

PROVING GOD – Chapter IV --- Human Destiny
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OPENING WORDS

BELIEVE OR BE DAMNED!

For some of you this is the fourth time you've heard me say that. Is your resistance starting to crumble? Now for the last time – probably.

BELIEVE OR BE DAMNED! We stubborn Dutchmen never did respond well to threats.

God---Almighty God---All Seeing God---All Controlling God---REDEEMING GOD---
 Jealous God---Vengeful God---Loving God---All POWERFUL GOD---

A God like that has just got to leave tracks.

And the existence of such a God should be provable!!!

We've looked at God as the Alpha, the Creator. In Proving God – Chapter I, we climbed down from the tree of evolution and dug around its roots and learned that, given enough time, our known biological systems could have created everything from bugs to us without divine intervention – no firm tracks.

Proving God – Chapter II began with the beliefs that divine intervention gave humans the societal laws that make our civilization work. It seems the rules for life Charleston Heston carried down from the mountaintop, and a whole bunch of other rules, could just as well have evolved from the basics of self-interest. This led us into game theory and the prisoner's dilemma that made a very strong case for an alternative path to societal structure and laws -- that being -- basic decisions in one's own interest.. Darn. God tracks, maybe, -- but again, no proof.

Proving God – Chapter III proposed that humans were God's evolutionary destiny. This led us to look at complexity and cooperation as an alternate natural rule driving evolutionary direction, thus assuring survival of the DNA of the species. That system worked too – the cosmic being had competition to his/her claim to the only answer as to how smarties like us came to be.

So we come to Proving God – Chapter IV. And to kick start your brains for this adventure, try pondering – we aren't to God yet but we're moving toward it. Let's label it, whatever "it" is, "human destiny."

SERMON:

Richard Dawkins, Dan Dennert, Stephen Gould, and the rest of the gang arguing the question of “who we are, how we got here, and where are we going” are the primary authors of these words and concepts. I humbly try once again, possibly for the last time, to reduce a portion of this billion year story to a half-hour snippet focused on God Tracks. Robert Wright is the main wordsmith for much of the following.

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Those Famous Words:

IN THE BEGINNING...

In the New Testament, the Gospel of John begins, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... In him was life.” More than one science writer of a cosmic bent has juxtaposed this verse suggestively with the modern scientific view of organic evolution: in the beginning was, if not a word, at least a sequence of encoded information of SOME sort.

Fair enough. But if cosmically suggestive juxtaposition is what you’re after, you needn’t stop here, for the biblical word “WORD” is richer than it sounds. It is a translation of the Greek logos, which can indeed mean “word” but can also mean many other things, including “reason.” And you might say that, once self-replicating genetic information existed, a line of reasoning, a chain of logic, had been set in motion. A several-billion-year exercise in game theory had commenced.

LOGOS can also mean “Argument”, and it is tempting to view biological and cultural evolution somewhat as Hegel viewed human history – as a very long argument. Competing ideas about how to organize organic entities clashed. And non-zero-sumness, Robert Wright’s favorite phrase, won in the end. Non-zero sumness is not so shorthand for “he who cooperates best, perpetuates most,” an alternative to “the survival of the fittest” hypothesis, as we explored in a previous safari into this area.

One scholar has rendered logos as the “point,” and the “purpose” – the end that one has in mind. And, indeed, the religiously inclined might speculate that the spiritual corollary of the triumph on non-zero-sumness – the expansion of humanity’s moral compass – was the purpose of history’s game-theoretical argument all along. In the beginning, you might say, was the end, and the end was a basic truth – the equal moral status of all human beings.

The idea that a kind of LOGOS might be the force guiding a directional history is far from new. In fact, this was the theory of Philo of Alexandria; member of an ancient philosophical school that some scholars believe was the conduit through which LOGOS

entered Christian scripture. Permeating human history, Philo said, was a “divine LOGOS,” a rational principle that was immanent in the world but, at the same time, was part of God’s transcendent mind. And in what direction was LOGOS moving history, in Philo’s view? “The whole world,” he wrote, “may become, as it were, one city and enjoy the best of polities, a democracy.” Not bad, as two-thousand-year-old predictions go.

