

Mere Metaphor

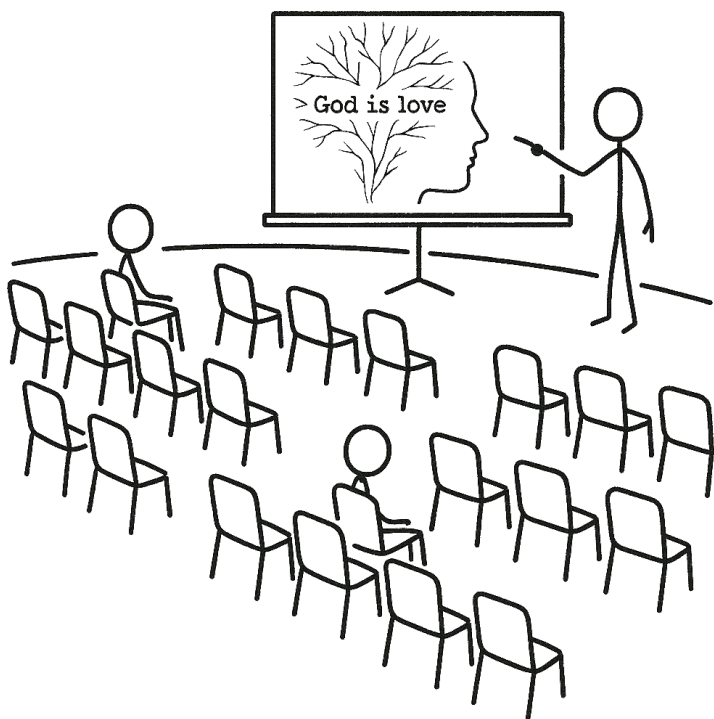


Understanding Religious
Language as a Materialist

by Derek Bredensteiner

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PREFACE

If you believe in a supernatural entity or a creator of the universe, that's not what this book is about. This book is about an entirely naturalistic (non-supernatural), physicalist, determinist, materialist view of religion and the meaning of the metaphors within it from that (natural) perspective.

I understand each reader has their own journey of faith. I've seen a spectrum of experience in my own family, from atheism, to conservative Christianity, to progressive Christianity, and many things in between. My intent isn't to challenge your path, but simply to share and explain a particular one — my own.

PREFACE

I realize not everyone reading this book will share my perspective, but hopefully what is presented here will not be a challenge, but simply information.

I see the audience here as Christians who struggle with believability, atheists who struggle with living as a minority in a Christian society, and most importantly — anyone who seeks to understand either of those two groups better.

I hope to present here an interpretation of Christianity (or at least some part of Christianity) that is compatible with an entirely natural universe.

PREFACE



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

To give some background about myself: I was raised in a Christian tradition. At age 12, when I was at Bible camp during some free time, I had climbed a tall tree where I could see nothing but nature. At this time, I heard the voice of God speak to me saying that he was “an idea invented by man, changed over thousands of years”.

It was easy to identify this voice as being a creation of my own mind, a creation based on what I understood about Christianity and the Christian God, based on what I heard from family and friends and Church leadership. This was a moment of my conscious awareness discovering what my subconscious already deeply believed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Throughout my life, I have found some value in Christian metaphors, some utility in asking myself “What would Jesus do?” — but it would also be accurate to describe me both as a materialist, and as a determinist.

When I say “materialist”, I am not referring to placing value or importance on material things, but instead a philosophical stance that views the universe and everything within it as describable by physical laws — including anything one may think of as a “Self”.

I see my “Self” as my physical body, everything within that body, and I see that self as a small part of a much larger context that I am interdependent with.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

When I say “determinist”, I am referring to a view of the world where everything that happens (including our thoughts and choices) follows naturally from the state of affairs that preceded it, like billiard balls colliding on a pool table.

This is not to say that fate controls us or that destiny is out of our hands, but very much the opposite, that our thoughts and choices (which are recursively shaped throughout our lives, compounding upon themselves) are the key link in the chain that determines what happens next.

Regarding religion and metaphors, I would like to share a quote from Joseph Campbell:

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Half the people in the world think that the metaphors of their religious traditions, for example, are facts. And the other half contends that they are not facts at all. As a result we have people who consider themselves believers because they accept metaphors as facts, and we have others who classify themselves as atheists because they think religious metaphors are lies.

