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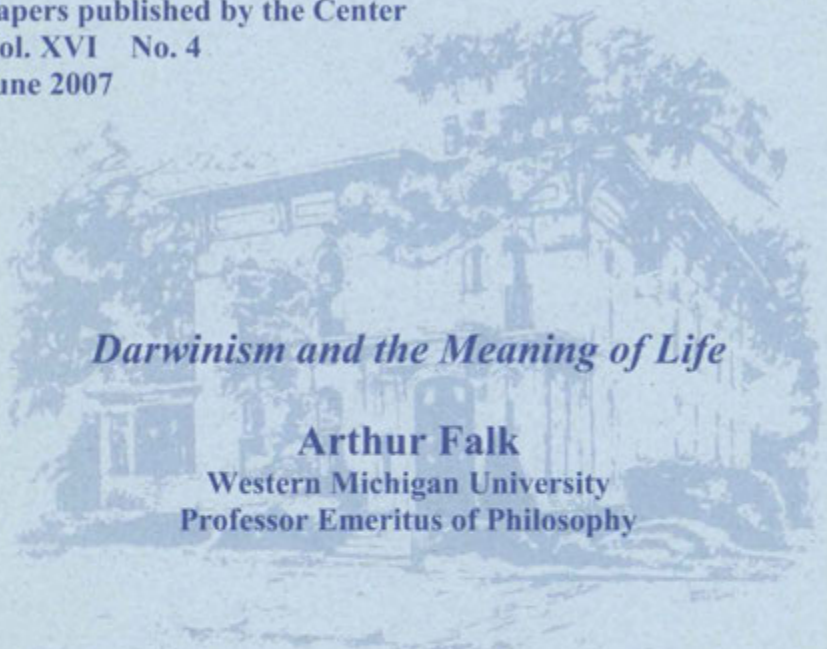
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Darwinism and the Meaning of Life

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Center for the Study of Ethics in Society

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Darwinism and the Meaning of Life

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Dr. Arthur Falk

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Arthur Falk has published two books (*Desire and Belief: Introduction to Some Recent Philosophical Debates* in 2004 and *Darwinism and Philosophical Analysis* in 2003) and dozens of articles on the philosophy of mind and the philosophy of science in distinguished scholarly and popular journals. His article “Ifs and Newcombs” was recognized as among the ten best philosophy articles published in 1985. Two extended stays in India as a lecturer led to the publication of his lectures there, *Darwinism and Philosophical Analysis*. Falk earned his doctorate at Yale and is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Western Michigan University.

Darwinism and the Meaning of Life

Arthur Falk

Abstract: Even when Darwinism is constrained to consist merely of theses that follow from biological science, it provides the material for persons to construct the meaning of their lives, once they understand their situation in the world. But this modest Darwinism leaves open the question whether that meaningfulness includes a place for religion, which remains a choice each society and each individual in that society must make.

My talk will have four parts: After a section defining my terms and a section clearing away four misunderstandings, I'll turn to positive claims in the two remaining parts. My main thesis is that Darwinism does give us the meaning of life, but only up to a point. It has a blank spot on the subject of religion, which we may fill in as we please.

I. Defining my terms

I begin by defining the two ideas in my title. I wish I knew who invented the phrase, "the meaning of life." Was it Monty Python? Probably not. Perhaps it was Leo Tolstoy.¹ Whoever it was, he sure came up with a humdinger. The meaning of life is a meaningfulness that comes from one's sense of one's situatedness, from which one's projects (i.e., one's large life-purposes) and values spring. Let me spell this out. First, there's no point in my thinking about the meaning of life in general unless it provides meaning to my own life. It's a kind of knowledge I can directly apply to myself here and now. One kind of knowledge is impersonal, like a map or a calendar.

Science is impersonal like that. One's sense of being situated is the other kind of knowledge, which one gets when one sees the little sign on the map, "You are here," and the note on the calendar, "today." I'll call this our "knowledge in the first person," referring to the first person pronouns, "I" and "me," which we use to express this sort of knowledge. We may think biological science provides an impersonal catalog of the kinds of beings there are. First personal knowledge comes when I identify which of the catalog's entries is the kind of being I am. Thus the meaning of life brings in who I am in the order of things and how I'm situated, not just in space but also in time. This sense of situation is the basis of the meaning of life, with purposes and values growing from it. I don't think you can have purposes and values without first having a sense of being situated.

The meaning of life also refers to an idea of a complete life that suggests how to organize one's daily activities in terms of it, some all-encompassing goals or purposes, in other words, one's projects. Once they're achieved and we find ourselves in states of fulfillment, happiness, self-realization, do these consummatory states then give meaning to our lives? It doesn't make sense to ask what their purpose is, because they're the fulfillment of purposes. But we can ask what value they have. If they lack positive value, the purposes they fulfill are delusions; the climax should not be an anticlimax. So we must look for the positive values these states realize. If we can find some, they'll give meaning to our lives.² To sum up, the meaning of life is a meaningfulness expressible in the first person, one's sense of one's situatedness, from which one's projects (i.e., large life-purposes) and one's values spring.³

with the logical discipline required to restrict oneself to just what can be deduced from the science. It's the latter I want.

II. My main negative claims

So to our topic: What does Darwinism tell us about the meaning of life? My first claims will be negative, and there'll be more cold splashes later. This is because scientific Darwinism is seriously misunderstood in the general public. We must begin with corrections.

My first negative thesis is that Darwinism is not noncommittal on the question of the meaning of life. You may have expected me to bring up the so-called naturalistic fallacy.⁶ Philosophers call it a fallacy to derive values from facts or equate the two. Science can give us only the facts, they say. Well, physics or chemistry can give us only the facts, but what about biology and psychology? Contemporary biologists and psychologists shy away from claiming scientific validation for any set of values, but I suspect that life and values cannot be separated. I think that, as biology matures, it will tell us about the values that life enhances. Already an important subdiscipline in evolutionary biology and ecology is life-histories, how in a species the lives are lived from birth to death. For the human species there are the disciplines of behavioral ecology and evolutionary psychology, once called sociobiology.⁷ One finds oneself exercising stern control over one's beliefs to avoid drawing conclusions about values from these disciplines, so obvious are the conclusions.

