

The New Atheism

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I imagine you've been hearing a lot about "the new atheism" lately, and have probably read some of it. The question you might be asking is, naturally enough, What's "new" about it? Well, there's not much new about atheism itself, of course, which has been around since ancient times. Several Greek philosophies, such as skepticism and Epicureanism, had little room for the gods, though if you were a skeptic or Epicurean you had to be careful what you said or did, since ancient cities required public liturgies and sacrifice to the official gods. For the most part, if you donated a goat periodically, and you didn't disturb the peace, no one much minded what you actually believed.

And there have been skeptics among Jews, Christians, and Muslims for many centuries, probably more than we'll ever know, because it was even more dangerous for them to speak out than it was for the Greeks and Romans.

Only in the last two centuries, in Europe and America, and then in China and Japan and India, has it become relatively safe to declare yourself a nonbeliever in God or the gods. In England it was a serious crime (blasphemy) even to deny the Trinity, let alone God; it was called "atheism" if you were a Unitarian and opened your mouth about it.

It was widely argued in the eighteenth century, I was amused to learn, that there *are* no atheists – that it is impossible to be an atheist – but just to make sure, they made it a crime.

By the late eighteenth century, all the traditional arguments for the existence of a traditional anthropomorphic God were refuted by philosophers such as Hume and Kant. With Darwin in 1859, a convincing explanation of the origin of life, including human life, filled the last large gap that theists thought only God could fill.

There has been nothing much new by way of arguments since then, I think, though there are fresh ways of putting them, new examples, and of course a lot more science to cite, as well as a lot of recent examples of religious nonsense.

So what's new? There's a new aggressiveness, a new forthrightness, and a new fearlessness motivated by a new disgust and a new alarm at the militant Christians in this country and the militant Muslims elsewhere who have declared war on us, not to mention militant Jews and Hindus. Until a couple of years ago it wasn't "done," it wasn't polite, to attack religion in this country. But now it is.

To judge by church attendance and answers to opinion polls, America is the most religious country in the advanced industrial world. It is considered suicidal for a politician to admit to being an atheist or agnostic if he or she is running for higher office. Most atheists and skeptics have preferred to keep quiet as long as they are left alone. We do have religious freedom in this country (thank God!) so why make a stink and draw the attention of the local Bible-thumpers who are worried about your soul?

Well, now we have a stink. Half a dozen books have appeared in the last three years with deliberately irritating titles such as *The God Delusion* or *God: The Failed Hypothesis* or *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. Some of them are selling very well, and their authors are appearing on talk shows and giving lectures all around the country, even in the Bible Belt, to large and appreciative audiences.

Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion* was #2 on the Amazon ranking last November, and stayed on the *NY Times* nonfiction bestseller list for a year. (It was still Amazon #132 last week in hardcover.) It was widely reviewed, and widely attacked. Several books have already appeared in response to it, including one called *The Dawkins Delusion*.

Christopher Hitchens's *God is not Great* was Amazon #2 last May (just behind Harry Potter) and was #1 on the *NY Times* nonfiction bestseller list.

So, why these books and this new aggressiveness against religion? The main reason is 9/11. For about fifty years we Americans had had it drummed into our brains that it was atheist Communists who were ready to invade us, enslave us, lock us up, or annihilate us with nuclear weapons. But those were not atheists who killed 3000 people and brought down two great buildings and four airplanes. It was 19 men who believed in God so deeply, who were so convinced that they would be taken up to paradise and greeted by beautiful virgins, that they went cheerfully to their deaths while killing enemies of their faith.

Here is what Richard Dawkins said last year (2006): "Many of us saw religion as harmless nonsense. Beliefs might lack all supporting evidence but, we thought, if people needed a crutch for consolation, where's the harm? September 11th changed all that. Revealed faith is not harmless nonsense, it can be lethally dangerous nonsense. Dangerous because it gives people unshakeable confidence in their own righteousness. Dangerous because it gives them false courage to kill themselves, which automatically removes normal barriers to killing others. Dangerous because it teaches enmity to others labelled only by a difference of inherited tradition. And dangerous because we have all bought into a weird respect, which uniquely protects religion from normal criticism. Let's now stop being so damned respectful!"

And Sam Harris begins his book with an arresting question. You learn that a young man boarded a bus while carrying a bomb surrounded by nails and rat poison. He sets it off, killing himself, twenty others on the bus, and several more outside the bus. When his family learns what he has done, they feel great pride in it: they know he has gone to heaven and his victims have gone to hell. That's all you know. You cannot guess whether he was rich or poor, educated or ignorant, popular or disliked among his friends. But it is ridiculously easy to guess his religion.