Of course, Philo didn’t have access to game theory, so he couldn’t talk about non-zero-sumness. Then again, game theorists weren’t the first people to recognize the logic of interdependence, and Philo certainly grasped it. Mutual need, he believed, was what wove God’s diverse creatures – people, plants, animals – into a whole.

“God has made none of these particular things complete in itself, so that it should have no need at all of other things,” Philo wrote. “Thus through the desire to obtain what it needs, it must perforce approach that which can supply its needs, and this approach must be mutual and reciprocal. Thus through reciprocity and combination even as a lyre is formed of unlike notes, God meant that they should come to fellowship and concord and form a single harmony, and that a universal give-and-take should govern them, and lead up to the consummation of the whole world.”

Amen to that.

In real life, of course, the story has been more complex than Philo’s story. In a sense, it has been a better story – not better in moral terms, but better in literary terms, in dramatic terms. It has featured ever since the first bacterium, a growing knowledge – and, with the arrival of human beings, growing self-knowledge. It has also featured amity and strife, good and evil – two forces vying with each other, yet inextricably bound together. And now, in the past century, as knowledge has grown exponentially, so have the stakes of this contest. More than ever, there is the real chance of either good or evil actually prevailing on a global scale. War and other forms of mass slaughter, other manifestations of massive hatred, could be ended – or, on the other hand, they could set new records for death and destruction-- they could even, conceivably, end us. And the outcome may hinge on the further spread of knowledge – not just empirical knowledge, but moral knowledge.

...But, whether or not you believe the story indeed has a cosmic author, one thing seems clear: It is our story. As its lead characters, we can’t escape its implications.

Let’s pursue Philo’s “one world city” thought for the moment.

X_____World Wide governance_____X

In many developed nations, the drift toward world governance is drawing fire. The nation-state, nationalists complain, is sacrificing its sovereignty. This is true. Governmental structures – including supranational ones – always lessen the freedom of their constituents. But at the same time, governmental structures expand freedom. If a city’s government is functioning well, its citizens gain the freedom to walk the streets with little fear of assault. Part of the deal, though, is that they don’t have the freedom to

assault other citizens. If you like the idea of government, that means you cherish freedom from assault more than freedom to assault.

So it is with supranational governance. Would you like to be reasonably free of the fear of global depression? Or would you rather preserve your nation's freedom to raise tariffs at will, or to keep its financial institutions opaque to international view? Do you cherish the freedom to live without fear of dying in a biological weapons attack? Or do you prefer the freedom to live without fear of having your freezer searched for anthrax by an international inspectorate in the unlikely event that evidence casts suspicion in your direction?...

The question is never whether you can keep all of your sovereignty; history says you can't. All along it has been the fate of humankind to have its fate increasingly shared. The question is in what form do you want to lose your sovereignty?

But then there's governments and there's governments. Lao-tzu in the 6th century BC recognized discipline and hard work as a societal base with

I work when the sun rises; I retreat when the sun sets.
I dig the well for water; I plow the field for food.
What use do I have for the Emperor's Power?

His 6th century mind continues:

The people starve because those above them eat too much tax grain
That is the reason they starve.
The people are difficult to keep in order because those above them interfere.
That is the only reason why they are so difficult to keep in order.

Thomas Payne in 1792 in the "Rights of Man" has this to say:

A great part of that order which reigns among mankind is not the effect of government. It has its origins in the principles of society and the natural constitution of man. It existed prior to government, and would exist if the formality of government was abolished. In fact, society performs for itself almost everything which is ascribed to government...

But how often in the natural propensity to society disturbed or destroyed by the operations of government! When the latter, instead of being engrafted on the principles of the former, assumes to exist for itself, and acts by partialities of favor or oppression, it becomes the cause of the mischiefs it ought to prevent.

John Stuart Mill in the 19th century steps in with:

That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant...

