

Cosmic Meaning, Awe, and Absurdity in the Secular Age: A Critique of Religious Non-Theism

Ryan Gillespie

University of California, Los Angeles

■ Abstract

The notion of a meaningful life in secular modernism is often caught between two worlds: a deep human yearning for cosmic meaning, on the one hand, and a seemingly random, impersonal, contingent universe on the other hand. This is often referred to as absurdity. One response to absurdity is classical theism, and another is scientific reductionism. A third response, and the subject of this article, is religious non-theism. This article: (a) explicates the primary tensions of absurdity, in relation to both human expectations and discussions of beauty in contemporary physics and cosmology; (b) analyzes the arguments and motivations of religious non-theists and the attitude of awe toward the cosmos as a rapprochement between—or at least alternative to—classical theism and scientific reductionism, as a sort of post-secular response to absurdity; and (c) begins a critique of the religious non-theist perspective, explicating four worries, expressed as the Commitment Problem, the Standards Problem, the Moral Problem, and the Awe Problem.

* This article began as a public lecture delivered for the Center for the Study of Religion on February 25, 2015 at UCLA. I am deeply grateful to Carol Bakhos for the invitation and continued support, and to audience members for their engagement. Thank you to Howard Wettstein, three thoughtful anonymous referees, and the *HTR* editors for their time and critiques.

HTR 111:4 (2018) 461–487

■ Introduction

Contemporary notions of a meaningful life—which is to say, notions of such meaning in secular modernism—are often caught between two worlds: a deep human yearning for cosmic meaning, on the one hand, and a seemingly random, impersonal, contingent universe on the other hand.¹ That is, there is an undeniable “yearning for cosmic reconciliation”;² we humans have “telic yearnings” that won’t go away.³ And, also, there seems to be the fact that “the more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless.”⁴ “The absurd,” Camus tells us, “is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world.”⁵

The idea here is something like: there is nothing inherently troubling about meaning-seeking humans, in isolation, nor is there something inherently troubling about a silent universe, in isolation. When the two collide, however, a great dissatisfaction occurs, a sort of cosmic cognitive dissonance. So, the yearning runs headlong into the silence, and the silence into the yearning. Let us call this the Great Collision.

There are two predominant answers to the Great Collision. The first dominant answer comes from the scientific reductionist: the yearning feels relevant and important, and we may like to think it is real, but it is not properly a part of any scientifically sophisticated or significant theory of the way the world is. One of the most influential physicists of the second half of the twentieth century, Steven Weinberg, puts it this way in his popular *Dreams of a Final Theory*: certain “opponents of reductionism . . . I would not try to answer . . . with a pep talk about the beauties of modern science. The reductionist worldview *is* chilling and impersonal. It has to be accepted as it is, not because we like it, but because that is the way the world works.”⁶ We might wish that it were not so, but if we want to live in reality-as-it-really-is, we must, with varying degrees of heroism, bite the bullet and accept that there is no inherent meaning to life or the cosmos. Randomness and

¹ The distinction is not as clean as subjective/objective meaning. *Secular* is used to signal not just contrast to transcendence and transcendent frames for living but also a life conditioned within—even when against—an immanent frame, with *modernism* indicating modernity (approx. 1500 to present) and serving as a synonym for contemporary. My usage is indebted to Taylor’s third notion of the secular (Secularity 3) and shifts in social ontology. See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011) 15–22, 618–75; see also José Casanova, “The Secular, Secularizations, Secularisms,” in *Rethinking Secularism* (ed. Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan Van Antwerpen; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) 54–74.

² Thomas Nagel, *Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) 3.

³ Samuel Fleischacker, *Divine Teaching and the Way of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013) 308.

⁴ Steven Weinberg, *The First Three Minutes* (New York: Basic Books, 1993) 154.

⁵ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (trans. Justin O’Brien; New York: Knopf, 1955; repr., New York: Vintage 1991) 28. Page numbers taken from the reprinted edition.

⁶ Steven Weinberg, *Dreams of a Final Theory* (New York: Vintage, 1994) 53 [italics in original].

chance govern (or at least presided over the initial life-giving conditions). Thinking otherwise is sincerely mistaken or deliberately false.

The other dominant answer comes from classical theism and its contemporary defenders: the yearning is a sort of built-in homing device to draw humans toward God. The scientific picture seems to render the world pointless, random, and chance-rich, but that is simply because God does not compel humans to belief and worship; rather, humans have a choice, with many arrows, including nature, pointing toward God, but nothing that makes belief and worship a matter of necessity—logical, empirical, or otherwise. The point is that once one adopts the right attitude toward the world, one sees, clearly, the fingerprints of God all over it.⁷ With an attitude of awe toward the majestic beauty, mystery, and limits of the cosmos, one has taken a religious stance, and, of course, to a theist, this is the correct attitude and stance. Classical theism becomes an attitude-belief-practice triumvirate, each piece interdependent.

The Great Collision presents, then, a disjunction of sorts for those who seek to live in truth, in reality-as-it-really-is (whatever that means): either deny the yearning, arguing that it is this human need that is illusory and mistaken, and thus accept the cold hard facts of a cold hard universe; or deny the modern scientific picture as illusory, arguing that the reduction of human life and our world(s) simply to particles and fundamental forces is mistaken. Accepting the cold-hard-facts view is often seen as a threat to the meaningfulness of life,⁸ and our modernity is haunted by the “spectre of meaninglessness.”⁹ Furthermore, there seems to be a “distinctive kind of cosmic anxiety, a crushing sense that we are utterly insignificant.”¹⁰

While there are hosts of contemporary defenders of each of the dominant answers, this article is concerned with the arguments and motivations of a unique position, what I am calling the religious non-theist. The religious non-theist, in essence, claims that of the two dominant answers, the second one is closer to correct: the proper attitude of a human toward the cosmos is one of awe, and this attitude of awe is indeed religious. Like a certain kind of theist, the religious non-

⁷ The view is essential to natural theology in the Enlightenment, most famously William Paley’s 1802 work *Natural Theology* (ed. Matthew D. Eddy and David Knight; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). Even if it is controversial whether he believed it or not—or even if it is clear that he did not—Hume captures the essence of the view: “The whole frame of nature bespeaks an intelligent author” (*Dialogues and Natural History of Religion* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1993] 134).