It is not just 9/11, of course, that has infused this new urgency into the atheists and secularists, for the Christian faithful in America have declared war on "secular humanism" and are trying to force prayer in the school rooms, "Intelligent Design" in biology classes, banning of abortion and contraception and stem-cell research, suppressing of homosexual rights, and so on. Under George Bush the White House and the Pentagon harbor little cells of fervent Christians who believe the invasion of Iraq is the fulfillment of biblical prophecy, the beginning of Armageddon. Jerry Falwell and other Fundamentalist preachers have routinely been invited to national security briefings; they doubtless had lots of good foreign policy advice, drawn from the book of Ezekiel.

Who is buying these new atheists' books, and applauding at their speeches? It might seem that they must already be atheists or agnostics or skeptics, so that Dawkins and Harris and Hitchens are preaching to the choir and not reaching those they disagree with.

But even if that were true, the books and lectures would still be having an effect. By encouraging the atheists to shed their fears of social ostracism and come out of the closet, for example. Hitchens reports that at several of his well-attended speeches or debates people have come up to him afterward to say that they thought they were the only atheist in town. They have felt empowered and encouraged. This experience, repeated many times, will itself have consequences.

And it does seem that there is a steady stream of converts who have read some of the books or watched Dawkins's television show *The Root of All Evil*. On Dawkins's website are posted two hundred letters from people who tell their stories: how they had been believers, in some cases deeply devoted to a Fundamentalist or Catholic community, but read *The Selfish Gene* or *The God Delusion* and are now pleased to be atheists.

But let me turn to the four books (the four atheist Gospels) I have been reading.

Sam Harris, *The End of Faith* (August 2004)

Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Sept 2006)

Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (May 2007)

André Comte-Sponville, *L'esprit de l'athéisme* (Sept 2006)

I have a few general comments to make, but for the most part this morning I want to pick out a few passages and arguments that struck me as new or unusually interesting. I won't be very systematic.

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All but Harris give some time to the traditional arguments for the existence of God, and they make short work of them. There are the various cosmological arguments of St. Thomas, destroyed by Hume, and the ontological argument of St. Anselm, pretty well disposed of by Kant. Nothing much new here, other than the lively turns of phrase; if you took Philosophy 101 you probably went through them all yourself.

Dawkins, of course, as a biologist and renowned explicator of Darwin in such books as *The Selfish Gene* and *The Blind Watchmaker*, spends some time on Intelligent Design, though not as much as you might expect, since he has dealt with it extensively in other books. You have to feel some pity for the ID advocates. They can no longer point to the human eye, as they used to do, as an example of such perfection that only God could have made it, for even Darwin sketched out how the eye might have evolved, and since then so much evidence has accumulated that the eye is now offered as prime evidence *in favor of* evolution by natural selection. The ID believers are reduced to citing the supposed mystery of the human immune system and a few oddities like the rotating mechanism of the flagellum in some bacteria, as "gaps" that the Darwinian theory of random variation and natural selection cannot explain. Dawkins points out how desperate an argument this is, a "God of the gaps" whose function is to be evoked to explain the increasingly fewer and smaller puzzles that evolutionary biologists haven't sorted out yet.

Several of the new atheists give variations on the argument that has done the most damage to faith in God, the Argument from Evil, though this too is ancient. Voltaire revived it in 1755 after the earthquake in Lisbon. Arriving on All Saints' Day, it killed one third of its population of 275,000, and destroyed all its churches. If God is omniscient, omnipotent, and benevolent, then why did He make this happen, or let it happen? And why did He set off, or not prevent, the tsunami in the Indian Ocean a few years ago that killed 230,000 people? Why did He not stop the Nazis from exterminating half of his Chosen People?

Voltaire's target was Leibniz, who argued that, for all its imperfections, this world is the best of all possible worlds. Voltaire's character Candide asks, "If this is the best of all possible worlds, what must the others be like?"

Richard Dawkins points out that this argument does not refute the existence of a god, only a *good* god, so he does not find it very interesting. But surely no one who believes in one god will concede that he is not good, or not all-powerful. And so we get the ugly and preposterous proclamations by Christians and Muslims alike that the tsunami was sent by our good God to punish the wicked tourists on the beaches of Thailand.