— Joseph Campbell

I like to think there is a 3rd category that does not see metaphors either as facts, nor as lies.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

There are, of course, many Christians that see their faith as compatible with science, but very few of those take a completely materialistic or deterministic view — always leaving some supernatural element remaining.

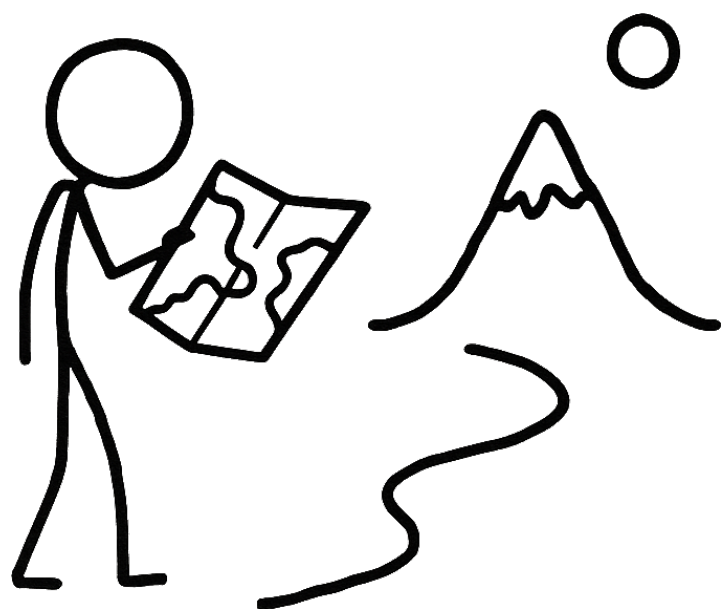
I do not see any need for this hedge to reconcile things — God is love, hell is suffering, heaven is a state of mind, a state of being, available to all of us here and now, through embracing and expressing love for all through our actions in the real world, during our short lives. There is nothing supernatural about love.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

There is no need to contradict our observation of a deterministic reality with a supernatural free will, in order to see the obvious complexity present in a piece of software (us) that recursively iterates itself on a lifetime of sensory experience, in order for that piece of software to take responsibility and suffer consequences for its choices.

There is no need to claim God's decree for us to make (and continually remake) our choice of orientation for what good and bad are. Just like up and down, good and bad are also relative terms that only make sense with a direction, an aim, a target, a goal — that we choose.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



INTRODUCTION: METAPHOR

What do I intend the word “metaphor” to mean in this book? When I say “metaphor”, I mean exactly what some people might call “analogy”, and also exactly what some other people might call “maps of meaning”, and what others still might call “abstraction”. There are of course distinctions that can be made between these terms, but I would like you to be able to understand the common theme I am referring to, using whatever term is most familiar to you.

INTRODUCTION: METAPHOR

One thing I do not mean by metaphor, is simile. Once during a radio interview, Joseph Campbell asked the interviewer to give an example of a metaphor. The interviewer responded "John runs like a deer". That is not a metaphor, it is a simile. The metaphor is "John **is** a deer". The interviewer responded "That's a lie!" And then the interview ended with Joseph softly speaking, "That's a metaphor."

INTRODUCTION: METAPHOR

Another thing I do not mean by metaphor, is lie. Every abstraction omits some detail. It might be technically accurate to call these missing details “lies of omission”, but this misunderstands the purpose of the analogy. The reason a map is useful for navigating, is because it allows us to see and connect things in a way that is simply not possible when we zoom in on a single detail.

Another thing I do not mean by metaphor is poetic, fancy, or flowery language that is in some way distinct from normal language. Every word is a metaphor. The basic operation of human language is to take something and provide another view of it.