⁸ Contention to the meaningful or meaningless disjunction can follow in several ways. For an argument that cosmic insignificance is just a metaethical mistake about objective value and the so-called cosmic point of view, but that despite such a lack, or mistake, humans are still able to hold values firmly nonetheless, see Bernard Williams, “The Human Prejudice,” in *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline* (ed. A. W. Moore; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008) 135–52. For an argument that if objective value doesn’t exist, then nihilism logically follows, see J. L. Mackie *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin, 1991). For a critique of cosmic insignificance and relation to metaethics, see Guy Kahane, “Our Cosmic Insignificance,” *Nous* 48 (2014) 745–72.

⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 717.

¹⁰ Kahane, “Our Cosmic Insignificance,” 763.

theist denies only scientific reductionism, not scientific inquiry altogether. But unlike their theistic counterparts, the claim is that religious awe, as an expression and a telic orientation, need not contain ontological commitments to God nor other metaphysical baggage often associated with theistic religion.¹¹ For example, Ronald Dworkin, the most fully realized position of the group,¹² calls his approach “religious atheism”;¹³ Thomas Nagel, who hints at such a view, calls for the need of a “religious temperament”;¹⁴ and Gary Gutting discusses “religious agnosticism.”¹⁵ One might fruitfully think of religious non-theism as a certain kind of postsecular response to the absurd,¹⁶ believing that “the issue about meaning is a central preoccupation of our age, and its threatened lack fragilizes all the narratives of modernity by which we live.”¹⁷ The source for this meaning is indeed religion—but religion understood in a Wittgensteinian sense,¹⁸ that is, as an attitude, a telic orientation to the world, and not (only) about propositional beliefs about deities and so forth.¹⁹

In what follows I will: (a) explicate the primary tensions of the absurd position, in particular its discussion in Camus in relation to both human expectations (the first section) and discussions of beauty in contemporary physics and cosmology (the second section); (b) analyze the motivations and arguments of religious non-theists

¹¹ There are important differences and distinctions across these thinkers and their views. I will try not to paint with too broad of stroke here, but, in another sense, it will be important to grant some latitude about particularities of views in order to see what this interesting philosophical move might be, if not exactly (yet?) a social pattern/cultural movement.

¹² Or at least it has attracted the most significant scholarly attention. See, e.g., “A Symposium on Ronald Dworkin’s *Religion Without God*,” *Boston University Law Review* 94 (2014) 1201–1355.

¹³ Ronald Dworkin, *Religion Without God* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013) esp. 1–43.

¹⁴ Nagel, *Secular Philosophy*, esp. 3–17.

¹⁵ Gary Gutting, “The Way of the Agnostic,” *New York Times*, 20 January 2013, <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/01/20/the-way-of-the-agnostic>; idem, “Pascal’s Wager 2.0,” *New York Times*, 28 September 2015, <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/09/28/a-new-wager>.

¹⁶ On the postsecular, see Ryan Gillespie, “Religion and the Postsecular Public Sphere,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 102 (2016) 194–207; idem, “Reason, Religion, and Postsecular Liberal-Democratic Epistemology,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 47 (2014) 1–24; Philip Gorski et al. *The Postsecular in Question: Religion in Contemporary Society* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); Jürgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2008).

¹⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 718.

¹⁸ Wittgenstein looms large in this article, both in the knot into which he ties ethics, religion, and questions of ultimate meaning together and the insight about potentialities for religious language to be about attitudes toward the world or limits of language in general (“as a teacup will only hold a teacup full of water”). The central tension is acknowledging the limits of running outside of the boundaries of language, and that, knowing as much, even he still uses expressions of absolute value and miracle and so forth, as discussed in Ludwig Wittgenstein, “Lecture on Ethics,” in *Philosophical Occasions 1912–1951* (ed. James Klagge and Alfred Nordmann; Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993) 36–44, at 40; see also Nagel, *Secular Philosophy*, 31.

¹⁹ I use the phrase *telic orientation* to mean something like our ultimate attitude toward the world, religious or not, and (likely) based on ultimate meaning (which is to say ultimate ends) as humans. It is akin to Fleischacker’s usage of the *telic arena* “in which we raise questions of our overall or ultimate end: of whether our lives are worth living, and what if so, makes them so” (*Divine Teaching*, 144).

and the position of awe toward the cosmos as a rapprochement between—or an alternative to—classical theism and scientific reductionism, a sort of postsecular response to absurdity (the third section); and (c) begin a critique of the religious non-theist perspective (the fourth section), posing what I will call the Commitment Problem, the Standards Problem, the Moral Problem, and the Awe Problem.

While there is much to admire, especially in the emphasis on religious awe and scientific inquiry, the working critique is something like this: either it isn't religious or it isn't non-theistic. The in-between of religious non-theism seems to cash out in the logic of either classical theism or scientific reductionism respectively, at this point moving inconsistently between the assumptions and notions of those two positions, and it is thus hard to follow either as a bridge between the two positions or as a robust alternative to them. If there is, in the end, nothing outside of nature, then the religious invocation seems inappropriate, and if there is something outside of nature, and thus religious, then that which is beyond nature would need to be, ironically, less predetermined than non-theists currently allow.

The fifth section is a brief conclusion and calls for further inquiry into religious non-theism and attempts at reconciliation after the Great Collision for theological defenders and critics alike.

■ Absurdity, Classical Versus Modern Expectations, Reconciliation

Absurdity, in the sense discussed so far, is about a relationship between two things. Camus notes, “The absurd is essentially a divorce. It lies in neither of the elements compared; it is born of their confrontation.”²⁰ The confrontation, then, between human yearning for meaning and the seeming randomness and silence of the universe, results in an absurdity because the two are supposedly so disproportionate.

The invocation of proportion is essential here. For Camus, an example like a single warrior attacking a million men is absurd “solely by virtue of the disproportion between his intention and the reality he will encounter, of the contradiction . . . between his true strength and the aim he has in view.”²¹ Notice Camus's contrasting setup of reality and aim: the disproportion is between the way the world actually is (the reality he will encounter) and human goals (the aim he has in view). The problem, then, is the disproportion of what humans are trying to achieve, aiming to do, and the way the universe is.

