

The Good News of Materialism

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Context: Not long ago I gave a talk in which I mentioned how the Christian fundamentalists are making war on science because they (correctly) perceive scientific materialism, and materialism in general, as undermining their beliefs.

Two claims they make over and over are that if you don't have a God, you don't have any purpose in life; and if you don't have a God, you lack a moral basis.

I said that these claims were exactly contrary to truth, and that it was a shame nobody in America is making the positive case for materialism. We need -- I said as a rhetorical flourish -- a secular Savonarola, a humanist John Wesley, to go out and preach the gospel, the good news, of materialism.

After that talk I got to wondering: just what would it sound like, a gospel sermon in praise of materialism? And the sermon began to write itself in my head....

My friends, I come to you tonight with good news.

I am here to tell you about freedom: the fresh breeze of liberty that blows through the material universe.

And I am here to tell you about the excitement of finding meaning and the most noble of life goals in that material universe.

And I want to tell you of the happiness that comes from having a sure moral compass, a natural guide that leads always toward generosity, creativity, and honor, and away from cruelty, meanness, and sloth.

Let me talk of freedom first.

I am a materialist. That means that I believe that this rich, beautiful and infinite material universe is all there is.

We who live exclusively in this material universe know freedom because we live a life free from demons.

We never fear the caprice,
the unpredictability,
of hobgoblins and spooks.

We honor our dead for what they meant to us,
and then we let them go --
they don't hang around us, querulous snoops and critics.

We only need to determine one will -- our own.

We do not need to quest about,
reading auguries and trying to interpret ancient writings,
searching to learn the will of supposed deity.

It is true that we stand alone in the material world.
We have nobody to pray to but our fellow humans
And nobody to blame for a disaster but them or ourselves.

But we also have nothing to dread but the tangible dangers posed by
our fellow humans -- I will return to these later -- and the
predictable dangers of the physical world.

We properly fear diseases and tempests and earthquakes and floods,
but we can understand them.

We can judge their likelihood.

We can take precautions -- if we are willing to use our wits.

And when disaster does strike

-- when the ground shakes and makes trash of our proud buildings

-- when the river rises and erases our homes

-- when our children are out skiing and there's the boom of an
avalanche

-- when the doctor looks solemnly at you or your loved one and says
"I'm sorry to tell you this, but..."

-- when tragedies happen we can be shocked,

we can be angry, we can be heartbroken,

but at least we have this great freedom: we need not think

some supernatural agent willed the disaster

or planned it or permitted it to happen.

We may blame ourselves if we didn't take sensible precautions

but at least we don't have to worry whether we

thought wrong, or prayed wrong or not enough at the wrong
shrine.

So when we are lonely or beset with woe,

we know the cure lies in better links to our fellow humans

-- not in talking to imaginary beings.

And when disaster strikes in our material universe we are free

to face it,

to fight back,

to start to rebuild or recover.

And when we reach the end, we are free to die with dignity

knowing our lives are complete.

We didn't get this freedom easily.

It is quite new in the mental history of our race,

and still doesn't come naturally to some of us.

That's reasonable: from infancy we are trained in two skills:
purpose and empathy.

From babyhood we have wants, aims, goals, motives, and strive to
achieve them.

From childhood we learn over and over that the way to understand
other people is to know that their minds and emotions are like
our own.

It is automatic that whenever we wonder about some event in the
human sphere,

we start by looking for purpose, for goal, for intention.

Who meant this, who wanted it, what do they get?

This works so well in the realm of human activity, it is no wonder we
automatically and thoughtlessly apply it to the realm of natural
effects.

If there's a flood or a fire or a drought or a disease or an avalanche,
what was the PURPOSE of it?

what was the MOTIVE behind it?

When we were primitives, lacking explanations for most everything,
this was our only hope.

If friends and family are dying from a drought or a crop disease or a
plague,

we desperately wanted to do SOMETHING,
to strike a deal with SOMEbody.

There was no visible agent, nobody to bargain with.