André Comte-Sponville, who is the only professional philosopher among our four authors, takes a greater interest in the argument, which he traces all the way back to Epicurus (4C BCE), who said:

Either God wants to eliminate evil and can't, or he can but doesn't want to, or he doesn't want to *and* can't, or he wants to and can. If he wants to and can't, he is impotent, which does not accord with God; if he can but doesn't want to, he is wicked, which is alien to God. If he doesn't want to and can't, he is both powerless and wicked, and therefore not God. If he wants to and can, which alone is appropriate to God, then where does evil come from, or why doesn't God suppress it?

Evil is an enormous theoretical problem for believers; for nonbelievers it is a practical problem only. Comte-Sponville quotes Freud, who said, "The world is not a nursery." Why should we think the world is designed for us?

There are two kinds of evil, of course, natural and human. Natural evils, like tsunamis, are the greater problem for believers, for they can't be blamed on human beings. But human evils, too, are deeply disturbing to a belief in God, or they should be. It is true that believers can say that human evils, like the holocaust of the Jews, are due to human sin, and are not God's fault. God made us free, because freedom is a good, and He is not to blame if we abuse our freedom. As God himself explains it in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, "I made [man] just and right, / Sufficient to have stood though free to fall." But Comte-Sponville disagrees with Milton that we are "sufficient." He asks, "Why did God create us so weak, so cowardly, so violent, so zealous, so pretentious, so stupid? Why so many bastards and mediocrities, so few heroes and saints? Why so much egoism, envy, hatred, so little generosity and love? Banality of evil, rarity of good! It seems to me that a god, even while leaving us free and imperfect, would have been able to obtain a more favorable proportion" (125).

This thought leads Comte-Sponville to make an argument I have not seen before: the Argument from Mediocrity. "I do not have a high enough idea of humanity in general and of myself in particular to imagine that a god is the origin of this species and this individual. Too much mediocrity everywhere. Too much pettiness. Too much *dénéantise*, as Montaigne says ["nothingness"]. Too much vanity, as he says again... You will tell me that perhaps God has done better elsewhere... Let's grant it. But is that a reason to be contented with so little here? ... 'God created man in his image,' we read in Genesis. That makes one doubt the original" (129-30).

We get an argument in the same spirit from Christopher Hitchens: what he calls "the tawdriness of miracles." Most Christians agree that the age of miracles is long past, and that we must take on faith that Moses brought plagues on Egypt and parted the Red Sea, and that Jesus walked on water, cured the sick, and rose from the dead. But this faith is very shaky in many of the faithful: they want more miracles. "If the religious were wise," Hitchens writes, "or had the confidence of their convictions, they ought to welcome the eclipse of this [biblical] age of fraud

and conjuring. But faith, yet again, discredits itself by proving to be insufficient to satisfy the faithful. Actual events are still required to impress the credulous” (140).

But these events, these new miracles, are pretty disappointing. We never get a Red Sea parting anymore, no one walks on water, no one rises from the dead. We get tawdry little things like the liquefaction of the blood of San Gennaro in Naples, or various stone statues of the Virgin Mary that “weep.” Hitchens writes, “Even if I could not easily introduce you to people who can produce this identical effect in their spare time, using pig fat or other materials, I would still ask myself why a deity should be content to produce such a paltry effect” (144). Is this the best he can do? Harry Potter could do better in his freshman year.

I have had the same thought myself about seances, Ouija boards, and abductions by aliens. The results are always the same and always tedious. Our dead grandfather, channeled by a medium in the dark, taps out something really profound like “It is beautiful up here” or “You will find your missing wallet in the bottom desk drawer.” That’s it. Nothing new, nothing deep, nothing mind-blowing. It’s enough to make you want to avoid heaven for as long as you can. And those aliens from outer space who keep performing the identical experiments, on thousands of rural Americans at night, year after year. Are they idiots? If they’re so forgetful or incapable of learning, how did they get here?

It’s obvious enough, but worth repeating, that the god being talked about in all the books is not the entity often on the lips of Unitarians or philosophers--the spirit of the universe, the order of things, the power of love, or something vague like that. Albert Einstein said, “I believe in Spinoza’s God who reveals himself in the orderly harmony of what exists, not in a god who concerns himself with fates and actions of human beings.” Dawkins sets this metaphorical or pantheistic “god” aside; it is not his target; he thinks it should not be called “God” at all, and I agree with him. The god he attacks, and the god most believers believe in, he defines as “a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us” (31). Comte-Sponville is more elaborate: “I mean by ‘God’ an eternal Being, spiritual and transcendent (at once exterior to and superior to nature), who has consciously and voluntarily created the universe. He is supposed perfect and blessed, omniscient and omnipotent. He is the Supreme Being, creator and uncreated (he is the cause of himself), infinitely good and just, on whom everything depends and who depends on nothing. He is the Absolute in act and in person” (80).