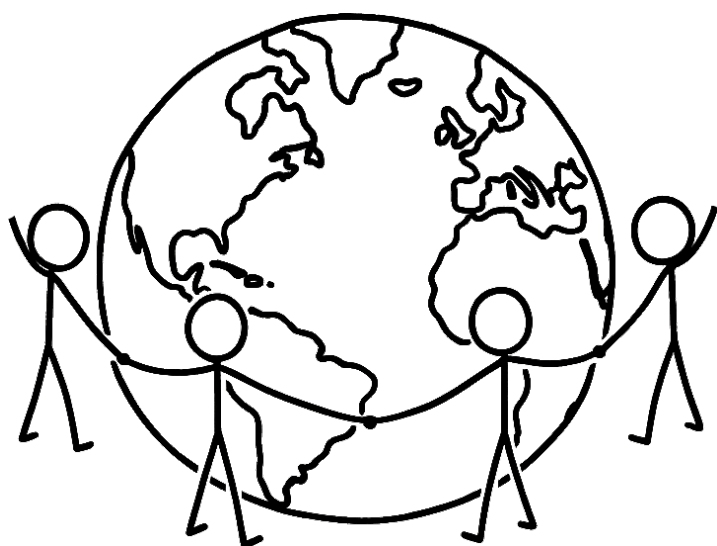
INTRODUCTION: METAPHOR

“Tree” is a line (a boundary) we have drawn, a common pattern we see amongst a related group of DNA based organisms. “That tree” may be understood not just as specific collection of atoms at a particular point in time, but also as an entirely different collection of atoms at a point in time 100 years later, because we can observe how one slowly transformed into the other. A “tree of life” may allow us to discuss things at an entirely different level still, using what we know of patterns in branches from the organisms we have observed.

INTRODUCTION: METAPHOR

Metaphor is not a special category of language, but the very basis of language itself. What we call “literal” is just analogy that is so heavily used we’ve forgotten its analogical roots.

What I mean by “metaphor” in this book is this basic transformation operation that is at the heart of every word - an abstraction, an analogy, a map of a thing that allows us to understand and draw connections we would not be able to otherwise.



GOD: LOVE WITHIN AND BETWEEN US

The Bible says "God is love". The Bible describes love as patient and kind, not proud or rude or selfish, keeping no record of wrongs.

Love is not a cosmic personality. Love is not a transcendent entity. Love is not supernatural. Love is something natural and real, something we feel and experience, it is a way of being and acting, it is something that regardless of background we can all relate to.

GOD: LOVE WITHIN AND BETWEEN US

Many Christians already speak of God in ways that align with this metaphorical understanding. They say they feel God within them. They see God in the kind acts of strangers. They recognize God in the eyes of others when love is present. These experiences require no supernatural explanation, they are moments of human connection and compassion.

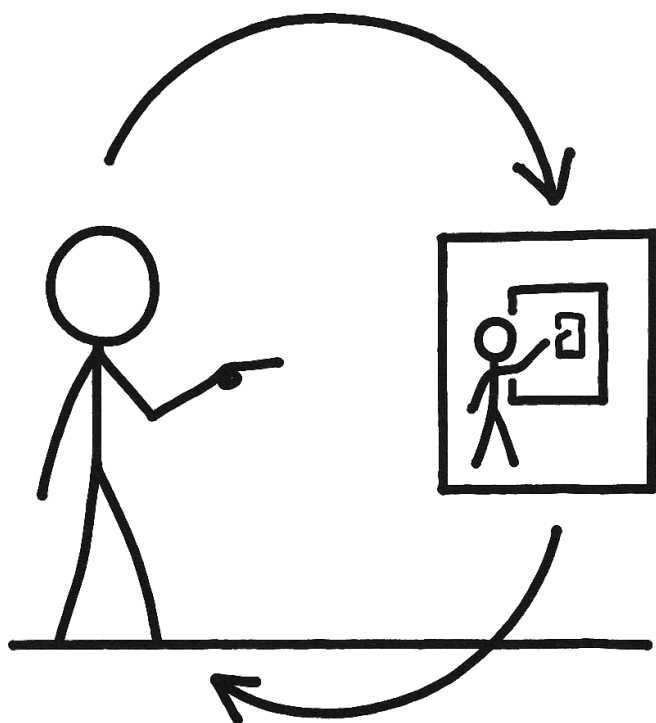
GOD: LOVE WITHIN AND BETWEEN US

Of course, this understanding doesn't cover all aspects of what God means to all Christians. There is the creator, the miracle worker, the lawgiver and justice dispenser. The miracle worker provides hope in the face of tragic circumstances. The lawgiver provides certainty in the face of difficult moral dilemmas. The justice dispenser fulfills a deeply held natural desire for fairness in an unfair world.