Rather than do nothing, we hypothesized an invisible agent --
a demon or a demigod or, later, a single God.

It didn't do much good, but prayer and rituals filled the time while we
suffered.

Ask any doctor: half of medicine is keeping the patient occupied
while the disease runs its natural course.

So it was until a breeze of freedom began to blow -- less than 300
years ago.

The Enlightenment was a feeling among educated people that we had
finally learned enough about the universe,
that we could begin to see how it worked.

We didn't know it all -- nobody said that then; nobody says it now --
but the general shape, the outline, the skeleton of how the world
and the universe work had emerged out of the fog of ignorance

that had enclosed us since the dawn of the species.

So many great minds contributed: to name a few:

Kepler -- then Newton -- then Sir William Herschel opened up the skies, showing that the planets and the distant stars all danced to the same, simple tune of gravity.

Louis Pasteur firmly established the germ theory of disease, so that many of the awful plagues for which we formerly had only poor, unhelpful explanations -- "bad air," demons, witchcraft, sinful thoughts -- could be understood, prevented, even cured.

The geologist Charles Lyell and the naturalist Charles Darwin opened up all of time to our minds.

The naturalists and geologists had been collecting museum cabinets full of fossils which were clearly the stony remains of animals and plants that no longer existed, though many were, equally clearly, related to existing animals or plants.

Lyell was the first to explain and demonstrate how geological processes had to have taken immense spans of time to occur -- mountains thrusting up and being ground down over millions of years.

When he opened up that vast horizon of time, it created the arena in which Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection could operate. Darwin's idea needed vast spans of time over which to operate, and Lyell's geology provided that.

The more closely the natural philosophers looked at any process, the more they found that natural processes ran themselves, regulated themselves, by simple laws and ratios of small whole numbers.

These great, bold insights excited brilliant people from Voltaire to Hume to Ben Franklin and Tom Jefferson because now, for the first time, the world could be explained without recourse to supernatural agents.

The breeze of the Enlightenment blew away the fog of centuries to reveal a vast stage of time and space.

The lights came up and the demons fled away.

There was no more need to invoke angels or demigods, and the monotheistic god himself became architect and spectator.

These thinkers and thousands who've come after them have made it possible to enjoy freedom from blame and fear.

If we choose to live in a material universe,

We don't have to pay off any witches.

We don't need to apologize to our ancestors.

We don't have to placate any gods.

We needn't pray

and we needn't blame.

We take reasonable precautions based on knowledge;

and when something tragic happens, we are free to simply

deal with it -- with dignity and fortitude.

But freedom has to be accepted,

it has to be grasped by each person individually.

To receive it, you have to be willing to give up demanding a

purposeful agent behind every event.

You have to accept that

to ask the purpose behind a disease or a flood

is like asking about the shoe size of the wind:

A category error, a waste of breath.

Some people, it seems, can't do that --

can't abandon the habit of seeking purpose behind every event;

can't give up the hope that if they could just find the right way to

pray, they could gain the control, or the comfort, that eludes

them.

They turn their back on simple freedom and retreat into complex,

uncertain slavery.

Here is the rub, the big problem for many:

To be a materialist you have to give up the most common image of

God: God the interferer, God who answers prayer.

You CAN be a materialist and still believe in some concept of God.

There are materialists who believe in a God -- the prominent writer

and skeptic Martin Gardner is one.

True, most materialists are also Atheists --

people who find no need for any type of God to explain the

universe.

But all that you really have to abandon is the idea of a God that

interferes, that reaches into creation and tweaks it, jimmies it, to change the course of events on account of prayer or any other arbitrary reason. That is Deism, but it sounds like atheism to many believers.

When believers are exposed to the idea of Deism or Atheism, they often recoil at once -- I think because they instinctively sense that it undermines four key ideas they hold -- often without having really spelled them out or thought them through.

When you draw them out, get them to articulate the problems, they raise some combination of four issues. These are serious philosophical issues and they deserve serious thought, and I want to answer them here.