The objections to government interference... may be of three kinds. The first is,...there is no one so fit to conduct any (activity), or to determine how or by whom it shall be conducted, as those personally interested in it... The second objection is... though individuals may not do the particular so well, it is nevertheless desirable that it should be done by them, rather than by government, as a means to...strengthening their active faculties, exercising their judgment, and giving them familiar knowledge of the objects with which they are thus left to deal. The third, and most cogent reason for restricting the interference of government, is the great evil of adding unnecessarily to its power. Every function super-added to those already exercised by the government, causes its influence over hopes and fears to be more widely diffused, and converts, more and more, the active and ambitious part of the public into -- hangers-on...

Finally, by Murray Rothbard in the 20th Century:

...rule of the State, is its parasitic nature – the fact that it lives coercively off the production of its citizenry. To be successful to its practitioners, the fruits of parasitic exploitation must be confined to a relative minority, otherwise a meaningless plunder of all by all would result in no gains for anyone. (As Franz) Oppenheimer pointed out that there are two and only two mutually exclusive means for man to obtain wealth. One, the method of production and voluntary exchange, the method of the free market, Oppenheimer termed the “economic means”; the other, the method of robbery by use of violence, he called the “political means.” The political means is clearly parasitic, for it requires previous production for the exploiters to confiscate, and it subtracts from instead of adding to total production in society... no matter how small the power of the government...(it) creates two unequal and inherently conflicting classes in society: those who, on net, PAY the taxes, and those who, on net, LIVE OFF taxes.

Thinkers, writers, and observers of the human scene from the 6th century BC to today have cautioned us to answer the question carefully in what form you want to lose portions of your sovereignty.

Of course, even answering that question wisely won't bring instant Nirvana. Once we've recognized the necessity for global governance, we still have to get from here to there. And that could be dicey. After all, history – and prehistory – attest that evolving from one distinct level of political organization to another often brings, euphemistically, “transitional instabilities.”

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...Even assuming governance moves to the global level peacefully and democratically, inspired guidance will matter in a new way. After all, there's only one globe. However many alternatives there are for reforming the IMF after a crisis, they can be tested only in serial, not in parallel. And if the first trial fails spectacularly, that's really bad news.

What's more, the potential badness of bad news has risen. With more souls in the world every century; the sheer weight of potential suffering has reached an all-time high. Hitler and Stalin made this point, and the coming of thousands of nuclear weapons has underscored it.

Of course, if you're a person of sufficiently large vision, you can always shrug this worry off. Even if we wipe out all human beings, some species will survive, such as the famously radiation – resistant cockroach. And if biological evolution is directional, then maybe there will eventually be a species smart enough to reignite cultural evolution, impelling social organization, once again, toward the planetary level, so global concord will get a second chance!

Personally, I don't feel a strong enough kinship with cockroaches to find much solace in this scenario. In fact, there are mishaps well short of nuclear annihilation that I'd just as soon avoid....

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As for the scientific assault on purpose: A strictly empirical analysis of both organic and cultural evolution reveals a world with direction – a direction suggestive of purpose, even (faintly) suggestive of benign purpose. Life on earth was, from the beginning, a machine for generating meaning and then deepening it, a machine that created the potential for good and began to fulfill it. And, though the machine also created the potential for bad – and did plenty of fulfilling on that front – it now finally shows signs of raising the ratio of good to bad; or, at the very least, of giving the human species that option, along with powerful incentives to exercise it.

This recent uptick in the moral stock market, coming several billion years after the creation of life, may strike some people as underwhelming. If you really sit and ponder all the suffering that has been by – in fact, was built into – biological and cultural evolution, you may find it hard to muster a lot of gratitude toward the universal architect.

Yes, there is a theory of movement from the alpha to omega where Omega has been the objective all along – this world wideness some now see on the horizon.

In the times of Hitler, world wide reach, world wide links, world wide controls were active subjects of discussion – all tied to fascism. It's amazing how fast a viewpoint can move from radical to trite. Today, with the fascism seeming link an ancient relic, and the Internet looking strikingly neural, talk of a giant global brain is cheap. But there's a difference. These days, most people who talk this way are speaking loosely. Tim Berners-Lee, who invented the World Wide Web, has noted parallels between the Web and the structure of the brain, but he insists that "global brain" is a mere metaphor. Teilhard de Chardin, in contrast, seems to have been speaking literally: humankind was coming to constitute an actual brain – like the one in your head, except bigger.