While there is already a problem with Camus's formulation,²² let me try to articulate the heart of Camus's critique, and that is: absurdity in the realm of

²⁰ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 30.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

²² Camus talks about the trouble of aiming for objective and universal normative understanding sourced in nature and coming up short, and of receiving normative understanding from art but being skeptical of its universality and objectivity: “you give me the choice between a description that is sure but that teaches me nothing and hypotheses that claim to teach me but that are not sure” (*ibid.*, 20). Normative meaning is what Camus seeks, or says that humans are seeking, and he says that it will not (or cannot) be found in the world. The argument, then, seems to be something like

cosmic meaning and value is the result of the disproportionality between human expectations of the world and the way the world actually is.

The idea might be, then, that absurdity results because humans harbor expectations of deep, universal, cosmic meaning for humanity and the universe/multiverse. These expectations came from antiquity and religious ages, what I have called classical theism. The expectation of classical theism is of an ordered, intelligible universe, which itself is meaningful, purposeful, and functioning and is full of meaningful, purposeful, functioning things. This sort of expectation, as Aristotelian teleology fell out of favor both scientifically and philosophically, began to change in the Early Modern and Enlightenment eras and reached its acme in the high modernism of Camus, as literary and scientific insights altered human expectations to match the findings of a contingent, random, chance-rich universe.²³

The notion of classical theism, in particular for moral life, as having undergone changes in expectations and contexts of rationality is discussed in MacIntyre's *After Virtue*: "that moral judgments are linguistic survivals from the practices of classical theism which have lost the context provided by those practices."²⁴ This is precisely correct for Camus as well—meaning, in general, and moral meaning, in particular, is a survival from a different context of attitudes, beliefs, and practices. But for Camus, humans need to shake this expectation of classical theism as well as the fragmented associated practices. This classical expectation lingers, but does not fully exist in the sense that it remains a live option or legitimate expectation to be held by reasonable people. Rather, it is merely nostalgia: "nostalgia for the absolute."²⁵

From the vantage of the early twenty-first century, there is a sense in which one knows exactly what Camus is talking about, and a sense in which his claims are alien. The sense in which his claims are alien is that the expectations of classical theism have indeed been shifted out of the primary seat of human consciousness,

this: Humans seek universal normative meaning, but there is no universal normative meaning to be found, on the grounds that such has not been discovered (via scientific inquiry). But that the world is silent is already to have made a judgment about (a) the way the world is and (b) what normativity is and what grounds it. For example, a non-natural moral realism might provide a robust counter to Camus's claims. See Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defense* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Terence Cuneo, *The Normative Web* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Derek Parfit, *On What Matters* (2 vols.; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). While the distinctions between natural and non-natural moral realism are contested, the essential tenants of non-naturalism might be that the moral world is independent from the empirical scientific world and that moral terms are neither reducible to nor re-describable as nonnormative or non-moral terms.

²³ That religion can oppose science historically is well-known (e.g., Galileo). For the idea that Christianity, in particular, was a spur to scientific inquiry and traditional scientific concepts like order and regularity, see, e.g., Alfred N. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Macmillan, 1925); Eugene M. Klaaren, *Religious Origins of Modern Science* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977); David C. Lindberg and Ronald Numbers, *God and Nature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

²⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (2nd ed.; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) 60.

²⁵ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 36.

and so handwringing over the contrast between human aims and silent universes is not felt so much by those who, in one sense, were raised (both formally and informally) with the knowledge of a seemingly randomized universe and its contingent existence. But the familiarity of Camus's position is precisely that the gnawing for cosmic significance still hasn't gone away, despite now multiple generations of such scientific understanding and continued reading of, say, Camus. This suggests a shift in understanding of the human condition.

Charles Taylor's work on secularization and secularity provides a robust narrative of just such a shift toward the contemporary human condition, that of secular modernism. He puts it this way:

We live in a condition where we cannot help but be aware that there are a number of different construals, views which intelligent, reasonably undeluded people, of good will, can and do disagree on. . . . It is this index of doubt, which induces people to speak of "theories" here. Because theories are often hypotheses, held in ultimate uncertainty, pending further evidence. I hope I have said something to show that we can't understand them as mere theories, that there is a way in which our whole experience is inflected if we live in one or another spirituality. But all the same we are aware today that one can live the spiritual life differently; that power, fullness, exile, etc. can take different shapes.²⁶

The idea is that the modern secular condition is one in which humans are acutely aware of making a choice to live in one construal, one narrative, or another. So even if one ultimately disagrees with a certain kind of religious narrative, or Darwinian narrative, or multiverse narrative, there is, at base, a common awareness that one has made a choice to accept or reject something. Furthermore, there is commonality for each of us — atheist, theist, agnostic alike — harboring uncertainty in our choice (we might have chosen wrongly). Taylor is also highlighting that in any theory of meaning or attempted recovery of a moral source, something must be chosen, and that is because we sense the power of meaning to order and shape our lives: "It is indeed a feature of our age, unlike any previous ones, that we can feel the loss of meaning as a real threat."²⁷ The power to search for and make meaning will (and must?) continue — but just how and with what methods and tools is precisely the secular modernist challenge.

Reconciliation and dissatisfaction after the Great Collision runs in four different directions. One direction is straight-ahead classical theism, and another is straight-ahead scientific reductionism. The absurd position, as the third direction, maintains its resistance to reconciliation. It is not to endorse the reductionism nor the yearning, in the classical theistic variation or otherwise. It is to remain in "conscious dissatisfaction."²⁸ The fourth direction, with many variations within

²⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 11.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 678.

²⁸ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 31.

it, is the most rhetorically interesting, as it attempts reconciliation by appealing, directly, to portions of religious construals and portions of scientific construals. One striking version is a revival of natural theology.²⁹ Another version I will call Cosmic Eco-Theism.³⁰ And yet another is the focus here: religious non-theism.