A plausible reason for thinking that Darwinism must be noncommittal on the meaning of life is that this is something involving the first person point of view, and no scientific theory says anything about the first person point of view. Theory is like that map I mentioned; it tells you how things are laid out, the grand scheme of things. It may get detailed enough to say at what date a person named Arthur is in the Bernhard Student Center in Kalamazoo. If you're a determinist, you'll think science could be this specific. But unless I know I'm Arthur, and now is that date, and here is the Student Center, I could not infer from what science said that I am this person standing here. Knowledge of myself in the first person and of the time in terms of now; that's legitimate knowledge, and it's a kind of knowledge that's not contained in science. So I concede the premise of this objection, but reply that, to get the meaning of life from science, we add what we know in the first person to what science tells us, and the combination tells us life's meaning.

I don't think I've just lapsed into a grandiose Darwinism. There's nothing cosmic in my combination of Darwinism with my situatedness. If even modest Darwinism can suggest values, I suspect they'll be very specific to my situation.

The rest of my talk amounts to stating the necessary qualifiers and caveats that must be attached to my claim that values can be derived from the facts of biology. For starters, natural selection always reveals values late, often too late. Today's populations are adapted to yesterday's environments, because the selection was done by yesterday's environments. To the extent that today's environment does not differ from yesterday's, the tardiness

of the revelation of value won't matter. But with human activity affecting the global environment, from mass extinctions of species to global warming, it's urgent that we not appeal to our adaptations by natural selection to straightaway justify our way of living today. For that, we'd have to defend the thesis that today's environments are sufficiently like yesterday's.

My second negative claim is that Darwinism does not tell us that there's just one meaning of life, the same for all living things. Some still think the meaning of life is the competition that leads a few to great success, many to lesser success, and many more to utter failure. That view says that the meaning of life is the process of natural selection itself. "Do unto others before they do it unto you." That's the view called social Darwinism, which justified capitalism unfettered by legal oversight, as though predatory practices were good. Darwinism as I use the term is not social Darwinism, which errs in two ways. A science-based Darwinism does not espouse the predatory route to fitness and reproductive success as the meaning of life, first of all because that claim ignores the various ways evolution has in fact occurred, some of which are quite pacific.⁸ Predation is only one of several mechanisms by which evolution by natural selection occurs. There are cases of evolution by mutual aid, that is, symbiotic evolution. Changes occur in two lineages of organisms that improve their symbiotic relationship, like the proboscises of bees and the lengthening of flower tubes, the combination optimizing the getting of nectar and the carrying off of the pollen. There's also evolution by direct adaptation to a physical environment, not involving any interaction with the biotic

environment, where the notion of competition applies. Did cactuses beat up anybody to become adapted to desert life? I think not. There's also evolution by noncompetition, evolution's version of "less is more." Evolving to exploit an as-yet-unexploited ecological niche is an instance. Secondly and more importantly, a science-based Darwinism does not find values in the process of evolution, but rather in its products, the adaptations themselves. So even if evolution did only occur by predation, social Darwinism would still be wrong.

Nor does biology endorse the old view that pleasure is the meaning of all sentient life. The experience of pleasure is usually associated with an activity that's good for us, such as the exercise of some power we have. Pleasures can be things like the exhilaration of achievement or even something as simple as looking at beautiful things. Pleasure seems to have evolved to tell organisms when they're doing something right. Pain tells the opposite story. I take this insight to be endorsed by Darwinism. If that's so, occasionally pleasures and pains lie. An example of a false pleasure is a dream that one is experiencing a sexual orgasm (and let's say, for men the dream is not accompanied by an ejaculation). Surely, we can recognize this as a pleasure that's false. Then we see that we even arrange to be lied to when we resort to modern methods of circumventing the normal pathways of the brain, to deliver pleasures without any activity other than taking a euphoric drug like cocaine, or a legal substance like refined sugar. These too are false pleasures. It's not just that the falseness of a pleasure reduces its goodness just as its brevity or mildness would, but rather the goodness it has is derivative from the adaptive association of agreeableness with

truthfulness. My conclusion: It's not the pleasure that gives meaning to our lives, but rather the activities we take pleasure in. The goodness of pleasures is only partly due to their being agreeable; the other part is their telling the truth. Hedonism focuses on the agreeableness but forgets the truthfulness. We feel a pleasure, with no truth to dignify it, as false when it gives way to a sense of let-down. A sybaritic life of false pleasure is a meaningless life.

Recall my first negative thesis, and notice I've just qualified it. However much an action's being an adaptation and being the source of pleasure is an indicator of its positive value, adaptation and pleasure are not foolproof indicators, nor are they detailed enough.

Another reason Darwinism does not reduce all life to a single meaning is that it's a theory of the evolution of each and every species, each one of which has its own way of living. If Darwinism indicates a generic meaning of life, say "fitness," it's empty of content until fleshed out as one or more meanings for human life, and another set of meanings for another species, and a third set of meanings for a third species, and so on.

Suppose Darwinism describes the life of a species well enough for it to say what values members of that species are built to pursue. Still it's not the meaning of every life lived by members of that species. This is my third negative thesis. Darwinism does not subscribe to the traditional notion of a species as an essence. An essence is supposed to be something necessary, in the sense that any individual must have that essence in order to be the kind of thing it is. A lion would have the essence of lionhood, making it a lion; a human being would have the essence of humanness. And bodily

organs would have essences too. Thus the essence of hearts would be to be blood-pumps. This notion goes way back to ancient philosophy. Darwinism has no truck with it. Instead, according to Darwinism, the separateness of coexistent species is an artifact of the extinction of the varieties intermediate between them. There's no essence which unites all members of a species; instead there's a series of accidents which isolates the members of a species from members of other species enough to prevent interbreeding. Darwinism promotes an alternative to essentialism, which I'll call population thinking. According to this way of thinking, a species is a population of variant forms, each of which preserves the ability to freely interbreed with the others of the opposite sex. As long as a population has that trait, it can vary in indefinitely more ways. And if there is a barrier to interbreeding, then no matter how similar two populations are, they count as two species. An example is the strong similarity between small mouth and large mouth bass in some lakes.⁹ They don't interbreed.

