

# Excerpts from “A New History of Western Philosophy, by Anthony Kenny”

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This was from February 2016. I found it among the notes and posting for reference.

## **page 138**

He taught that we should not render evil for evil; but so had Plato's Socrates. He urged his hearers to love their neighbours as themselves; but he was quoting the ancient Hebrew book of Leviticus. He told us that we must refrain not just from wrong deeds, but from wrong thoughts and desires; Aristotle too had said that the really virtuous person is one who never even wants to do wrong. Jesus taught his disciples to despise the pleasures and honours of the world; but so, in their different ways, did the Epicureans and the Stoics. Considered as a moral philosopher, Jesus was not a great innovator: but that, of course, was not at all how he and his disciples saw his role.

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While Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–72) regarded Hegel as excessively sympathetic to religion, Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55) thought him impudently disrespectful of it.

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Men take their own essence, imagine it freed from its limitations, project it into an imagined transcendent sphere, and then venerate it as a distinct and independent being. ‘God as God, that is, as a being not finite, not human, not materially conditioned, not phenomenal, is only an object of thought’ (EC 35).

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God is not what man is—man is not what God is. God is the infinite, man the finite being; God is perfect, man imperfect; God eternal, man temporal; God almighty, man weak; God holy, man sinful. God and man are extremes: God

is the absolutely positive, the sum of all realities; man the absolutely negative, comprehending all negations. (EC 33)

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Kierkegaard always placed faith at the summit of human progress, and regarded the religious sphere as superior to the regions of science and politics. Ethics, too, he taught, must be strictly subordinated to worship.

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he compared a person over-learned in literature to a man with an over-furnished house

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‘Each generation inherits from its predecessors the illusion that the method is quite impeccable, but the learned scholars have not yet achieved success.’ If we are to take a historical document as the basis of our religious commitment, that commitment must be perpetually postponed.

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Jeremy Bentham and James Mill had ensured that religious instruction should form no part of John Stuart’s education. Accordingly, in his autobiography, Mill says he is ‘one of the very few examples in this country of one who has, not thrown off religious belief, but never had it’. Possibly because of this, he did not feel the animus against religion that many other utilitarians have felt. In his posthumously published *Three Essays on Religion* he took a remarkably dispassionate look at the arguments for and against the existence of God, and at the positive and negative effects of religious belief.

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It is more difficult to reconcile an acceptance of Darwinism with belief in original sin. If the struggle for existence had been going on for aeons before humans evolved, it is impossible to accept that it was man’s first disobedience and the fruit of the forbidden tree that brought death into the world.

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At most, Darwin disposed of one argument for the existence of God: namely, the argument that the adaptation of organisms to their environment exhibits the handiwork of a benevolent creator. But even that is to overstate the case. The only argument refuted by Darwin would be one that said: wherever there is adaptation to environment we must see the immediate activity of an intelligent being.

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To my mind it accords better with what we know of the laws impressed on matter by the Creator, that the production and extinction of the past and present inhabitants of the world should have been due to secondary causes, like those determining the birth and death of the individual. When I view all beings not as special creations, but as the lineal descendants of some few beings which lived long before the first bed of the Silurian system was deposited, they seem to me to become ennobled. (OS 395) It was special creation, not creation, that Darwin objected to.

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When neo-Darwinians claim that Darwin's insights enable us to explain the entire cosmos, philosophical difficulties arise at three main points: the origin of language, the origin of life, and the origin of the universe.

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There is no problem in describing a single individual as having legs  $n$  metres long. But there is a problem with the idea that there might be just a single human language-user. It is not easy to explain how the human race may have begun to use language by claiming that the language-using individuals among the population were advantaged and so outbred the non-language-using individuals.

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If we reflect on the social and conventional nature of language, we must find something odd in the idea that language may have evolved because of the advantages possessed by language-users over non-language-users. It seems almost as absurd as the idea that banks may have evolved because those born with an innate cheque-writing ability were better off than those born without it.

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there is no goal to which language is a means: one cannot have the goal of acquiring a language, because one needs a language to have that wish in.

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However successful natural selection may be in explaining the origin of particular species of life, it clearly cannot explain how there came to be such things as species at all. Darwin never claimed that it did; he did not offer an explanation of the origin of life.

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Neo-Darwinians, by contrast, often attempt to tell us how life began, speculating, say, about electrical changes in some primeval organic soup. These explanations are of a radically different kind from those that Darwin put forward to account for evolution. Neo-Darwinians try to explain life as produced by the chance interaction of non-living materials and forces subject to purely physical laws. These accounts, whatever their merits, are not explanations by natural selection.

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and realises that a human being is born in order to give up life, and that this body is not a home but a short-term hostelry which one must leave as soon as one sees one is becoming a burden on one's host'

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At a time when philosophers and scientists were happy to accept that the universe had existed forever, there was no question of looking for a cause of its origin, only of looking for an explanation of its nature. But when it is proposed that the universe began at a point of time measurably distant in the past, then it seems perverse simply to shrug one's shoulders and decline to seek any explanation.

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'It is indeed a great question whether Atheism is not as philosophically consistent with the phenomena of the physical world, taken by themselves, as the doctrine of a creative and governing power'

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Marcus instituted a cruel persecution of Christians, and dismissed their martyrdoms as histrionic. One of those who was executed in his reign was Justin, the first Christian philosopher, who had dedicated to him an Apologia for Christianity.

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For about ten years he was a follower of Manichaeism, a syncretic religion which taught that there were two worlds, one of spiritual goodness and light created by God, and one of fleshly darkness created by the devil. The distaste for sex left a permanent mark on Augustine, though for several years in early manhood he lived with a mistress and had with her a son, Adeodatus. In 383 he crossed the sea to Rome and quickly moved to Milan, then the capital of the western part of the now divided Roman Empire.