It is very understandable why all of those are desired, but these supernatural attributes are unnecessary additions to this core metaphor. When we strip away these layers, what remains is something far more universal, tangible, and real.

GOD: LOVE WITHIN AND BETWEEN US

Love is something we have and feel within us. Love is something we express toward others through our actions. Love is something we recognize in the words and deeds of those around us. This is the God that exists in our lived experience, not a being separate from us, but the very connection between us.



FREE WILL: RECURSING A LIFETIME

In Conway's Game of Life, we see patterns emerge from simple rules. It begins with a grid of squares, a few shaded and most others not. It continues with a single step, shading is flipped based on simple rules regarding nearby squares. This exact same step is repeated ad infinitum. Complex structures form, interact, and evolve in ways that are impossible to predict from the starting conditions alone. This emergent complexity is not magic, it is the natural consequence of recursive iteration.

FREE WILL: RECURSING A LIFETIME

Our minds work in a similar way. Every thought, every breath, every action we take arises from the sum total of our previous experiences. Each moment is informed by everything that came before it, stored in our memories and neural pathways. And simultaneously, each moment becomes part of that sum total, influencing everything that comes after.

This is what recursion means. It is a process that feeds back into itself, creating ever-growing complexity from simple foundations. The self is not static but constantly rebuilding, redefining, and reforming based on its own outputs. This recursive property allows for an infinitely complex system to develop, grow, and change over time.

FREE WILL: RECURSING A LIFETIME

I'd like to consider the following scenario:

Imagine a carnival game: a heat plate carefully adjusted to cause pain without causing harm. If you keep your hand on the plate long enough, you win the prize. For this thought experiment, we can imagine a wide range of time intervals required and subsequent monetary rewards.

Some may remove their hand immediately. Others grip tightly, pushing through the pain. Some may endure for a while and change their mind at any particular moment.

FREE WILL: RECURSING A LIFETIME

The stimulus (the heat) is external. The reward (the money) is external. But what determines precisely when the hand is removed? It is pain tolerance of course, but it also involves so much more.

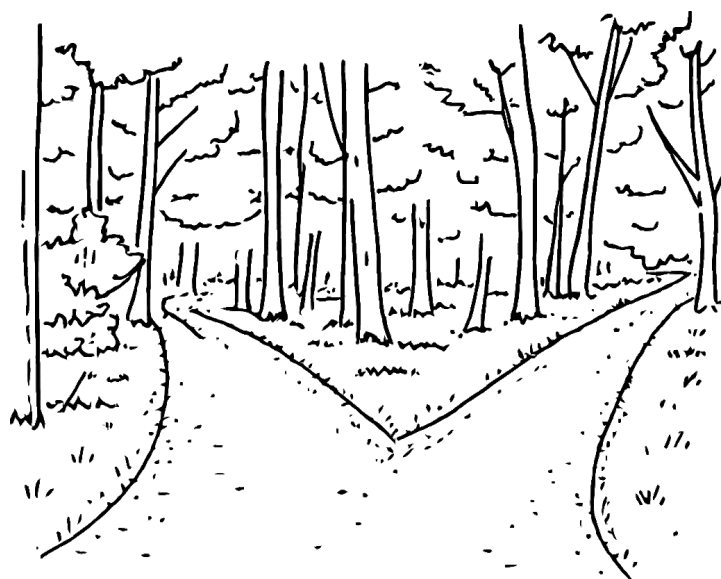
It is everything: past financial hardship, current financial situation, early experiences of risk and reward, cultural values about dignity, trauma around control, memories of dares, sibling rivalries, lessons from parents, every story ever heard of sacrifice, humor, faith, fear, defiance, stories of what make a person great, every narrative we have ever told ourselves about who we are. And it is determined by every thought going through that person's head in those moments as well.

FREE WILL: RECURSING A LIFETIME

The action is entirely unpredictable from the outside (and perhaps from the inside as well). It is, for all practical purposes, infinitely complex.

And yet, it is also accurate to say that everything happening in space and time within the boundary of that human body is under that body's control, and is that body's responsibility.