There's the danger of reading the very undarwinian idea of essentialism into the question of the meaning of life, leading to the idea that one size fits all. Many of the traditional arguments about what is "contrary to nature," like those against birth control, are based on essentialist misunderstandings of biology. Consider the argument, "Genitals and acts involving them are for procreating. Period. Therefore such acts as are not for procreating are contrary to nature, Q.E.D." Well, no, not even of species for whom that "Period" is true.¹⁰ More generally, some people think that biology becomes an alternative basis for traditional natural law theory. No again: that's still essentialism; instead we must bring population

thinking to bear on the meaning of life. Even within a species there's at most what statisticians call a central tendency among the diversity in the population. Extrapolating this lesson to the question of the meaning of life, there'll be variant meanings of the lives lived by a freely interbreeding population. So the values revealed by Darwinism will not be laws to obey; they'll be tugs toward ideal ways of living. I'll exploit this idea later when I get around to saying positive things.

I don't worry about drawing values from Darwinism eventually; I do worry about drawing them prematurely, and thereby getting the values wrong. I've heard that some argue on Darwinian grounds that it's ok for low status males to commit rape!¹¹ Egads! As a caution, my fourth negative claim is that Darwinism is not a finished theory. Many areas of theory are still much debated. We as outsiders can look in and see where the majority opinion among the experts happens to be at the moment, but as outsiders it would be prudent not to prejudge the issues. The areas of debate that have most relevance to giving the meaning of human life are group selection and sexual selection. First, has selection of groups, even at the expense of individuals, had a significant role in the evolution of humanity? If so, we may have to reconsider the role of altruism in the meanings of human life.¹² Secondly, was Darwin right about species that have sexual reproduction, that the female sex chooses which males will get to reproduce, and so selects for male traits like aggressive-ness? This is sexual selection, which would complement natural selection. Not only are males at odds with each other on this view, it predicts female interests are at odds with their mate's

interests. Might there be instead a kind of social selection emphasizing common interests? Joan Roughgarden, a professor of biology and geology at Stanford University (and, by the way, a transgendered woman), has written a book called *Evolution's Rainbow*, which seeks to undermine the primacy of Darwin's theory of sexual selection.¹³ Roughgarden asks, what if competition and coalitions occur within a sex as well as between sexes, for the purpose of access to, and control of, the whole shebang of resources needed to produce and rear offspring, not just access to the opposite sex? What if this led to the selection of traits in both sexes that are social rather than antisocial? Theories of male aggressiveness and female coyness would need nuancing. On the other hand, the psychologist Geoffrey Miller argues in *The Mating Mind*¹⁴ that sexual selection, when both sexes exercise mate choice and invest in parenting, does explain our sense of community and morality. Either way, a 12 year-old excellent introduction to evolutionary psychology, Robert Wright's *The Moral Animal*,¹⁵ is already out of date.

Not just Darwinism, but all science, is incomplete. So let's not draw conclusions about the ultimate fate of the universe according to science. To do so ignores that we're on the verge of another expansion of our view of what counts as the totality of what exists, equivalent to earlier realizations that the universe was more than our solar system inside a sphere of fixed stars. The totality of things is probably not just our universe. Our universe is one of an incredibly large number of universes sprouting like bubbles from a cosmic bubble pipe (so to speak).¹⁶ We know something about the fate of our sun and even our universe, but neither fate is the fate of

the totality. What then is ultimate for science? Scientists don't know; science simply peters out at its extremes, on the largest scale and on the smallest scale. When you hear theologians talking of the ultimate fate of things according to physics, put it aside as uninformed. Science and religion don't tell different ultimate stories. Rather, religion tells an ultimate story unrelated to any scientific evidence, and science confesses that any story it'll ever be able to tell will probably fall short of being an ultimate story.

III. My positive claims

Even if biology does tell us something about human values, for them to be effective, we must embrace them in a first person way. Or we might turn away from them. We either have to own our humanity or become alienated from it. I propose we own our humanity, and each of us own our variant form of it. I'll now make positive claims about three ubiquitous features of human lives, which we can call the three Cs: copulation, culture, and consciousness, particularly the consciousness of time passing. Unlike the four Fs, which some of you may know, my three Cs are serious and adequate to the human experience.

Could anything be clearer than that copulations help give human life meaning? (I promise this paragraph is rated PG-17.) Copulations are the consummation of intragenerational love. Human females are in continuous estrus, sexual receptivity, and have cryptic ovulation, not showing the male when his sperm can lead to conception. Human males are sperm factories in 24-7 operation.

Simple biology suggests that frequent copulation is meant to be part of adult human life. Without getting too graphic, copulations provide the glue that binds couples and makes families. Of course, noncopulatory love, like that between parents and children and spreading out to relatives, is another glue for families, just as important. For most of us, the meaning of life is the meaning of life in families. Perhaps it's symptomatic of the question about the meaning of life that it seems most pressing for youths, caught in between the families they were children in and the as-yet-unformed unions in which they'll become parents. They sense their temporary loss of meaning during this riskiest time of their lives when courtship is supposed to occur.