Motivations for something like a religious non-theism seem to come from three primary places. Firstly, following discussion in this section, there seems to be a dissatisfaction with the scientific reductionist picture, in particular its lack of a place for something essential. For example, the lack of, or impossibility of, an adequate explanation of consciousness contributes to Nagel's skepticism.³¹ For Stuart Kauffman, the problem is the lack of a starring role for human agency.³²

Secondly, there is the motivation stemming from a certain kind of impossibility (though not a literal impossibility) of Camus's absurd position. The commitment to a "total absence of hope" is bleak, and even Camus, in the very next words after that phrase, tries to soften it by saying "which has nothing to do with despair."³³ But this seems to be a precarious conceptual dance, this rejecting hope and yet somehow also avoiding despair. Furthermore, Camus speaks of the irrationality of the world and the inexistence of a logic to provide meaning, and yet himself seems capable of discerning as much rationally and providing an alternative logic of meaning that avoids self-annihilation. But arguments aside, one might think of this motivation as a sort of *dissatisfaction with the conscious dissatisfaction* of Camus's absurdity. Perhaps cognitive dissonance is just too much, or the existential burden too great.

²⁹ A prominent voice here is McGrath who articulates a natural theology consistent with Christian Trinitarian views to meet certain objections. See Alister McGrath, *A Fine-Tuned Universe: The Quest for God in Science and Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009). For a pushing of the boundaries between naturalism and theology, see John F. Haught, *Is Nature Enough? Meaning and Truth in the Age of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). For a kind of Neoplatonism that is consistent with classical theism and/or a multiverse, see John Leslie, *Universes* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

³⁰ This view holds that there is a deeply spiritual component to humanity and that a scientifically accurate view of the cosmos strengthens just such a commitment and offers place for it. Furthermore, it frequently holds that theistic religious language is up to the task and normatively appropriate, but that characteristically classical theistic terms like *sacred* and *God* need not have the same classical theistic referents. For this view of ecospirituality, sometimes called Big History, see David Christian, Cynthia Brown, and Craig Benjamin, *Big History: Between Nothing and Everything* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2013). Two ambitious projects in this view are Michael Dowd, *Thank God for Evolution: How the Marriage of Science and Religion Will Transform Your Life and Our World* (New York: Viking, 2009), arguing for a New Theism/Religion 2.0, and the multimedia project *Journey of the Universe*, in Brian Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker, *Journey into the Universe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014). Lisa Sideris calls these projects Genesis 2.0 and the return of mythopoetic science. See Lisa Sideris, *Consecrating Science: Wonder, Knowledge, and the Natural World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017). It appears as if Cosmic Eco-Theists have more cultural adherents than religious non-theism per se, and perhaps this reflects a certain bias or obstacle in the otherwise more academically philosophical religious non-theism.

³¹ Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) esp. 35–70.

³² Stuart Kauffman, *Reinventing the Sacred* (New York: Basic Books, 2010) x.

³³ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 31.

A third motivation for religious non-theism is from certain scientific findings, i.e., the colloquial “from the science itself”—particularly certain “surprising facts” as well as the role that beauty plays in physics and cosmology. I will explicate this motivation in more detail.

■ Surprising Facts and the Song of Beauty

Scientific inquiry, particularly in cosmology and particle physics, continues to deepen and expand, discovering so-called fine-tuning. The fine-tuning of the universe is a phrase used to capture the fact that our universe seems to be amazingly tuned for human life. While an unsophisticated version of fine-tuning jumps straight from the facts of fine-tuning to concluding a Creator God, more modest versions put fine-tuning this way: “while it does not establish the truth of theism . . . it does provide very significant evidence which (if left unanswered) can render theistic belief not unreasonable at the end of the day.”³⁴ By fine-tuning, I refer to and mean those incredibly precise facts and combination of forces during and immediately after the Big Bang that enabled life-permitting conditions, and, following John Leslie, that it appears “as if small changes in this universe’s basic features would have made life’s evolution impossible.”³⁵

Fine-tuning is the kind of thing that Charles Peirce might call a surprising fact.³⁶ Tying directly into the conversation in the previous section, a fact could only be surprising if it was unexpected. So, it would follow that the very kind of transition from classical theistic expectations to modern scientific expectations discussed above did indeed occur, or was complete, if evidence that indicates order, beauty, and precision is surprising.

Following an abductive approach to scientific inquiry,³⁷ the facts of fine-tuning and beauty might cause a revision in theoretical beliefs and modeling, and even fundamentally change human expectations and telic orientations. In one sense, this

³⁴ Hud Hudson, *The Metaphysics of Hyperspace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 36.

³⁵ Leslie, *Universes*, 3.

³⁶ Peirce’s connection of abduction and surprising facts isn’t as straightforward as contemporary notions of inference to the best explanation. But the structure given in Peirce is:

The surprising fact, C, is observed;

But if A were true, C would be a matter of course,

Hence, there is reason to suspect that A is true.

See Charles Peirce, *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (ed. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, and Arthur W. Burks; 8 vols.; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931–1935, 1958) 5:189. See also Chihab El Khachab, “The Logical Goodness of Abduction in C. S. Peirce’s Thought,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 49 (2013) 157–77.

³⁷ I am using *abduction* in a mostly Peircean, non-strict sense but one also tied very much to just dialectic (reasoning the probable) in general in Aristotle, as distinguished from *apodeixis* (scientific/demonstration) (e.g., *Top.* 1.1) or perhaps most saliently as rhetoric in Isocrates (*Antid.* 271). For present purposes, Paley’s description of his own notion of “the argument cumulative” suffices: the goal is not a conclusion of necessity, for “the proof is not a conclusion, which lies at the end of a chain of reasoning, of which chain each instance of contrivance is only a link, and of which, if one link fail, the whole falls” (Paley, *Natural Theology*, 46). The idea, writ large, focuses

is exactly what our religious non-theists are going to argue for in the subsequent section. But in another sense, these surprising facts are just more information to be explained in the search for meaning. Nobel-prize winning physicist Frank Wilczek (and co-author Betsy Devine) put it this way:

the mysterious longing behind a scientist's search for meaning is the same that inspires creativity in music, art, or any other enterprise of the restless human spirit. And the release they offer is to inhabit, if only for a moment, some point of union between the lonely world of subjectivity and the shared universe of external reality.³⁸

The connection seen here is the search for meaning in scientific and aesthetic enterprises.