We are accountable for what we do, even if that is a product of what we are, because what we are is also a product of every thought we have and every choice we make.



GOOD: A DIRECTION WE CHOOSE

The key point is simple. Words like “good” and “bad” are meaningless without a direction, an orientation, a goal, a target. They only make sense with reference to something. This is precisely the same way that “up” and “down” work.

We often use these words, “up” and “down” as well as “good” and “bad”, without explicitly stating that orientation, but there is always an orientation implied. When you say “that's good”, you are making reference to some target, some goal, some direction that has been chosen.

GOOD: A DIRECTION WE CHOOSE

For example, a statement like “Genetically modified crops are good/bad” has many possible intended and implied targets. Is the goal feeding more hungry people today? Is the goal a robust ecosystem that has the biodiversity to rebound from catastrophe?

And so the direction, the orientation, is a choice that we have made, are making, and will continue to remake. There is no objective “good” that exists independent of our choosing it. There is no universal objective direction for morality any more than there is a universal objective direction for “up”.

GOOD: A DIRECTION WE CHOOSE

What we call “good” is always relative to the goals we have chosen. Some of these choices are personal, others are social agreements. But in all cases, they are choices.

Recognizing that these choices are always present allows us to have deeper conversations about what we each believe is right and wrong, for us to share our reasons, our fears and hopes, and the consequences we expect. These conversations can lead us to finding places where we agree. These agreements are the foundations of our laws, our social contracts, and our nations.

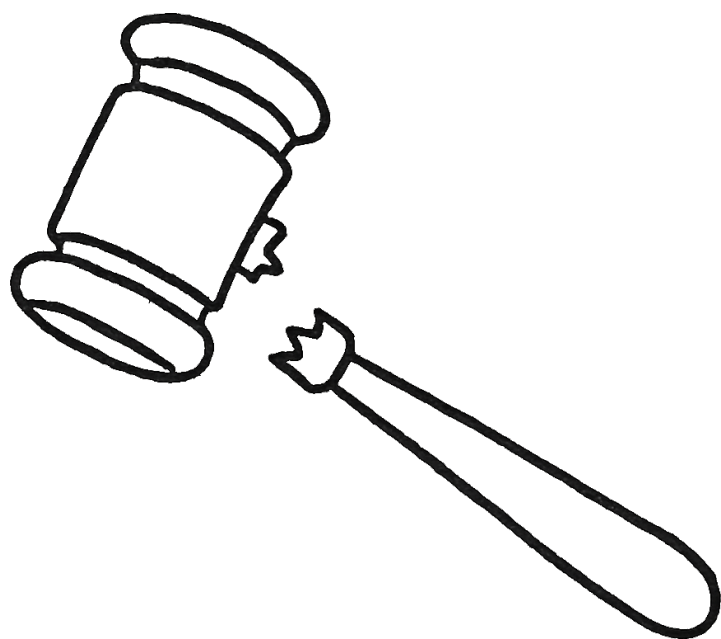
GOOD: A DIRECTION WE CHOOSE

When one side claims objectivity by divine decree, it shares no reason, no rationale, no information, with the other side — and it prevents the other side from sharing any reasons of their own.

If the truth of the matter was already decreed, what sway could any reason have in altering that truth? There is no longer any room to explore the contexts and consequences, and so there is no way to find the details and specifics of where our disagreements and agreements lie.

GOOD: A DIRECTION WE CHOOSE

The only way for us to have a conversation is to first agree that there is a conversation to be had, and a point (a shared goal) in having it. Claims of objective divine decree remove any reason for discussion — they imply there is no point. I would like to know more about your reasons, your fears and hopes, and the consequences you expect. I would like to share mine with you. I would like for us to find common ground.



SIN: ALIGNMENT WITH THAT CHOICE

Just like the words “good” and “bad” (and “up” and “down”) only have meaning with an orientation, so too it is with the word “sin”. Sin doesn't exist independently of the direction and orientation you have chosen.