Family life is so central for the meaningfulness of the lives lived in families that good social policy would protect and further the family. I for one would foster conditions that help reduce adultery, abandonment, cuckoldry, pregnancies out of wedlock (formerly known as bastardry), spouse abuse, child abuse, unrealistic expectations and unpreparedness, and the other ills of American family life that undermine the contract of monogamous marriage and cause horrendous divorce rates.¹⁷

The other thing about copulations is that the centrality of matings within families is only that, a strong central tendency within human populations. I don't think society should discriminate against the sexual behavior in private among consenting adults, which falls outside the central tendency and which is not injurious or contrary to the person's own contractual obligations, such as the marriage contract. Society should also protect alternative public gender expressions, such as Joan Roughgarden's, from hate crimes and

unfair practices. And let's be clear about the reason for tolerance. It's not because Darwinism provides these atypical people with an excuse for the way they are. Do left-handed people make excuses for their left-handedness? Neither should gay people. To offer an excuse is to admit that, if one did not have the excuse, one would be blameworthy. Using biology to make excuses is a misuse of biology, even if genetic determinism were true, and it's not. Some more negative theses for you: genetic determinism is not true, and biology is not in the business of manufacturing excuses, nor would it be, even if genetic determinism were true. Rather there's nothing here requiring excuse, from a Darwinian point of view, because variation is normal, even if the variants are atypical of the central tendency. Central tendencies among a range of variations are not indicative of essences; they only indicate the contingent and accidental¹⁸ shaping of prior generations of a population by natural selection.

We may feel that an atypical variant behavior leads to a less than fulfilling life, and feel we ought to steer young people toward more fulfilling ways of living. Sometimes that's very true; I'm thinking of a heterosexual man's choice to be a cad, not a dad. I do think a dad-life is more fulfilling in the long run than a cad-life. So I'd recommend preserving a distance in status and prestige between marriage and mere cohabitation without commitment (sometimes even concerning who pays the next month's rent). American parents tend to indulge their children too much in this regard. Not to preserve unique privilege and highest regard for the marriage contract imposes a cost in status on married couples and the institution of marriage, a cost of the kind economists call an externality.¹⁹ I'd appeal to Darwinism here, which I think justifies

some inequalities and some discrimination to preserve them. But before dads act paternalistically, they should ask themselves whether a life-style's reduced power to be fulfilling is due to the nature of the variation, or is it only the result of society's discrimination against it? If the former, how alterable is the variant? If the latter, we should direct our reforming efforts toward society rather than the individuals who suffer the discrimination. This is the way I'd recommend gay people explain themselves. They should use the opportunity to teach, not mistreat themselves by making biological excuses. And they should concede there are more fulfilling and less fulfilling ways of being gay.

Culture is another biological fact about human beings. Again, what could be clearer than that one's culture helps settle the meaning of one's life by providing projects? For the purposes of my talk, our culture defines modes of excellence. Unlike other primates, whose culture, insofar as they have any, consists of tools and skills, our culture embodies our values. I include language as value-creating. Consider how many forms of human excellence are inconceivable without language, science for example. Another value is monogamy. Does the biology of the human species dictate monogamy? Probably not, but our culture does. Does biology predict its failure? No, only that it won't be easy.

The ideals embodied in our culture are passed on to the next generation mainly through families, and that accounts for the great importance to society of fostering the ideals of family life. Parents and older children are role models for the values of their culture, forming the child's sense of the meaning of its own life. Youths are

naturally idealistic and will emulate those who manifest meaningfulness and nobility of spirit in their own lives.

Any culture is a cornucopia of varieties of human excellence. For Americans and Chinese it's glorious to become rich. So success in business is a mode of excellence. The Olympic Games and the World Series define another form of excellence. But so are successes as a writer, as a scholar, as an athlete, as a butler, and literally thousands of other ways of being excellent, skillful, or successful. Each of us must choose the modes of excellence we'll strive for in our lives. We cannot strive for all, so we must choose to narrow down, to exclude alternatives. Excellence in one area is sufficient for meaning, even if it comes at a great price in overall well-roundedness. Think of Beethoven and Wittgenstein, Bobby Fisher and Emily Dickinson. Our choices may require hardship and suffering. Nothing in this picture of the meaning of life requires it to be easy or cheap or happily content. But also nothing in it requires excessive expense, that is, that we achieve the top rung on the ladder of excellence for our lives to be meaningful. But the life of a couch-potato is empty and unfulfilling, even if it be sybaritic.

Darwinism tells us that human beings are culture-driven animals, and so we should look to a culture for the specifics. These specific human values are the creations of a population that recognizes and rewards with status those who pursue their realization. Status or rank in a social hierarchy, in a community, is important, and it goes with being a role model. High status is necessarily rare, and so, yes, there's competition, but it's as much a striving toward meeting an ideal as it is defeating another person. And social competition is bounded by rules of fair play. We also

recognize that people are free to break with cultural givens and strike out on their own. This is the noncompetitive strategy for status. Think of Jackson Pollock, the paint-spiller; his paintings now hang beside Rembrandt's.

Finally, there's consciousness, another result, along with culture, of that three pounds of intricately interconnected tissue called the brain. Because of our consciousness we reflect on the spread of our existence from the past into the future. The essential feature of our experience of time is passage, ephemerality. We live in time; at any time we have a past which we recall, a present we experience, and a future we anticipate. The present passes, transferring the near future into the recent past. The fugacity of temporal experience is a part of the knowledge I call knowledge in the first person, our sense of situatedness. Our situation is always changing. Apart from our experience, time would be like the way it's represented on a calendar; passage does not affect calendars. We cannot say this ephemerality is irrelevant to the meaning of life because it's part of situatedness. But does it enhance meaningfulness or detract from it? I want to say consciousness of time's ephemerality enhances positively the meaningfulness of life.

Let's scrutinize the theistic story. I think that the religious story about life portrays our temporality as a negative thing. Notice how it fights the temporality of existence. First of all, its god is traditionally taken to be the philosopher's god, whose perfection requires that it be outside time altogether. For if it changed, it would change from having a perfection to lacking one or from lacking one to having it, in either case the conclusion being that at some time it's

not perfect. Secondly, there's the postulate of human immortality, which does not get us all the way outside time as is the case with god, but we escape many of the consequences of being temporal beings. Its most delusory consequence is that it gives us the false idea that the only achievements worth anything are lasting ones. The very idea, say, at the Olympics of setting a record in some sport, only to see it surpassed the following day, is a vanity of vanities. I think that conclusion is the wrong use of consciousness. One's situatedness in time is what makes values relevant. How does it subtract from the value of a sublime piece of music that it has an ending?