First -- the idea that the universe is a vast, cold, sterile, chaotic infinity and without the knowledge of God's love and care, humankind would be -- what? Well, really scared, I guess. Adrift in an unplanned chaos.

I deal with this issue at some length in my book. To summarize, the universe revealed to us by the Enlightenment and all the scientists since is anything BUT cold and sterile and chaotic. It bubbles with form and creativity at every scale you can measure from the Planck length up to the Parsec. It's only empty and sterile to those who refuse to look at it -- people who remain stubbornly ignorant of the real findings of any science. To the people who spend their lives studying it, the universe becomes just steadily more magnificent and more richly patterned the longer you look.

The second issue is: people say they can't tolerate the idea that they, personally, are only a MERE accident. They always say "mere." That is a repugnant idea. They need to believe that they are an intentional creation, that their existence was intended -- by somebody.

This also I wrote about in my book. To summarize:
What makes you, you is the DNA in your cells.
The numerical uniqueness of this genome is just astronomical.
You are not a MERE accident,
 you are an astoundingly unlikely event.
There will never to be another copy of your DNA until the sun goes
 cold.

The overwhelming majority of the human race is already dead or yet
 to be born, but here you are
 -- alive and kicking and perceiving and thinking --
 and carrying the one and only instance of you that will ever be.
This is not cause for repugnance; this is cause for celebration.
Why do you search for a license to BE when you already ARE?

Furthermore, the idea that your birth, your genetic inheritance and
 your personality were in fact directly planned by God
 -- which is what people seem to mean by the phrase, "I am a
 child of God" --
this idea leads to some really horrible consequences if you only take
 time to think it through carefully.
I cover that in the book; check it there.

The third great fear is that people say:
 without the idea of a God, they cannot see any purpose in
 humanity in general, or their own existence in particular.

The fourth fear is that without a concept of God, they have no basis
 for their morals,
 no reason to live rightly,
 nothing but some shifty relativism that forgives anything and
 gives no guidance.

When I wrote my book, I thought these last two ideas were separate
 issues, and gave them separate chapters.
What I bring you tonight is the discovery that what I think is the right
 solution to one question also solves the other!

Let's tackle the first: How do we find a sense of purpose in a material
 universe?

Let me point to two axioms on which we can build.

The first is that, like it or not, each of us is a member of the human species.

Now, you may not think too highly of your species;
you may think poorly of certain members of it,
you may find its collective actions sometimes unfortunate.

Well, tough. Get real about this: you can't survive alone.
You can't possibly cut yourself off from the products and works of
your fellow humans
-- you would not be happy living naked in the woods, eating
roots and berries, believe me.

Your only hope of comfort and longevity, lies in the actions of other
humans and the society they create.

As you walk through this city your very survival, minute by minute
and hour by hour depends on other humans doing their jobs
conscientiously and restraining their aggression.

Think of all the ways people -- bus drivers, car drivers, nurses, the
people who manage the water supply -- could kill you any
minute through carelessness or anger or intoxication.

You may not like it, but you are irretrievably stuck, embedded, in the
great matrix of human kind.

Your life is bound up in its life, you depend on the rest of your
species for your life and the future of your children, and the
species is depending on you.

The second axiom is that idea that each of us is an utterly unique
event in the genetic history of the race -- never to be repeated.

Given those two points, I say to you that
the only reasonable "Purpose" any of us can have in life is this:
to prove and demonstrate the value of our unique genome,
in the context of our species.

To show our genome forth,

To fully implement it,

To completely occupy and exploit the envelope of its unique
capacities,

all in the context of human society.

Fine words -- I think! -- but what do they really mean?

How do we judge the value of a genome, which is to say, of a person?

What would be the test?

In the living web revealed for us by Darwin, there is only one criterion for the success of a particular shake of the genetic dice: does it live to breed and reproduce itself? If it does, it's a winner; if not, it's scrap.

Nature's pass/fail test is: will you, or did you, reproduce?

But nature has no purpose, no intentionality.

We most definitely do.