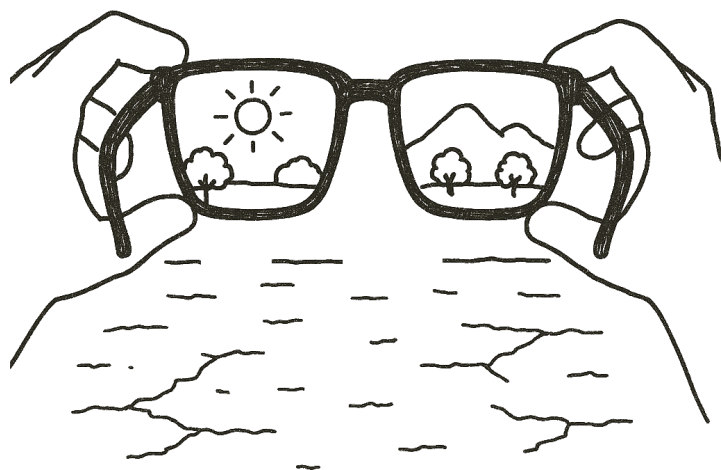
What makes something a “sin” in your view is precisely the direction and orientation you have chosen for yourself. If you have oriented yourself toward kindness, then cruelty becomes a sin. If you have oriented yourself towards de-escalation, then aggression becomes a sin.

SIN: ALIGNMENT WITH THAT CHOICE

No one else can impose this definition on you. Not priests, not holy books, not tradition, not society. A sin is something you have decided for yourself based on your chosen orientation. It is the consequence of the choice you've made about what direction is "good". Even if the way you've made these choices is through subconscious absorption and synthesis of those outside forces, even if the way you identify the direction is through vague intuitions from your conscience, it is still a choice you have made, and that you can remake.

SIN: ALIGNMENT WITH THAT CHOICE

This is why sin feels personal, why it produces guilt. It is not because some external authority is judging us (that would be shame). It is because we are judging ourselves against our own internalized standard. When we recognize that we have acted against our currently chosen direction, there is an internal conflict that can be felt in that moment, an internal conflict that can be carried through to resolution, to redemption.



REDEMPTION: MAKING NEW CHOICES

Redemption is not about resolving guilt for actions we knew were wrong. It is about seeing our past actions in a new light entirely. It is most often the case that the self that committed what we now see as sin did not view it as sin at the time, and that is the crucial point.

When we recursively process our experiences, we can reach new understandings about our past actions. What once seemed justified, necessary, or even good can be recognized as harmful, unnecessary, or misaligned with who we want to be. This recognition creates a discontinuity, and a new self can emerge that sees differently, if we are willing and able to recognize this old self, and willing and able to allow this new self to emerge.

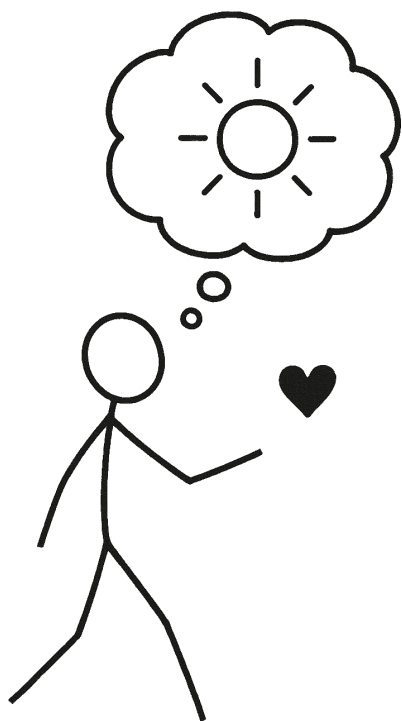
REDEMPTION: MAKING NEW CHOICES

This is not a matter of willpower or commitment to “do better”. It is a shift in perception. The old self that performed the action and the new self that judges it are separated by this shift in understanding. In a very real sense, you are not the same person who committed the act, because you now see it through entirely different eyes.

Redemption is this process of investigation, this process of examining why you saw things one way before and how you might see them differently now. It's not about promising to resist temptation. It's about the temptation ceasing to tempt you because your understanding of what is desirable has fundamentally changed.

REDEMPTION: MAKING NEW CHOICES

The person you become through this recursive process is determined to make different choices not through force of will, but because they genuinely see the world differently than their former self did.