Sam Harris adds in his sharp sardonic way: “Our situation is this: most of the people in this world believe that the Creator of the universe has written a book. We have the misfortune of having many such books on hand, each making an exclusive claim as to its infallibility” (13). So God is the author of a book as well as the universe (he waited till humans invented the alphabet). Harris later says, “The belief that certain books were written by God (who, for reasons difficult to fathom, made Shakespeare a far better writer than himself)” has brought misery upon the world. “Imagine a world in which generations of human beings come to believe that certain *films* were made by God or that specific software was coded by him. Imagine a future in which millions of our descendants murder each other over rival interpretations of *Star Wars* or *Windows 98*” (36).

In light of these arguments for and against a creator-god, I find myself sympathizing with the ancient gnostic view of the world. To the early Christian gnostics the world is so wretched a place, full of ugliness and misery, and human lives are so solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short, that if a god made the world and the human race he must be either a stupid bungler or a wicked villain – either a fool or a knave. The gnostics thought that the Jehovah of the Old Testament was just such an evil god, and so they claimed there must be another god, the god of *gnosis*, or

spiritual knowledge, who will save us. A little pessimistic, perhaps, but a plausible enough philosophy.

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Religious faith has another Problem of Evil, and that is the manifest evil caused by religious faith. Sam Harris describes in excruciating detail what good Christians did for centuries to helpless old women whom they accused of witchcraft. He tells of the exquisite tortures dreamed up by the Catholic Inquisition: hanging by a *strapado* until your arms dislocate, insertions of pear-shaped vises in all your orifices, or the inducement of mice to burrow into your abdomen. Pope Lucius III unleashed the Inquisition, and large armies, against the Cathars of southern France in 1184, who seem to have been perfectly harmless, even admirable, other than the fact that they didn't agree with the Pope. In fact they were much like the gnostics, and thought this world was created by Satan. The Pope ordered a crusade, and set out to kill them and torture them by the tens of thousands, thereby proving them right about Satan.

And the Jews, confined to ghettos, expelled from various territories, blamed for everything bad, and periodically slaughtered in pogroms, all because they felt, not unreasonably, that the Messiah had not yet come, and they preferred their ancient Law.

Dawkins tells a story about the Inquisition in Italy in 1858: a Jewish boy, secretly baptized by a hired housemaid, was seized by the Inquisition from his distraught parents on the grounds that he was no longer Jewish. There was nothing they could do. Even a protest from the British Prime Minister was unavailing. A Catholic newspaper in the United States defended the kidnapping on the grounds of *religious liberty*: “the liberty of a child to be a Christian and not forced compulsorily to be a Jew.... The Holy Father's protection of the child, in the face of all the ferocious fanaticism of infidelity and bigotry, is the grandest moral spectacle the world has seen for ages” (313).

This sort of thing, from personal tragedies to mass murder, is all-too-familiar to us, but it is important to be reminded of how bad it was until quite recently in the Christian world, and how bad it still is in the Muslim world, so we can see the religious mind at work. That mind, Hitchens argues, is essentially totalitarian. And Harris points out that there are hundreds of thousands of people in American prisons, serving long sentences, for victimless crimes: for growing and selling marijuana, for instance, which is harmless. It is the religious mind that believes in victimless crimes, that is, in sins, and so they inflict more crimes, with real victims, by passing laws about what people do in private.

Another religious evil is child abuse. Hitchens goes on a bit about pedophilia by Catholic priests, though here it seems not so much a matter of religious belief (it is certainly forbidden by the Church) as an example of what happens when men have an undeserved moral authority, and even physical power, over children. Religious beliefs and institutions grant this power over children to priests and others, so they can indoctrinate the children, but of course it is not just in churches that this abuse takes place: it is found in schools, in Boy Scout troops, and especially at home by fathers and sometimes mothers.