That is, this search for meaning and the so-far surprising results have aided in forming an understanding of a kind of beauty, mathematical and otherwise. In other words, absurdity results from disproportionality, but certain scientific and mathematical findings are being put in the language of proportionality: symmetry, harmony, ratio—in short, the language of beauty. Consider these quotations:

Passion for science derives from an aesthetic sensibility, not a practical one. We discover something new about the world, and that lets us better appreciate its beauty. On the surface, weak interactions are a mess: The force-carrying bosons have different masses and charges, and different interaction strengths for different particles. Then we dig deeper, and an elegant mechanism emerges: a broken symmetry, hidden from our view by a field pervading space. It's like being able to read poetry in the original language, instead of being stuck with a mediocre translation.³⁹

and

Science begins and ends in the physical world of sensation, but in seeking to understand this world and predict its behavior, science imagines other worlds, ruled by logic but inaccessible to perception. Only small glimpses of such worlds shimmer at the corners of reality. But knowing that the physical world supports—no *demands*—their extraordinary beauty, we return to it with a new feeling.⁴⁰

and

My colleagues and I in fundamental physics . . . like to think that we too search for beauty. . . . When presented with two alternative equations purporting to describe Nature, we always choose the one that appeals to our aesthetic

on the amount of evidence and reasoning it takes to weigh the scales toward one side as opposed to another in situations where ideal epistemic conditions are unattainable.

³⁸ Frank Wilczek and Betsy Devine, *Longing for the Harmonies* (New York: Norton, 1989) xi.

³⁹ Sean Carroll, *The Particle at the End of the Universe* (New York: Dutton, 2012) 278.

⁴⁰ Wilczek and Devine, *Longing for the Harmonies*, xiii [italics in original].

sense. “Let us worry about beauty first, and truth will take care of itself!”
Such is a rallying cry for fundamental physicists.⁴¹

The middle quotation is taken from the introduction to a book entitled *Longing for the Harmonies* and the last from *Fearful Symmetry: The Search for Beauty in Modern Physics*. Such titles are hardly unique. Look at the titles of several recent books: *The Beauty of Physics*; *The Elegant Universe*; *Feynman’s Rainbow: Search for Beauty in Physics and Life*; *Deep Down Things: The Breathtaking Beauty of Particle Physics*; *A Beautiful Question: Finding Nature’s Deep Design*. I could go on further quoting from physicists and listing books.⁴²

Notice that the argument here is not that a certain kind of scientific reductionist picture must be wrong because there is no place for beauty in it (in the way that one might critique that there is no place for agency in it). Rather, the argument is that there is a surprising amount of beauty in (what seems to be) the way the world is, and especially in the way it came to be.

The animating point is just this: the modern scientific expectation was, precisely, for chaos and chance, and what is found, instead, is beauty and elegance. And so, this fact surprises us.

Interestingly, this beauty is then even taken as a justification for certain arguments and models. That is, given such a precise mathematics and necessity of physical constants and conditions, it makes sense that the more beautiful equation or answer would be (at least closer to) the right equation or answer. In his *The Fabric of the Cosmos*, influential physicist and mathematician Brian Greene writes: “Physicists also believe [their] . . . theories are on the right track because, in some hard-to-describe way, they *feel* right, and the ideas of symmetry are essential to this feeling.”⁴³ Even Weinberg, a champion of scientific reductionism, says:

Although we do not yet have a sure sense of where in our work we should rely on our sense of beauty, still in elementary particle physics aesthetic judgments seem to be working increasingly well. I take this as evidence that we are moving in the right direction, and perhaps not so far from our goal.⁴⁴

Part of the idea here is that something else besides observation aids in the understanding of—and the discovery (or construction, depending on one’s view) of—the way the world actually is. Beauty, meant in the sense of symmetry, harmony,

⁴¹ Anthony Zee, *Fearful Symmetry: The Search for Beauty in Modern Physics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007) 3.

⁴² Carroll also notes the interesting fact that some high-profile physicists of the current era—Fabiola Gianotti, Joe Incandela, Sau Lan Wu, David Kaplan—additionally studied art, music, or film. See Carroll, *The Particle at the End*, 277. It is an interesting contrast between these types of scientists and their discoveries of randomness, chance, and cold universes, mixed with excited talk of love and passion and beauty, and the literary celebration of coldness and chance, a festival of insignificance, resulting in a sort of misanthropy in the works of Samuel Beckett or Milan Kundera. See Nancy Huston, *Professeurs de désespoir* (Paris: Actes Sud, 2004); Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 699–703.

⁴³ Brian Greene, *The Fabric of the Cosmos* (New York: Vintage, 2005) 225.

⁴⁴ Weinberg, *Dreams of a Final*, 165.

proportion (and so forth), and aesthetic judgment, then, are not ornamental to the work of understanding nor, in one sense, to the very structure of reality itself. Rather, beauty and aesthetic judgment are both inherent and guiding mechanisms toward reality-as-it-really-is.⁴⁵ Notice the seeming implied agreement and unargued nature of what the standards and criteria of beauty are.

So, the expectation, in one sense, for chaos and randomness is met with a surprising degree of precision and beauty, and, in turn, the beauty, elegance, and symmetry are used to justify the betterness of the interpretations and models that include such features as opposed to the ones that lack such features. There seems to be, then, at least, some sort of intuitive pull, an Existentially Nagging Intuition, let's call it, that beauty is part of the knot of truth and goodness, just as many classical theistic scholars claimed.⁴⁶ But at a minimum, there is this set of surprising facts—fine-tuning—that need to be incorporated into our best interpretations of the way the world is that I will simply cluster under the heading of beauty. Both classical theists and religious non-theists give serious consideration to the outside-of-nature possibility (read: religiousness) of beauty; in other words, both can—and do—make use of beauty in their theories.