Certainly there are more people today than in Teilhard's day who take the idea of a global brain literally. But they reside where Teilhard resided: on the fringe of opinion.

Are they crazy? Was Teilhard crazy? Not as crazy as you might think. The net is indeed a giant pooling of thoughts and ideas. And once you understand how relatively non-crazy it is to call humankind a giant brain, other aspects of Teilhard's world view begin

to look less crazy as well. Such as: the idea that there is a point to this whole exercise; the idea that life on earth exists for a purpose, and that purpose IS becoming manifest.

Wright is not saying these things are true – at least, he’s not saying it confidently, the way he is saying that organic history and human history have a direction. He’s just saying these things can’t be dismissed with a wave of the hand. They don’t violate the foundations of scientific thought, and they even gain a kind of support, here and there, from modern science.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who we can now label as that mid-twentieth century prophet of globalization, declared the world’s nascent telecommunications infrastructure “a generalized nervous system” that was giving the human species an “organic unity”. Increasingly, humankind constituted a “super-brain,” a “brain of brains.” The more tightly people were woven into this cerebral tissue, the closer they came to humanities’ divinely appointed destiny, “Point Omega”.

What exactly was Point Omega? Hard to say. Teilhard’s philosophical writings are notable about equally for their poetry and their obscurity. As best I can make out, at Point Omega the human species would constitute a kind of giant organic brotherly-love blob

Having forecast the integration of humankind into a “planetized” whole—a giant “super-organism”—Teilhard addressed the obvious, Orwellian fear: the “lives of a cell” scenario. His message: Fear not. “To say ‘love’ is to say ‘liberty’. There need be no fear of enslavement or atrophy in a world so richly charged with charity.”

Well, that’s a load off my mind! As usual, Teilhard’s optimism is so fuzzy and boundless as to erode his credibility. And, as usual, his instinct for big-picture dynamics is acute enough to restore some credibility. He seems to sense that, when you face the trade-off between freedom and order, much of your wiggle room comes from a third variable that lies in the realm of spirit—or, to put it more mundanely, the realm of morality; what the world needs is to expand its supply of good will.

Of course, this goal, though moral, isn’t reachable only by moral means. We’ve just seen some political initiatives that, while not likely to unleash a torrent of good will, could at least cut the supply of *ill* will. There are no doubt other such policies. Still, when one group of people harbors contempt, or even disdain, for another group—fundamentalist Muslims for westerners, say, or westerners for fundamentalist Muslims—the problem is indeed at some basic level moral. What is arguably the biggest challenge of the future—staying safe while staying free—may be a project that is as much spiritual as political.

You may object that this project sounds vague and mushy. Well, obviously! That’s why it’s called a “spiritual” project instead of, say, a “civil engineering” project. Whether it is a doable project is unknown. But moral leadership *has* occasionally met with success. Neither Gandhi nor Martin Luther King, Jr., accomplished all he had hoped for, but both led wrenching and necessary social transformations with less violence than such

transformations had historically entailed. And, while both men were at some level politicians, their political force was inextricable from their spiritual force.

Well, in some ways, at least, the whole world is increasingly in the same boat. In that light, was Teilhard's optimism so hopelessly unrealistic? Given inspired leadership, how close *could* the world's peoples come to brotherly love—or, failing that, to the less intense psychic unity that a mild-mannered nationalism brings? Let's not dismiss the possibility out of hand but enjoy the vision and, once again given lots of time, consider its achievability. For now I'll just note that there was a time, only centuries ago, when even nationalist sentiment must have seemed improbable to Europeans, given cultural and linguistic differences and venerable hatreds.

There is one other, very different, and somewhat smaller, sense in which modern problems may find quasi-spiritual solutions. Slowing the rate of economic globalization, hence of cultural dislocation, is not only a political project. The less bent on material acquisition people in affluent nations are, the less breakneck the pace of modernization—and, as a bonus, the less environmental havoc there will be. As another bonus, we may discover something sages have been saying for millennia: endless acquisition isn't the route to fulfillment anyway.