HEAVEN: A STATE OF MIND AND BEING

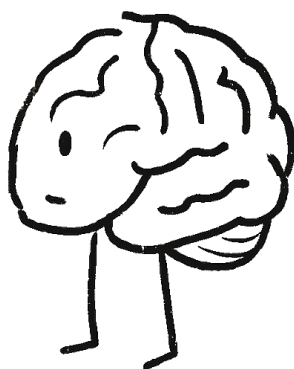
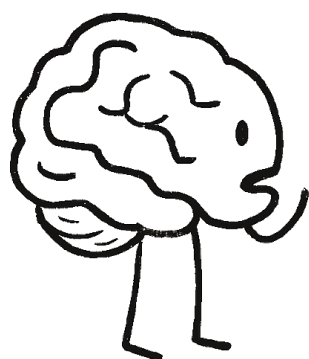
The threat of Hell and the promise of Heaven, as a destination after life, has been a tool of control and a powerful motivating force. Some have found great comfort from this promise. Some have found great anguish from this threat. This is not the only way to view these things.

Heaven is a state of mind, a state of being, available to all of us here and now, through embracing and expressing love for all through our actions in the real world, throughout our short lives.

Hell can be easily found as well, in an endless cycle of self-flagellation for a past that cannot be changed, or in worries and consternation over a future that cannot be predicted.

HEAVEN: A STATE OF MIND AND BEING

We always have a choice in the present moment, to affect the people and events around us. We can see heaven and make it so, if we so choose.



PRAYER: EFFECTS OF SELF-REFLECTION

Our thoughts are our own, hidden in some ways, but not permanently. They will eventually manifest in the world. Even if not revealed in the moment through subvocalization, microexpressions, glances, or telling silences, they will eventually be revealed through our future actions, inactions, and words.

Silent prayer is a form of deep reflection, a process of clarifying our own thoughts, values, and intentions. We are creating internal states that will inevitably shape our external behaviors.

PRAYER: EFFECTS OF SELF-REFLECTION

This process matters. It has real effects on the world, through how it changes us. When we spend time in contemplation, articulating our hopes, examining our fears, or considering our relationships, we are programming our own recursive system. We are introducing new inputs that will influence our future outputs.

Prayer gives us the opportunity to step back from immediate reactions and examine our own perspectives. It creates space between stimulus and response. In this space, new possibilities can emerge.

PRAYER: EFFECTS OF SELF-REFLECTION

We all have two hemispheres, one with a narrow linear focus, one with a wide parallel processing view. In the quiet space, when we allow it, we may find inspiration (audibly or emotionally) that shows us a broader picture of the world than we had considered previously, insight shared from one hemisphere's perspective to the other. No divine entity is needed to explain this common phenomenon.

The traditional language of prayer - asking for strength, wisdom, courage, or compassion - makes perfect sense in this materialist framework. We are not receiving these qualities from an external source. We are activating and reinforcing neural pathways associated with these qualities within ourselves.



VOICES: WHAT INSPIRES SHAMANS

Throughout human history, many have heard voices. These people have been called prophets, shamans, mystics, and visionaries. In our modern medical framework, they would be diagnosed with schizophrenia or other conditions that feature auditory hallucinations. But regardless of the label, the fundamental experience remains the same.

These voices are not supernatural communications from divine entities. They are productions of the human mind, arising from complex neural processes within the brain. Like all artists and their art, these voices reflect and serve as a focal point of society and the world around them.

VOICES: WHAT INSPIRES SHAMANS

When a person hears a voice telling them profound truths about existence, they are not receiving messages from beyond. They are processing cultural, social, and personal information in new ways. Their minds create patterns and narratives that reflect the collective consciousness of their time and place. We can all relate to this in some small way through our personal experience with dreams.

The content of these voices is not random or meaningless. It often addresses the deep concerns, fears, hopes, and values of the community. This is why prophetic voices throughout history have spoken about justice, morality, connection, and meaning.