Dawkins makes the point that religious indoctrination itself is child abuse. He tells about a letter he received “from an American woman in her forties who had been brought up Roman Catholic. At the age of seven, she told me, two unpleasant things had happened to her. She was sexually abused by her parish priest in his car. And, around the same time, a little schoolfriend of hers, who had tragically died, went to hell because she was a Protestant. Or so my correspondent had been led to believe by the then official doctrine of her parents' church.” She wrote: “Being

fondled by the priest simply left the impression (from the mind of a seven year old) as ‘yucky’ while the memory of my friend going to hell was one of cold, immeasurable fear. I never lost sleep because of the priest – but I spent many a night being terrified that the people I loved would go to Hell. It gave me nightmares” (317-18).

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I will end by talking about two of the most difficult arguments that atheists face. Some of our new atheists are a little breezy at times about these arguments, but they deserve to be taken very seriously. The first is a kind of converse of the problem of evil. Does atheism make us better people? What about Hitler and Stalin and Mao and Pol Pot? Weren’t they atheists? They and their followers in the millions have unleashed as least as much violence as the God-obsessed crusaders and jihadists and Inquisitors.

The first thing to say is that even if atheism made us morally worse, it might still be true. Very few Christians, after all, argue that you should believe in God because it will make you behave better. You should believe in God because he *exists*.

The new atheists by and large distinguish between rational or philosophical atheism and religious atheism, or religion masquerading as atheism. Sam Harris says, “although [Stalin and Mao] paid lip service to rationality, communism was little more than a political religion. At the heart of its apparatus or repression and terror lurked a rigid ideology, to which generations of men and women were sacrificed. Even though their beliefs did not reach beyond this world, they were both cultic and irrational” (79).

Hitchens goes into the question in greater depth. He points out that totalitarianism had religious origins. He quotes George Orwell, who wrote that “A totalitarian state is in effect a theocracy, and its ruling caste, in order to keep its position, has to be thought of as infallible.” He cites many examples of how the Catholic church worked hand in glove with Italian and Spanish fascism, and even with Nazism in Germany. Fascist Japan had an actual god as its head of state. Stalin had been a seminarian and learned a lot from the structure and ceremonies of the Russian Orthodox Church. (Hitler called himself a Catholic, but even if he was lying, the official Nazi ideology was closer to pagan than atheist.)

What emerges here is that it is possible to have an irrational and violent religion without a concept of God. This is important to remember. Or perhaps it is truer to say that some sort of God will be smuggled back into such religions even if the word “God” banned.

This leads to the anxious question, if there is no God, isn’t everything permitted? Here is Comte-Sponville on what he calls “nihilism”: “If everything is permitted, there is no longer anything to impose on oneself or with which to reproach others. In the name of what do we struggle against horror, violence, injustice? It is to devote oneself to nihilism or spinelessness (the latter being just the fashionable form of it), and to abandon the field, in practice, to the fanatics or barbarians. If everything is permitted, so is terrorism, and torture, and dictatorship, and genocide. ‘That an act might be immoral,’ they might say, ‘is not in our eyes an objection to it.’ The butchers of this world could not ask anything more from them. Nor could the cowards” (59-60).

But, he says, “It is not true that everything is permitted, or rather it depends on each of us that it not be. Faithfulness to humanity, and obligation to humanity! This is what I call practical humanism, which is not a religion but a morality” (61). He earlier said he no longer has any faith (he had been raised a Catholic), but he has *fidélité* or “faithfulness” to certain values: to

community, to love, to lucidity, to compassion, to truth. He does not think we need religion in order to hold to these. I certainly agree.

Richard Dawkins devotes a chapter to the question of how we can be good without God, and seeks the origins of morality in our ancestry, shaped by Darwinian pressures. There are many difficulties with this approach, but there does seem to be a set of avowed beliefs, such as the golden rule, which we find almost universally. Sam Harris thinks we are approaching a science of ethics, with recent research on the brain and mind and what makes people happy. There is in any case no evidence that lack of belief in God (as opposed to belief in the Aryan Race or the Dialectic of History) has in fact caused people to commit crimes. On the contrary, the crime rates tend to be lower in the liberal “blue” states than in the conservative and more religious “red” states, if that means anything.

It is not the Ten Commandments, handed down by God to Moses, that keep people from killing, stealing, committing adultery, or bearing false witness. With his usual wit, Hitchens observes, “however little one thinks of the Jewish tradition, it is surely insulting to the people of Moses to imagine that they had come this far under the impression that murder, adultery, theft, and perjury were permissible” (99). Laws like these are universal; we need no divine revelation to discover them. The response of the Israelites to Moses should have been, “Well, duh!”