We have brains, hearts, and purpose, and we can evaluate the success,

the value of a genome in far more subtle and interesting ways.

Nature's pass/fail test also applies only to the individual.

Natural selection asks, how successful is this genome in advancing itself.

I say that we apply the test:

how successful is this genome in advancing the whole human species?

Natural selection can't do that. Its only criteria for a species is, does it multiply to the absolute limits of its food supply?

We have much more sophisticated ideas about what improves the success,

the future prospects,
of the human species.

We can say, for example,

how healthy are the members of the species?

how well are they nourished?

how well protected from disease?

how safe are they,

how productive, how happy, how educated?

how long are their lives?

These are things that natural selection simply can never test.

But humans, uniquely in the world --

uniquely in the universe so far as we know --

have the ability to take a species-wide view of themselves.

We look beyond the boring question of,

did an individual added to the quantity of humans,

to ask things like:

did this person add to the quality,

or to the length, of any human lives?
how did she or he improve the nourishment,
the safety,
 the productivity,
 the happiness
of the entire human species -- or of any part of it?

Let me give some examples.

In human-species terms, a person's genome is a success not merely for producing offspring, but for producing well-parented, well-socialized, happy and productive offspring.

Natural selection only judges the reproductive success of direct descendants,
but humans can contribute to the reproductive success of completely unrelated people --
as teachers, as mentors or big-brothers --
or just by being a conscientious member of a school board --
or writing a good textbook --
or just helping some poor kid have a hot lunch.

In order to maximize your value to the species, you need to live as long and healthily as you can,
which implies that living a healthy lifestyle, taking care of yourself, is another way to demonstrate the quality of your DNA.

In short, anything you do
to improve the quality of your life
 or the life of another human,
or to extend your life
 or the life of another human,
demonstrates some positive value of your DNA
to the human species as a whole.

Even simply being a good example
-- an example of skill, of good humor,
 an example of patience or diligence,
 an example of generosity or honor --
is a contribution to the success of the human species,
and therefore a demonstration of the fitness of your genome in the species context.

Thus far I've talked of how to demonstrate positive value to the species,

but it is also possible to demonstrate negative value:

-- to show that your DNA is a net drag
and a deficit to the future of the species.

That would occur when you do anything that
makes another human life shorter
or poorer in quality.

Is it not clear that

anything that makes you or other people live shorter lives
is a negative for the species as a whole?

Is it not clear that

anything that makes your life or other people's lives
less healthy, less happy, or less productive,
is a net decrement to the fitness of the species?

And anything that harms children and make them less fit as
contributors to society

is a clear negative contribution to the health of the human species.

Any of these things demonstrates that,

at least for that time and to that extent,
your DNA is damaging the future success of our species.

Do you see what has happened here?

I started out talking about finding meaning and purpose in life.

But if you adopt as your life purpose,

demonstrating the species-level fitness of your DNA,
an entirely natural outcome is that you are led toward acts that any
tradition would call moral or ethical.

Acts that anyone would call immoral or unethical, are also acts that
show negative fitness.

I showed you a way toward PURPOSE in a materialistic life,

But our search for purpose has led us easily, naturally, automatically
to a wholly secular moral basis!

My friends, I have brought you a positive answer to a believer's third
concern,

-- that they find no purpose in life in a materialist world
and with it I've brought you a clear answer to their fourth concern
-- that without their belief in God, they would be adrift in

relativistic moral anarchy.

As a materialist, once you adopt the life goal I've described, you gain
a compass that always points in the direction of right living:
generous living,
creative living,
a life that reaches out to help others and be helped in turn
-- a compass that leads you
away from violence,
away from selfishness,
away from passivity and laziness,
away from from meanness of every kind.

The morals and the purpose both arise simply and naturally from an
entirely humanistic extension of evolution by natural selection.

My friends: I offer you Freedom waiting for you to grasp it,
a high and noble purpose,
and a reliable guide to a generous, upright life
-- in the material world.

Seize them now.

Thank you.