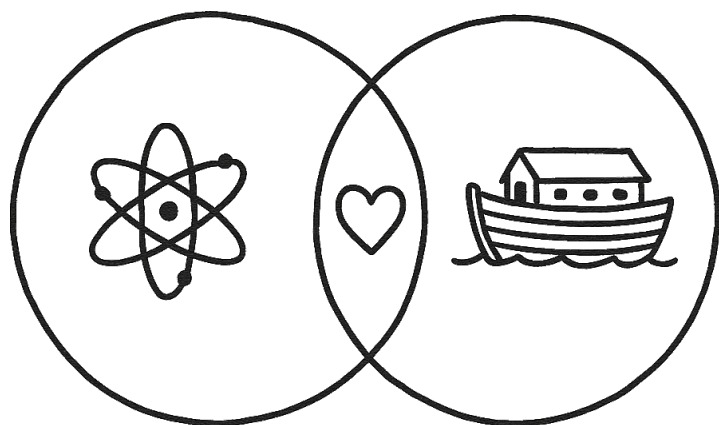
VOICES: WHAT INSPIRES SHAMANS

The distinction between the divinely inspired prophet and the mentally ill person is entirely a matter of the culture they inhabit. In some societies, hearing voices is interpreted as a gift, a connection to the sacred. In others, it is seen as a symptom, a dysfunction to be treated. But the voices themselves arise from the same human capacity for pattern-finding, narrative-creation, and meaning-making.

VOICES: WHAT INSPIRES SHAMANS

Understanding these voices as natural rather than supernatural does not diminish their potential value. Minds that process information differently can see patterns and connections that we may miss otherwise, and we can all benefit from these experiences being shared and respected.

VOICES: WHAT INSPIRES SHAMANS

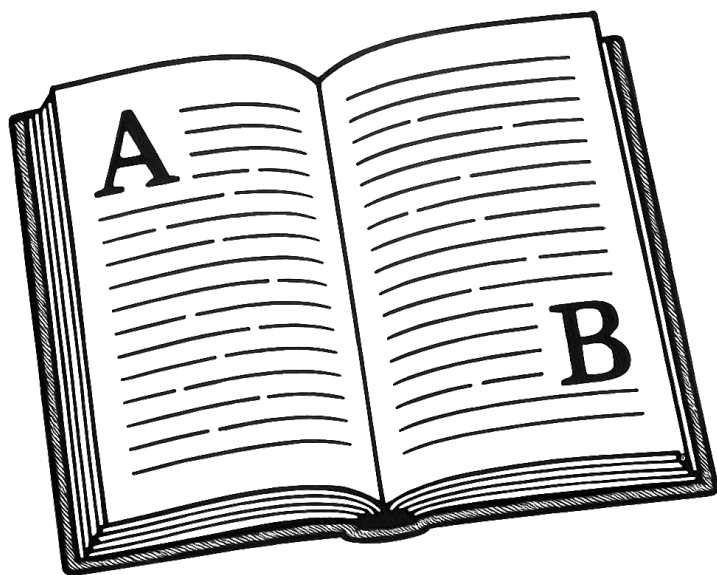


AFTERWORD

My understanding of your words may differ from your understanding of those same words.

I hope by sharing some of my understanding here, we might find some common ground. There may not always be a middle ground, but I do believe we all have more in common than we typically realize or discuss.

AFTERWORD



GLOSSARY

Determinism

A belief that all that happens in the visible universe obeys physical laws, including the chemical and electrical signals in our brains which in a very real sense **are** our thoughts and choices.

God

Love within us and between us.

Heaven

A place on earth, found through love, experienced in the here and now as a state of mind and being.

Love

Something we feel, have, see, and share that exists within us and between us — unconditional care for well-being, and a strong desire for deep understanding.

GLOSSARY

Materialism

A belief that the physical material world is all that exists. It is not a stance on the value or merits of material goods. It is a stance on the contents of the universe.

Metaphor

A method of understanding, a lens for viewing, a map for navigating, using language we understand to describe something we do not.

Orientation

The process of rotating a compass so that the letter “N” is aligned with something you may call north, such as a floating magnetic needle — a specific alignment with a goal.

GLOSSARY

Recursion

If you have one penny, and each day for 30 days you double the amount you had the previous day, you will then have 10,737,418 dollars and 24 cents. What makes this recursion (and not simply iteration), is that the result of each iteration is used as an input to the next iteration.

Supernatural

Anything apart from the natural, physical world. Anything that could never be described in terms of physics.