In the short run, the “natural” course of history has sometimes brought much unpleasantness.

And “cultural lag” seems to have been a big reason. Some historians trace the virulence of twentieth-century German nationalism all the way back to the nineteenth century, when industrialization swept lands that had just barely left the Middle Ages. Russia, even more than Germany, had to fast-forward from an age of serfs into the industrial revolution—and, in a sense, Russia never recovered, never developed fitting governance. Among the casualties that can arguably be chalked up to this cultural lag: the many millions who died by starvation or execution at Stalin's hands. Today, catastrophes of this size could transpire even without the sponsorship of a national political leader. That's life in a world featuring unaccounted-for nuclear materials, pervasive biotechnology, and lots of unhappy campers. Hence may concern about the number of unhappy campers.

Wright writes: The end is here. (He may be a bit premature but lets listen to his points.) With the world's ecosystem already under stress, and billions of additional people apparently on the way, mindless materialism grows more dubious. With society finally globalized, we don't need war to push political organization (that is, the realm of peace) to broader expanse. And with nuclear and biological weapons at hand, full-fledged war—and for that matter full-fledged terrorism – are less palatable than ever. Hatred just ain't what it used to be.

Even Herbert Spencer – who had a certain respect for enmity's gratifying effects – saw the declining virtue of antipathy. He wrote: “From war has been gained all that it had to give...” The social evolution that “had to be achieved through the conflicts of societies with one another, has already been achieved; and no further benefits are to be looked

for.” Wars, he observed, had not only ceased to be vital to progress; increasingly, they were the cause of “retrogressions.” (And this was before nuclear weapons.)

War has contained the seeds of its own demise all along. This primal form of zero-sum energy, through the very logic of history that it helped impel, was bound to grow more and more negative-sum until finally its downside was too glaring to ignore. In retrospect, it looks almost like planned obsolescence.

If war can indeed be turned into a relic, then the virtue of greed will recede further. From a given society’s standpoint, one big upside of wanton material acquisition has traditionally been the way it drives technological progress – which, after all, helps keep societies strong. In the nineteenth century, Russia and Germany had little choice about modernizing; in those days stasis invited conquest. But if societies no longer face conquest, breakneck technological advance is an offer they can refuse, and frugality a luxury their people can afford.

God knows greed won’t vanish. Neither will hatred or chauvinism. Human nature is a stubborn thing. But it isn’t beyond control. Even if our core impulses can’t be banished, they can be tempered and redirected.

Or, more accurately: some impulses can be used against others, a favorite UU concept. People will always seek social status, and revel in the esteem of their peers, but this very thirst can be used to dampen other thirsts. In defining the kinds of behaviors that do and don’t win esteem, communities have great power over how human nature expresses itself. Among the things that can in principle become prerequisites for social status (and, indeed, in some communities already are): not engaging in conspicuous consumption; not saying hateful things about whole national, ethnic, or religious groups, or even about other people. - - - - -

The point is that we are playing for the highest stakes in history. More souls are crammed onto this planet than ever, and there is the prospect of commensurately great peril. At the same time, there is the prospect of building the infrastructure for a planetary first: enduring global concord.

And if we did that – if we laid a foundation for peace and fulfillment around the world – that would counterbalance a lot of past evils, given the number of people now around to enjoy the benefits. It may literally be within the power of our species to swing nature’s moral scales – which for so long tended to equilibrate near dead even, at best – decisively in the direction of good; maybe it is up to us, having inherited only the most ambiguous evidence of divinity, to CONSTRUCT clearer evidence in the future. Maybe history is, as various thinkers have suggested, not so much the product of divinity as the realization of divinity – assuming our species is up to the challenge, that is. (One theologian has paraphrased Teilhard as believing that “God must become for us less Alpha than Omega.”)

Is this our Omega? Are we indeed getting closer? When we arrive, will we be able to look behind us on the path each of us has trod and see our own footprints? Will they be – God Tracks?