And now for another negative thesis. Darwinism does not offer an alternative escape from temporality. One may think of evolution by natural selection as directional, onwards and upwards. This is the idea of progress, which many have read into biology. Notice that this principle is just the temporal extension of essentialism. The goal of the process would be to fit the essence, which would be the process's acme. What has misled serious thinkers into this error? Perhaps its source is that natural selection can be directional. But natural selection can also be a stopper, a maintainer of the status quo. It can split and go off in multiple directions. And it can reverse directions as in the case of the pepper moths who evolved to be black from being greyish, and then evolved back to being greyish. Another example is the cave fish with vestigial eyes. They evolved to be blind. There's also devolution by natural selection. We cannot look to Darwinism to tell us what the long-term direction is. Even that can change.

Temporality goes with death. Father Time is brother to the Grim Reaper. Philosophers are fond of pointing out that we seem to be the only animal that knows it will die. Well obviously, we are the only animal that knows X, where X stands for pretty much anything you can think of. What's so special about knowing we'll die? Who was it who said that a truly aware person lives his life always with the prospect of his death before him? I don't care, because it's phony profundity.²⁰

What does Darwinism say about death? We're talking about a particular type of death, not accidental death or the kind of death called apoptosis, which afflicts some kinds of cells. We're talking about the deaths that the decrepitude of aging makes virtually certain. This is called senescence. Time for another negative thesis. What evolves need not be adaptive. Senescence evolved but was never selected for, and so it's not an adaptation. It's a maladaptive trait, but it could not be selected against effectively, because senescence is a time-dependent pleiotropism. What does that mean? Genes can have more than one effect on the organism's structure and behavior—that's the pleiotropism—and the effects can occur at different times of life. That's the time-dependency. Thus genes that promote reproductive success earlier in life may have the effect of causing the organism to senesce later in life. Yet those genes get selected for early on, and the later negative effect is not sufficient to create a counter-balancing selection against. So genes with late-onset effects can accumulate. There's no one single gene for senescence, just as there's no death gene. The many genes contributing to senescence increase vulnerability to death, but if the

genes' earlier contribution to the organism's reproductive success is enough to ensure their continuation in the gene pool, natural selection forgives the later effects that limit reproductive success. Darwinism explains death, but gives it no special meaning.

Let's be upbeat. Darwinism puts a positive spin on our temporality. At any time in our lives, we recognize an ideal for ourselves which we have yet to realize. We human beings with our culture and consciousness recognize a condition we might call the acme of our lives and the golden age of our culture. As long as there's time, there's hope of achieving it. Even when we're past our prime, there are still ideals to strive for. So I follow Spinoza who said that a virtuous person thinks about death least of all.²¹ He's not indifferent to death; that's Stoicism. No, death is evil. But a Darwinian meaningfulness of your life is its meaningfulness-as-you-live-it, immersed in the passage of time just as your life is. For meaningfulness stems from one's temporal situatedness, as we noted early on. If your life were to lose its meaningfulness-in-your-living-of-it, could any eternal, everlasting meaningfulness make up for that loss? Not for me it couldn't. So, as I live my life, I should focus on the considerations that give it meaning then and there.

There's a tension in the meaning-of-life-as-you-live-it. There's the evanescence, the passage of time, but there's also the abiding element, because much persists, although nothing lasts. The abiding element structures the evanescence and gives it unity across time. The self's unity is different from the world's unity, however. World-unity is to be discovered in perception and science; self-unity is to be made. The meaning of one's life depends on the abiding element that one adds to the evanescence. For that element, let's

look to commitments, which tie one's past to one's future. One creates the meaning of one's life by making commitments. If they had not been implicit in the way I described the first C, commitments would deserve to be a fourth C, because they're the true glue of family and society, within which most people find meaningfulness. They're either reaffirmed daily in one's actions, giving one's life a pattern, or they're broken or never made at all, in the name of freedom. But is a freedom from commitment a freedom for something better? Rarely. The dad reaffirms his commitments to family; the cad never makes them, and so his life is likely to be less meaningful, in that it lacks integrity over time in this respect. It is instead a picaresque life. (I am thinking of Casanova's memoirs.)

Have I merely expressed my preference for dads over cads (I being a father protective of two daughters), or is there something more substantial to back it up? I think Darwinism enters here to substantiate that the patterns in one's life that contribute most to meaning are those of family life and participation in the cultural excellences of one's society. Aspiration toward patterning one's life in these ways is so deeply ingrained in the kind of animal we are that, according to some philosophers,²² the patterns are one's self itself. I don't commit myself about that, which would equate having a meaningful life with being a self. No doubt, though, one's conception of the patterns one's life exhibits makes up one's concept of oneself and determines the story one tells when one wishes to say who one is. I've claimed that some patterns are more fulfilling than others, for instance, dad-patterns over cad-patterns. If there's to be any truth of the matter, so that the cad must see himself as a cad if he is to see the truth about who he is, Darwinist science will provide the

objective criterion we should use. Look for biologists' discussions of it under the heading of "r and K selection."²³ Dads follow *K* strategies, cads *r* strategies.