Beauty, in this sense, can represent a sort of clarion call. It might also simply be a siren. That is, beauty could be a siren song in exactly Odysseus's sense: a lure, a trap, a snare—something to which to avoid falling prey. But for now, let us discuss the religious non-theists' views on the relationship between beauty, the physical structure of the world, and religion, representative of a novel attempt at reconciliation after the Great Collision.

■ Religious Awe: Religious Non-Theist Responses

An obvious response to the surprising facts and clarion call of beauty discussed in the previous section is that of classical theism. But an interesting set of literatures, the approach I am calling religious non-theism, articulates a different response. As Thomas Nagel writes in the preface to his *Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament*, “I am resistant to the broad acceptance of scientific naturalism as a comprehensive world view. Theism is one form that such resistance can take, but I believe that there must be secular alternatives.”⁴⁷ The position, then, is meant to respond to the deep human yearning for meaning and to maintain scientific insight

⁴⁵ See also Dworkin, *Religion Without God*, 51–65.

⁴⁶ The statement is meant to document the tendency, the existence and persistence of the intuitive pull, not to use the persistence as decisive evidence of its truth. But such existence and persistence of the truth, beauty, goodness knot, especially within (after?) secular modernism, seems indeed worthy of attention. See Nagel, *Secular Philosophy*, 17; Ryan Gillespie, “Normative Reasoning and Moral Argumentation in Theory and Practice,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 49 (2016): 49–73, at 54, 64, also discussing what I have called here Existentially Nagging Intuitions.

⁴⁷ Nagel, *Secular Philosophy*, “Preface.”

without engaging in reductionism. The interesting point is that, for a certain kind of theist and non-theist alike, this is exactly a religious outlook.⁴⁸

The key rhetorical move for the religious non-theist is the division of religion into major constituent parts, of which knowledge is but one part (and often not the most significant or relevant part). So Gutting notes that knowledge “adds a major dimension to religious commitment,” but that love and understanding are equal elements in what it means to be religious.⁴⁹ Dworkin, playing out a twenty-first century *Euthyphro*, claims “logic requires a separation between the scientific and value parts of orthodox godly religion.”⁵⁰ That is, whatever cannot stand up to reason and to our best understandings of the way the world is, the “scientific” parts of godly religion—e.g., young earth creationism—must be severed. But the value parts, the love and understanding parts of which Gutting speaks, and the moral outlook of many major religions, are worth preserving to Dworkin (insofar as it is consistent with moral reality).

The outlook is religious for many reasons, and different writers have different motivations for including the term. But a general motivation is largely that which lies outside of, or beyond, nature, being well-captured with the common word religion, especially when severed from our understandings of knowledge (scientific, secular, religious, or otherwise). In trying to get at those things beyond knowledge, being beyond nature (and, hence, supernatural, in one sense of that term), it seems as if the cue is taken from Einstein,⁵¹ modernity’s most prominent forebear of religious non-theism. A famous quotation of Einstein runs:

To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms—this knowledge, this feeling,

⁴⁸ I am focusing on the writings that explicitly endorse their view as religious. There are others who prefer the increasingly common (self-)identification of spiritual-but-not-religious, which, in an agnostic or atheistic view, might amount to something similar. A figure of the latter might be Abrams, with a view like the ones surveyed in the main text as far as it is indeed the insights of fundamental physics and cosmology, consisting partly of the “surprising facts,” that prompt revision and expansion in human relationship to the cosmos. Consider:

Many religious believers are convinced that the earth was created as is a few thousand years ago, while many people who respect science believe that the earth is just an average planet of a random star in a universe where no place is special. *Neither is right*. Both groups are operating with mental pictures of the universe that we now know scientifically are wrong.

See Nancy Ellen Abrams and Joel R. Primack, *The New Universe and the Human Future: How a Shared Cosmology Could Transform the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011) xii [italics in original]; Nancy Ellen Abrams, *A God That Could Be Real* (Boston: Beacon, 2015).

⁴⁹ Gutting, “Way of the Agnostic.”

⁵⁰ Dworkin, *Religion Without God*, 9.

⁵¹ Dworkin is explicit in this regard, see *ibid.* 3, 50; also, the book is based on his 2011 Einstein Lectures at University of Bern.

is at the center of true religiousness. In this sense, and in this sense only, I belong in the ranks of devoutly religious men.⁵²

Notice that what is impenetrable to us really exists; it is not an illusion or illogical, neither a symptom nor false consciousness. Whether it is a supernatural deity or not is irrelevant so long as there is indeed something that is, in a sense, beyond nature, that is still part of reality (exists). It is wisdom and beauty, and it is knowledge, and it is feeling, and this knot is what he means by *religion*.

What Einstein seems to be expressing, both in his words and the obvious struggle for words to express it, is that religion is about that feeling (or belief or intuition or faith) that there is Something More. So perhaps the major organizing term here is religion, but in another, Wittgensteinian sense, the key rhetorical term is *attitude*: what is a proper attitude of humans to take toward the cosmos?⁵³ And here the religious non-theists's response is essentially identical to that of their classical theist counterparts: a proper attitude of humans toward the world is one of deep awe.⁵⁴

Dworkin puts the attitude of religious awe at the center of his religious atheism. Religious atheism is rendered intelligible by precisely the sort of discussion that has unfolded in this article, even culminating, especially for Dworkin, in Einstein. That is,

religious atheism . . . is not an oxymoron; . . . the beauty and sublimity [Einstein] said we could reach only as a feeble reflection are not part of nature; they are something *beyond* nature that cannot be grasped even by finally understanding the most fundamental physical laws.⁵⁵

The idea is that there is something beyond the empirical, reductionist scientific explanations even if hypothetically one could achieve the Theory of Everything, even if the dream of a final theory became a reality. This beyond nature is meant

⁵² Albert Einstein, "From Living Philosophies (1931)," in *Living Philosophies* (ed. Clifton Fadiman; New York: Doubleday, 1990) 6.