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The other charge levelled against atheists or irreligious people is that they have taken all the wonder and mystery out of life, that the scientific worldview they advocate is narrow, materialistic, utilitarian, bleak, and comfortless.

Again, one can reply that, even if that were true, it would not make atheism false. One could say that atheism is the standpoint of grownups who have put aside childish beliefs in Santa Claus, tooth fairies, angels, and God, and are clear-sighted and stout-hearted enough to face the fact that the universe doesn’t give a damn about us. The world is not a nursery.

As Dawkins says, “Even if we make a huge concession; even if it were conclusively demonstrated that belief in God’s existence is completely essential to human psychological and emotional well-being; even if all atheists were despairing neurotics driven to suicide by relentless cosmic angst – none of this would contribute the tiniest jot or tittle of evidence that religious belief is true” (352). (Dawkins is tough.) He goes on to question just how much comfort or solace religion really brings: religion may torment as often as it soothes. As for him, he finds great inspiration and joy in science and art, and the fact that we have only this life leads him to want to live it to the fullest.

Sam Harris offers an interesting chapter on meditation as a means to give ourselves deeper and richer and altogether *different* experiences from those we ordinarily have. He is studying the neurosciences and is trying to combine what he learns there with Buddhist meditation techniques. In the Buddhist texts he finds a psychological subtlety and empirical detail that leave the Bible and the Koran in the dust. The difficult terminology of Buddhism can be translated into a phenomenology, to what it feels like to have certain experiences; its metaphysics can be discarded. In particular it tells us something about how to get rid of that burdensome thing called our self, that illusion born of the subject-object relationship built into ordinary perception. But *extraordinary* perception may reveal something truer, that the self is a kind of illusion, and that we can gain serenity as well as deeper compassion when it vanishes, when we see that we are really are one with the world around us, including the people around us.

If more of us cultivated these experiences there would be less suffering in the world, and less motive to murder one another. At the core or source of most religions lie such experiences, but these religions displace them, layer them over with stupid dogmas that have no basis in any experience, or erase them altogether.

Comte-Sponville is the least hostile to traditional religions, the most conciliatory, even ecumenical—for he believes we can absorb wisdom from all traditions, even the Bible, though he too leans toward Buddhism as the greatest source of insight. He takes on the arguments for belief in God, and he can be sharp and witty about them, but he is rather more interested in showing, as his subtitle suggests (“Introduction to a spirituality without God”), that a deep and satisfying spiritual life, and even mystical experiences, are available to atheists no less than to theists, and maybe more so.

He describes a mystical experience he had when he was 25 or 26, in a forest in France, where he went for a walk one night with some friends. Their talk and laughter slowly dwindled away as they yielded to the beauty of the night sky and the sounds of the forest. Then, amidst the silence, “suddenly...What? Nothing: Everything! No words, no meaning, no questions. Just a surprise. Just a clarity. Just a wellbeing that seemed infinite. Just a peace that seemed eternal. The starry sky above me, immense, unfathomable, luminous, and nothing else in me but the sky, of which I was a part, nothing else in me but this silence, but this light, like a pleasant vibration, like a joy without a subject or object (with no other object but everything, with no other subject but itself), nothing else in me, or in the black night, but the dazzling presence of everything! Peace. Immense peace. Simplicity. Serenity. Happiness.”

He spends the last third of his book describing the features of this state of mind, and what it can teach us. He speaks, for instance, of the mystery of being, the almost imponderable question, asked by Schelling, “Why is there anything rather than nothing at all?” There is no answer to that question, but there may be an *experience* that takes in the mystery it evokes. It may lead us to feel a part of the whole universe even as we let go of it. He is not afraid to speak of “spirit” (*l’esprit*) as that which makes us distinctively human, connects us to one another, and allows us to transcend our bodies, our ego, and our narrow little interests. He ends his book (and I’ll end my talk) with this:

“Truth is too great for me – or my self, rather, is too small for truth. This pettiness is what I call the ego. This greatness is what I call spirit. It is thus the ego that is a slave, and shuts us in, and the spirit that is free, and liberates us.

Wretchedness of man, greatness of man, Pascal said. I would say, wretchedness of the ego, greatness of the spirit. To explain that, there is no need to believe in God, or in original sin! Nature is enough, of which culture is a part. Truth is enough (which contains the ego, and which the ego does not contain). The *whole of things* is enough, since there is nothing else.”