The contingency of meaningfulness, the fact that a person or a whole society might simply blow it, or have bad luck, is a source of perpetual anxiety for a reflective person, and it may lead one to try to transcend the contingency with a commitment of faith to the deity. Faith says the meaning of life is not contingent. Faith also claims to bind one's other commitments into a more unified whole, when they're subordinated to the commitment to the deity. Thus the person of faith has a sense of personal wholeness that's more complete and seemingly less vulnerable to personal failure or bad luck. A person who rejects faith may suspect a failure of nerve²⁴ infects faith's concept of what it is to be human; it's a callow flight from realism. From a less pejorative perspective the faithful are "meaning-in-life overachievers."²⁵

Critical reflection on what I've said about the third C, consciousness, seems to renew the doubt it was meant to allay: Is my positive spin on temporality mere indulgence in self-delusion?²⁶ Is not the buzz of life doomed to crash, like a puppet show from which the puppeteer is withdrawn? We know this foreboding as the "vanity of vanities, all is vanity" frame of mind. Some people are haunted by the specter of nihilism. But there's nothing logically compelling about this thought. Perhaps for someone afflicted by it, the best thing would be to be told to just get over it!²⁷ Or get a religion. I'm not being sarcastic.

IV. The Incompleteness of Modest Darwinism

This past year I published a defense of a version of Pascal's wager for religious faith, as a rational way to come to faith while still accepting science.²⁸ It says you should bet on faith because if God exists, there's much to gain, and if he does not, there's little to lose. That's a caricature merely, but I showed how something like that wager could represent religious conversion. Conversion as I described it is release from self-loathing, but I now realize this picture of conversion makes my account mainly fit Christianity. I should add release from a sense of nihilism, meaninglessness, as another source of conversion. In conversions of this sort, defeat of one's aspirations ceases to create meaninglessness, and the disunity of mankind, in the sense that meaningfulness without God is inevitably distributed unevenly among people, sometimes by sheer luck or misfortune; that too is overcome and meaningfulness is preserved despite its loss in the eyes of the world.

If my argument was right, atheists should accept that being religious is compatible with being rational and with believing what science says. A scientifically modest Darwinism is open to religion. I mentioned the biologist, Joan Roughgarden. I just reviewed a book of hers on this topic, *Evolution and Christian Faith*,²⁹ in which she makes that very point. She herself is a practicing Episcopalian. But I also argued in my Pascal article that accepting the wager was not required for rationality, that it was optional. I claimed that the issue between the theist and the atheist was no longer over what it is to be rational. It's rather over what it is to be human: Does being human fit together with being god-dependent? Does the latter complete the

former somehow? Modest scientific Darwinism leaves this huge question unanswered, and that's a deficiency in its meaning of life.

Most people go with the theistic option, although 90% of the 1800 scientists who are members of the National Academy of Sciences are atheists.³⁰ Most societies also go with the theistic option, cultivating social institutions that bias individual choice toward religion. Thus the choice individuals are usually confronted with is whether to stay with the religion of their youth or leave, rather than whether to leave irreligion and join a religion. I don't think that social biasing explains the whole of the lopsidedness of the results. In post-communist societies, where the option is to stay with the irreligion of one's parents or join a religion, there is more tendency to turn to religion.

In my article I did not say how I inclined. I may have even left the impression that I accepted the wager. But I do reject it personally, although I recommend social institutions that bias its members' choices toward religion.³¹ Irreligion should not come easy; it should be the result of intellectual and moral struggle. One must discover what it would be to be human without religion and convert to it with one's whole heart and mind.

Insofar as the Darwinisms I called grandiose address this question, they're more complete than the modest Darwinism I've restricted us to. So the final word goes to grandiose Darwinism. Each society and each member of the society must choose one. My own grandiose position is neither the theism of de Chardin nor the atheism of Dawkins, nor even the agnosticism of Thomas Huxley.³² Mine is a fourth: unimportantism. My sense of what it is to be human makes the existence of a god unimportant for the meaning of

my life; so I no longer give a twig whether a god exists or not.³³ I'm not afflicted with either self-loathing or a felt deficit of meaningfulness. I completely accept my being a human animal with human ideals. I'm happy with who I am, in my family, in my culture, striving for an excellence my culture has defined, and the ephemerality of it all seems to add to its worthwhileness. I don't begrudge the religious among us the comforts of their religion, but I don't hide from myself the unequal distribution of meaningfulness including the extreme chance of my life and others' losing all meaning. Amen.

In preparation for this talk, I picked up my Bible³⁴ and read the book of Ecclesiastes. I found two excellent sayings. The first was, "A fool multiplieth words" (10:14). The second was "Better is the end of a speech than the beginning" (6:9). We've now reached the better part of my speech. Thank you.³⁵

Notes

1. In his *Confession* (1884). In the Introduction, page 8, of the David Patterson translation (W. W. Norton and Co., 1983), the following sentence is quoted from the original edition's introduction: "Here unfolds the drama of a soul who has sought from his earliest years the path to truth, or as the author refers to it, 'the meaning of life'." A Russian prince, Eugene Troubetzkoy, published an article in 1918 in three installments in *The Hibbert Journal* (vol. 16) on the meaning of life. The phrase is everywhere in the article and in the second installment's title. Howard and Edna Hong, the most recent

translators of Kierkegaard's work, have him referring to the meaning of life in the 1840s.

2. Does my account miss something? A sense of being situated, having large purposes and finding the consummatory states valuable make our lives meaningful. But given that life's *meaningful*, should we go further and say what it is that life *means*, as though we were deciphering a difficult sentence? To grasp it we must be able to state its meaning. But what's the meaning of a life like George Washington's? Being the father of his country? His life reduced to five words? They cannot encapsulate the meaning of his life. That would need as many words as it takes to write his biography. I'm confused by what looks like a false analogy between words and lives. The words must first have a meaning for them to be meaningful. With lives, perhaps it's the other way round; it seems that, for lives, meaningfulness comes *before* the meaning. Owen Flanagan's theory of selfhood, to be noted near the end of part III, is relevant here.