⁵³ Nagel (*Secular Philosophy*, 17) stops short of claiming the religious attitude, preferring absurdity. He ends an exploratory chapter: ". . . we must go back to the choice between hardheaded atheism, humanism, and the absurd. In that case, since the cosmic question won't go away and humanism is too limited an answer, a sense of the absurd may be what we are left with." But his themes are similar to the religious non-theists, and he even claims the overarching "cosmic question" as reliant on an attitude:

How can one bring into one's individual life a recognition of one's relation to the universe as a whole, whatever that relation is? It is important to distinguish this question from the pure desire for understanding of the universe and one's place in it. It is not an expression of curiosity, however large. And it is not the general intellectual problem of how to combine an objective conception of the universe with the local perspective of one creature within it. It is rather a question of attitude: Is there a way to live in harmony with the universe, and not just in it? (*Ibid.*, 5).

⁵⁴ The priority or basicness of the attitude of awe is not necessarily on offer; in fact, it seems likely that there is a more essential attitude toward the cosmos necessary to give rise to awe (e.g., a substratum of reasonability, an attitude that is responsive to surprising facts, a kind of reflexivity).

⁵⁵ Dworkin, *Religion Without God*, 5–6 [italics in original].

to inspire, and yet also to remain, in one very real sense, a mystery. The option of identifying the beyond, the mystery, as God is decisively what the religious non-theist aims to avoid. But for Dworkin, this beyond nature is precisely a matter of faith—“faith that some transcendental and objective value permeates the universe, value that is neither a natural phenomenon nor a subjective reaction to natural phenomena.”⁵⁶

Gutting’s view is similar in its aim at the transcendent, but he says that this makes us properly agnostics, not atheists. His “religious agnosticism” means:

serious involvement with religious teachings and practices, in hope for a truth that I do not have and may never attain. Further, religious agnosticism does not mean that I renounce all claims to other knowledge. I may well have strong commitments to scientific, philosophical, and ethical truths that place significant constraints on the religious approaches I find appropriate. Religious agnosticism demands only that I reject atheism, which excludes the hope for something beyond the natural world knowable by science.⁵⁷

Despite the glaring clash of normative claims of the need to reject a deity in one and the need to exclude the rejection of a deity in the other, notice the similarities between atheism and agnosticism. The underlying key is an attitude toward the world, and in particular, an attitude grounded in a hope (for Gutting) and in a faith (for Dworkin) of Something More, a beyond to the naturalism of a scientifically-discoverable world.⁵⁸

In general, then, the argument of religious non-theism is something like this:

1. There is a realness of beauty in scientifically-respectable cosmologies;
2. This beauty is necessarily beyond nature (in one sense of *beyond* nature), evaluative, and aesthetic;
3. Religiousness, as a concept and attitude, best captures this beyond nature, this beauty, and in turn provides the proper founding for humans relating to the cosmos—which is awe;
4. Religions come in theistic and non-theistic varieties;
5. Logic and scientific methods and understandings indicate the higher likelihood that non-theism is true;

⁵⁶ Ibid., 6.

⁵⁷ Gutting, “Pascal’s Wager 2.0.”

⁵⁸ Kauffman operates with similar rhetorical moves of identification of cosmic yearning and the notion of an attitude toward and beyond nature, and the scientific complexities and discoveries of the twenty-first century without falling into scientific reductionism. But his view is more aligned with the Cosmic Eco-Theism, the sort of Spinozan redescription of classical theism discussed previously, as he is fully comfortable with overtly theistic language:

We need a place for our spirituality, and a Creator God is one such place. I hold that it is we who have invented God, to serve as our most powerful symbol. It is our choice how wisely to use our symbol to orient our lives and our civilizations. I believe we can reinvent the sacred. We can invent a global ethic, in a shared space, safe to us all, with one view of God as the natural creativity in the universe (Kauffman, *Reinventing the Sacred*, xiii).

6. The independence of morality from religion indicates that theism is not necessary to human flourishing;
7. So, religious non-theism is the most appropriate set of beliefs, meanings, and attitudes toward the cosmos.

Perhaps the most striking feature of religious non-theism is the concept of what I'll call the belief/faith pairing, a restatement of the severing of the knowledge side of religion from the values side of religion above. A commonplace contemporary notion of faith generally collapses the distinction between belief-in and belief-that. That is, belief-that and belief-in fuse together into the concept of faith, and that is what is often, at least colloquially, meant by the expression "persons of faith": they believe that God/gods exists, and are devoted to trusting God/gods, as generally expressed through culture, ritual, and practice. In the polytheism of Greek and Roman antiquity, the split was much more pronounced: belief-that did not entail belief-in.⁵⁹ So, while it was common to believe that numerous gods existed (belief-that), for most people, only certain gods received trust, devotion, worship, ritual practice, and so forth (belief-in).

Religious non-theists, like their Greco-Roman polytheistic counterparts, also emphasize the refusal to collapse belief-in and belief-that into a single notion of (religious) faith. However, the religious non-theist rejects the existence of deities and opts, instead, for only the faith side, only the belief-in side. At this point, I am unaware of rituals, practices, and so forth that correspond to the religious non-theist, and trust or faith (that sense of *pistis* in Greek) seems replaced by the attitude of awe. Religious non-theism is an attitude of awe, but it does not (as it cannot) dispense with the sense of faith, the belief-in side of faith, that motivates and inspires the awe. In one very real sense, it seems that religious non-theism, as a set of beliefs about the cosmos and humans' relation to it, and corresponding attitude, is historically uncharted.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ For more on the split of belief that the gods exist and following, trusting, worshipping the gods in antiquity, see Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (trans. John Raffan; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985) and James Kinneavy, *Greek Rhetorical Origins of Christian Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

⁶⁰ While there are certainly individuals in history who likely share some version of attitudes of awe toward the cosmos, choosing to express this *as religion* without deistic commitment, it is rare as a rhetoric; that plenty in, say, Enlightenment Britain remained outwardly pious (attending church) but expressed inner doubts is of a different order. There are numerous examples of abstaining from the trusting/devotion/practice side while maintaining the empirical belief side. For an argument on just such a take for certain "Christian Atheists," see Carol Poster, "'If Thou Art God, Avenge Thyself!' Sade and Swinburne as Christian Atheists," in *Straight Writ Queer: Non-Normative Expressions of Heterosexual Desire* (ed. Richard Fantina; Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006) 244–57. Again, religious non-theists reverse this relationship (by rejecting empirical belief that God/gods exists but maintaining the faith side of the pairing), or, in another sense, side-step the pairing altogether.

