to weep for the beauty of the appearance of the truth. But I told myself that the very poignancy of that beauty came only from the fact that it was an illusion.

Nor even through the agony I had brought upon myself. "Truly ... affliction is a treasure, and scarce any man hath enough of it," says John Donne, but such treasure was wasted on me. The greater the pain, the more it fed my pride. To be sure there was a grain of justification in my stubbornness, because pain as such isn't a logical argument; its usefulness lies not in proving things true or false, but in moving us to reconsider. But supposing pain a refutation wasn't my temptation. Mine was supposing it a proof.

I did pray to God one night. I told him that I thought I was talking to the wall. I said that if He existed, He could have me, but He would have to show me because I couldn't tell. As the minutes ticked past, the wall looked more and more like a wall, and I felt a fool.

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Yet He did hear my prayer. I came, months later, to feel a greater and greater horror about myself. Not exactly a feeling of guilt, nor of shame, nor of inadequacy -- just horror: An overpowering true intuition that my condition was objectively evil. I couldn't have told why my condition was horrible; I only perceived that it was. It was as though a man were to notice one afternoon that the sky is blue, when for years he had considered it red.

Nothing like this had ever happened to me before, and I couldn't explain it. The intuition of the objective evil of my condition appeared as though from nowhere, and contradicted everything I had been telling myself. I experienced it not as an inference, but as direct knowledge. It had authority, commanding assent -- and I assented. Though I didn't know it at the time, it was what John's Gospel calls the conviction of sin. I believe that the Holy Spirit, in answer to my prayer, had been secretly cutting a door in the stone wall of my self-deception.

Augustine had argued that although evil is real, it is derivative; the concept of a "pure" evil makes no sense, because the only way to get a bad thing is to take a good thing and ruin it. This doesn't make evil less horrible; it is *how* evil is horrible. Evil is a parasite on good. I had always considered this a neat piece of reasoning, with a defective premise. Granted the horrible, there had to exist a wonderful of which the horrible was the perversion. But I didn't grant the horrible.

Now all that had changed. I had to grant the horrible; it was right behind my eyes. If there was evil, then there must be good, though I didn't know what it was. The significance of this fact wasn't that it gave me a great deal of knowledge, but that it humbled my mental censors.

I began to realize, not only that my errors had been total, but that they had not been errors at all, merely lies. Years earlier, when I had deserted the faith of my youth, I thought I had done so for good reasons. Yet search memory as I might, I couldn't now remember any. Had I forgotten them? On the contrary; as the days went by, I was unforgetting more and more of my past. I had never had good reasons to desert my faith. My desertion had taken place first; my reasons, as I called them, had been cooked up afterward. One after another, various pieces of repressed knowledge reasserted themselves: the good of this, the evil of that, the reality and goodness of God.

The final step of my recovery was the restoration of faith in Christ, for there is more to Christianity than mere theism, much more to faith in the Son than belief in the Father. The recognition that I had never had good reason to lose my faith wasn't enough to restore it; I also needed reason to return to it.

Did I then reason my way back to the Savior? No, and this used to puzzle me. Some years passed before I understood how this final step had taken place. It had been through misuse of intellect that I had deserted Him; therefore, in His mercy, God choose means of restoration which humbled my intellectual pride.

I do not mean that my restoration was against reason. On the contrary, what happened was a reinstatement of the good reasons for faith which I had always possessed before. I had, after all, been a well-instructed Christian, and it had not been for ignorance of the grounds of faith that I had thrown them all away. Now by the grace of God, I remembered them -- and I recognized that their force was unimpaired.

My story is extreme. Yet in the essentials, I think my atheism was like all atheism, merely written in larger letters. Not every atheist deceives himself about the same things, or as many things, or to the same degree as I deceived myself, yet there is no atheism without self-deception. There is a way to honesty, but it leads through Jesus Christ.