3. Most of us get our first idea of life's meaning from catechisms. The first question in mine (The Baltimore Catechism from the 1940s) was, "Why did God make you?" And the answer was, "God made me to know him, to love him, and to serve him in this world, and to be happy with him forever in the next." In terms of purpose, my job is to know and love God. In terms of values, well, being happy for a while among my friends and family is not enough to make life worth living, but being happy forever with God is. Note also my being situated in the first of two lives, and my scale, rather

huge I'd say, given that there's just me and God mentioned. That was the meaning that life had for me until sometime in high school, when I started to have doubts about whether there was a god, and whether there was an afterlife.

4. Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*. I recommend either the Krailsheimer translation (Penguin, 1966) or the Ariew translation (Hackett, 2005). The passage I quote is in section 423 of Krailsheimer, in section 680 of Ariew. The popular Trotter translation (Modern Library, 1941) is awful.

5. See de Chardin's *The Phenomenon of Man* (1955, translation: Harper, 1959) and several books by Dawkins, e.g., *The Blind Watchmaker* (W.W.Norton, 1986), some essays in his *A Devil's Chaplain* (Houghton Mifflin, 2003) and his *The God Delusion* (Houghton Mifflin, 2006).

6. The standard argument for the naturalistic fallacy's being a fallacy is "the open question argument," formulated by the philosopher, G.E.Moore. It always makes sense to ask of any equation of an evaluative predicate, y , with a descriptive predicate, x , "But is x good, really?" E.g., if fitness is equated with goodness, it always makes sense to ask that of fitness. This openness only refutes the idea that the equation is true analytically. Further, the question is ambiguous, because it has a context-free reading and a reading in the first person, present tense. Even if x is y in the context-free sense, the question may be whether I, here and now, should pursue x . The openness of that question does not show anything wrong with the

equation in its context-free sense. See my *Darwinism and Philosophical Analysis* (New Delhi: Decent Books, 2003), pp. 178-186, for a more extensive defense of a naturalistic theory of value.

7. Richard Lewontin (*New York Review of Books*, October 20, 2005) distinguishes the more ambitious sociobiology from its more cautious successor, evolutionary psychology, in that the latter does not use its models to make very specific predictions. Lewontin, an adversary of both developments, sees the move as one from being false to being vacuous. I am more hopeful. For a persuasive defense of evolutionary psychology against another recent attack, see Edouard Machery and H. Clark Barrett, "Debunking *Adapting Minds*," forthcoming in *Philosophy of Science*, also available from Machery's homepage, www.pitt.edu/~machery.

8. G. Ledyard Stebbins, *Processes of Organic Evolution* Third edition (Prentice-Hall, 1977), pp. 100-106.

9. The example is from G. C. Williams, *Natural Selection* (Oxford, 1992), p. 119.

10. The reason it does not work for, e.g., bovines is that any essentialist argument would entail that evolution could not break the constraint on copulation without generating another species. Note how my idea of false pleasures works here. For us, orgasms of copulations that cannot lead to reproduction are not necessarily false, but they would be for bulls and cows, where semen production and ovulation coincide.

11. My point is not the question begging one that the current biology *has got* to be wrong because the values derived from it are wrong. See Joan Roughgarden, *Evolution's Rainbow* (University of California Press, 2004), pp. 172-174, for a criticism of the biology underlying the conclusions of the evolutionary psychologists.

12. Elliott Sober and David Sloan Wilson, *Unto Others* (Harvard University Press, 1998).

13. Joan Roughgarden, *Evolution's Rainbow*. See especially pp. 168-181. For a more scholarly presentation see Roughgarden, Meeko Oishi, Erol Akçay, "Reproductive Social Behavior: Cooperative Games to Replace Sexual Selection" *Science* 311 (February 17, 2006) pp. 965-969, and ten letters and authors' response "Debate, Sexual Selection and Mating Strategies" *Science* 312 (May 5, 2006) pp. 689-697.

14. Geoffrey Miller, *The Mating Mind* (Doubleday, 2000).

15. Robert Wright, *The Moral Animal* (Vintage, 1994). Wright thinks sexual selection can only account for the extra-moral characteristics of society, like the status hierarchy. Only kin selection and reciprocity can account for ethical sentiments and also their weakness. Miller is a healthy antidote to these restrictions.

16. George Johnson, "Oh, for the Simple Days of the Big Bang" *New York Times* (Sunday, October 8, 2006), p. 3 of the "Week in

Review” section. Johnson reports that the recently discovered increasing rate of expansion of the universe is being thought of as evidence for the many universes theory. See also Raphael Bousso and Joseph Polchinski, “The String Theory Landscape” *Scientific American* 291 (September 2004), pp. 79-84. See the illustration on p. 86. It is reprinted in *Scientific American*, special editions, vol 15.3 (2005) *The Frontiers of Physics*.

17. For the prevalence of these in American society and their bad consequences, see Richard Layard, *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* (Penguin, 2005), pp. 60ff, 78ff, and 176ff.

18. Accidental is the opposite of essential, in philosophical jargon. Popularly it means unintended. I mean both here. But I do not mean random.

19. You bear an external cost in the reduced value of your house, if your neighbors lease out their front yards as dumps. If you wear a lapel-pin acknowledging your meritorious service, its value is decreased if everyone wears look-alike lapel-pins. Does the recognition of same-sex marriage impose external costs on traditional marriage, sufficiently high to justify disapproving same-sex marriage, as I think we should disapprove cohabitation? Clearly, condoning cohabitation is much more corrosive; see Darren Spedale and William Eskridge, “The Hitch” *Wall Street Journal*, October 27, 2006, editorial page. But are there still some external costs of the look-alike type? I’d say, not enough to justify not legalizing same-sex “civil unions.” A semantic dodge to reserve the word

“marriage?” Concerning externalities, perception is all. On that, see Layard, cited earlier, chapter 9.

20. I don’t defend either lying to oneself about the nature of death and its inevitability or practicing denial in the face of its imminence, but I reject making thinking of one’s death a requirement for one’s being human authentically, which Martin Heidegger may or may not have claimed (*Being and Time* (1927), division II, part 1). For arguments that there’s nothing conceptually special about death as it applies to oneself as distinct from death in general, see Paul Edwards’s article, ““My Death”” in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Paul Edwards, ed. (Macmillan, 1965).

21. Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics* (1677), Part IV, proposition 67, where “free” is convertible with “virtuous.” Of course the circumstances in which one must live could become so extremely bad as to warrant suicide.

22. E.g., Owen Flanagan, *The Problem of the Soul* (Basic Books, 2002), pp. 242ff.

23. Edward O. Wilson, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (Harvard University Press, 1975), pp. 99ff.

24. The title of a chapter in Gilbert Murray, *Five Stages of Greek Religion*, 3rd edition (Beacon Press, 1951). See Stephen Weldon, “In Defense of Science: Secular Intellectuals and the Failure of Nerve Thesis,” *Religious Humanism*, 30 (1996) for the subsequent history

of the diagnosis of the impulse to other-worldly religion as a failure of nerve.

25. Owen Flanagan's phrase, in "Self-Confidences," *Self-Expressions* (Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 201. Peter J. Mehl makes the charge against Kierkegaard at length in his *Thinking Through Kierkegaard* (University of Illinois Press, 2005). Mehl reveals his Darwinism on p. 166.

26. Darwinism does *not* say life has *no* meaning; it does not say our quest for meaning, purpose and value is a delusion, a quest for self-deception on a grand scale. When our catechismic conception (see note 3) of the meaning of life was destroyed, it left a hole in our picture, and that gaping hole defines what we expect any conception of the meaning of life to tell us. One of the losses is the sense of cosmic grandeur of the theistic providential meaning of life. Some people say it has a profundity and ultimacy that no nontheistic meaning of life could come close to. Somehow, this little planet among a gazillion planets, in this century among the millions of centuries past and the many more to come is not a big enough stage. The cosmos dwarfs it. A paltry skit is replacing a grand opera. So these people say. Part of their sense of loss is the loss of being stage-center. If we'd be willing to play a bit part, we'd find there is an engrossing story, even if it's not about us. Could life have meaning despite its playing a bit part in a story of cosmic dimensions that's mostly about other things? Hmmm. . . Before God I was merely humbled; but before everything else I am humiliated. I suppose some would say that's the same thing as life having no

meaning. They feel that hole as a huge gaping vastness. The first point I wish to make is that the absence of a full substitute for a *religious* answer is not the same as affirming there's *no* answer. That would be like concluding that one's keys are gone forever just because one checks one's pockets and finds they're not there.

27. Susan Wolf, "The Meanings of Lives" reprinted in Perry, Bratman, and Fischer, *Introduction to Philosophy*, fourth edition (Oxford University Press, 2007). Page 71: "The only advice one can give to such people is: Get Over It."

28. Arthur Falk, "A Pascal-type Justification of Faith in a Scientific Age" *Philosophy* 80 (2005) 543-563. I agree with the criticisms of Pascal's version, which Alan Hajek makes in his article "Pascal's Wager" in the online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* and in his article "Waging War on Pascal's Wager" *Philosophical Review* 112 (2003). I don't agree with his claim that there's no way to repair the argument.

29. (Island Press, 2006). My favorable review is in *The Quarterly Review of Biology* 82.1 (March, 2007) pp. 44f.

30. Edward J. Larson and Larry Witham, "Scientists and Religion in America" *Scientific American* 281 (September 1999); also their "Scientists are Still Keeping the Faith" *Nature* 386 (1997) pp. 435f.

31. See Layard, cited earlier, p. 64, for evidence that societies with high belief in god are happier societies. Thus I encouraged my

daughters to join a church when they were young, and again as adults for the sake of the grandchildren. But I do think it matters *which* church; see note 33. A second reason for preferring a society biased toward religion is—I agree with Nietzsche—that a post-religious atheism is more in accord with an ideal humanity than a primitive atheism by default. For one, a passage through religion can create wonderful experiences, such as of the beauty of holiness. The prevalence of the primitive type of atheism by default in today's irreligious societies accounts (I'd bet) for the reduced happiness in them. I'm often tempted to say to such atheists, "Fool! You think atheism endorses your succumbing to your miserable temptations." My distinction between better and worse sorts of atheism keeps my position from requiring me to be duplicitous about my recommendations with regard to societies and children.

32. Huxley came to feel an ethical horror of natural selection, which I share. See my "Reflections on Huxley's Evolution and Ethics" *The Humanist* 55.6 (Nov/Dec 1995) pp. 23-25.

33. I do care about people's conceptions of god. The god of the Old Testament and the god of medieval Christianity do not deserve respect. Many Christians agree with my assessment of the medieval Christian god. See William James's essay, "Is Life Worth Living" (the second essay in his *The Will to Believe and Other Essays* (Longman Green, 1896)), section III. He thinks my rebellion against such a being is a proper first stage to a truer religion. But at this stage I halt and stand at ease. Suppose god were to turn out not to violate the Geneva Conventions in his handling of the prisoners

taken in his cosmic war, I'd still decline the meaning he might offer to give my life. If he turned out to be the totally other, pure love, or incarnate in the person Jesus, well then I'd not harbor disrespect for this god, and I'd recommend churches that see god in those ways (see note 30), but I'd still resist such a god's meddling with my life.

34. The Douay-Reims translation (1582-1610). Any resemblance of these quotations to the original Hebrew, which they supposedly translate, is purely coincidental.

35. My thanks to Jeff Seaver and a student of mine, Jill Pinkerton, for the invitation to speak in October 2006 to the Freethought Association of West Michigan, as well as for the suggestion of the topic, and to Carl Bajema for good insights in correspondence about the topic. An earlier version of the talk is published on the Association's website, www.freethoughtassociation.org. Thanks to my student Brennan Jacoby for leading me after that first talk to insights concerning what really should be a fourth C, namely, commitments. Our society does push the ideal that copulation should be tied to commitment; they go together "like a horse and carriage," as the song says. A version substantially the same as the present one is forthcoming in the journal *Religious Humanism*.

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