■ Toward a Critique of Religious Non-Theism

I have offered some of the main arguments and motivations for religious non-theism, situated it in a contemporary scientific context, and, it is hoped, have done so in a way that advocates and critics alike would recognize. Now let me offer four major worries about religious non-theism. Let us call these: the Commitment Problem, the Standards Problem, the Moral Problem, and the Awe Problem. I will take each in turn, also showing how interconnected these problems are to each other.

It might be that religious non-theism is not a rhetorical carving of the new but a conceptual void. This is the Commitment Problem. That is, the religious non-theist position can certainly be an alternative to reductionism and theism, but its challenge as a bridge between them is clear, as it ends up roundly rejected by both sides, and for similar reason: a failure fully to appreciate the metaphysical commitments and entailments of the scientific reductionist picture, on the one hand, or a failure fully to appreciate the metaphysical commitments and entailments of the classical theism picture, on the other. The theistic religious version of the latter is relatively obvious: God, especially in the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions, is not an optional part of the religious narrative. Skepticism of certain scientific knowledge claims in a holy book is not the same thing as skepticism toward the deity at the center of the entire texts and traditions. For example, the religiously faithful in Jewish and Christian traditions can, and do, disagree about readings of Genesis 1; but it is hard to understand what a religiously committed Christian or Jew who rejected commitment to God means. In other words, commitment to God is not just part of the faith-belief-practice relationship within, say, Judaism, Islam, or Christianity: it is essentially what we mean. The attitudes, beliefs, and practices are reinforcement and furthering of one's commitment to God, and sometimes vice versa,⁶¹ but they are not intelligibly separable.

Physicist Sean Carroll speaks for the same idea—that commitment to God is the core of classical theism, not a separable part—but from a critical perspective. Terms are malleable, indeed, but rhetoric is not to invent whole cloth, and one risks confusion of motivations in such instances of rhetorical stretching. Here is Carroll:

Of course, nothing is to stop you, when you say the word “religion,” from having in mind something like “moral philosophy,” or perhaps “all of nature,” or “a sense of wonder at the universe.” You can use words to mean whatever you want; it's just that you will consistently be misunderstood by the ordinary-language speakers with whom you are conversing. And what is the point? If you really mean “ethics” when you say “religion,” why not just say “ethics”? Why confuse the subject with all of the connotations that most people (quite understandably) attach to the term—God, miracles, the super-

⁶¹ I have in mind here a certain kind of religious orthodoxy that encourages one to try the rituals, attitudes, and practices on for size, so to speak, and see whether one does not end up closer to God. For an excellent account of this in Judaism, see Howard Wettstein, *The Significance of Religious Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015) 52–54. For secular correlates of try-first-then-(you-will)-believe, see Fleischacker, *Divine Teaching*, 536, n. 1.

natural, etc.? . . . The only reason to even think that would be an interesting claim to make is if one really did want to include the traditional supernatural baggage—in which case it's a non-empty claim, but a wrong one.⁶²

So, it might be the case that the religious non-theist does not fully grasp the metaphysical implications of either scientific commitment, on the one hand, or theistic commitment, on the other. Or, perhaps, such a critique is hasty, and it is precisely this sort of narrowness of orthodoxy, be it religious or scientific, that religious non-theism means to counter. “You just don’t get it, do you?” one can easily imagine the religious non-theist saying to either the scientific reductionist or the classical theist. And maybe so.

And of course, in an abductive reasoning picture, it is perfectly intelligible to claim that the science, particularly contemporary cosmology and the surprising facts of fundamental physics and fine-tuning, requires explanation in a better, more coherent way, and perhaps one consistent with the yearning to make and have cosmic meaning. This might be just such an answer for religious non-theists. Such a strategy could be pursued along two avenues, standards, and morals, both of which lead to dead ends.

The first strategy might be to highlight that, strictly speaking, science does not demand an attitude of awe or require pushing beyond reductionism, but something does. Let us call this the Standards Problem. In this view, it is not the data itself that reveals answers but rather the way in which the data fits with some other standard—a theoretical model, a human expectation, God, and so forth. This is not simply to highlight how physics generally proceeds, in which theoretical models are developed and tested, the models acting as frames through which physicists do their observation, so that with enough outlier data, new models emerge often in precisely abductive fashion, and so forth. Rather, the point is that there is a standard other than scientific truth held in addition to, or above, the scientific truth standard. This is a promising move in that it is fully consistent with all of the beauty-loving physicists. Recall that in a certain kind of fundamental physics, aesthetic judgment and instantiations of beauty were deemed to be pointing toward truth, or were considered more likely to be true, which is just to say that there is a standard necessarily supplemental, and perhaps even superior, to the empirical scientific data itself—in this case, beauty.

One problem with the standards view, however, is that it simply shifts the site of rational disagreement from the data to the operating standard in the sense that one can intelligibly and reasonably ask, “Yes, but why *that* standard?” That is, why is beauty superior to just the scientific truth, so to speak (as our reductionists

⁶² Sean Carroll, “Science and Religion are Not Compatible,” *Discover*, 23 June 2009, http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/cosmicvariance/2009/06/23/science-and-religion-are-not-compatible/#.VhRNm9a6_mc. See also Weinberg, *Dreams*, 241–61, esp. 245.

might indeed ask). And why beauty and not, say, parsimony?⁶³ Predictability? Timeliness? Subjective cognitive satisfaction? And so on, running squarely into all the whose/which standard debates familiar from the previous few decades. And if the answer is something like: beauty is and ought to be the standard because it is, or has been, the most likely to tact closest to scientific truth, then we are left with another puzzle. Why is beauty such a reliable guide to truth? And we have merely kicked the explanatory, understanding can down the road. And all of that is to assume stability in usage and understanding of the component parts of beauty!⁶⁴

Even still, imagine we have reached consensus on the relationship between scientific truth and beauty, it still does not follow that one must hold this view, logically, but rather that would be a normative must. And the argument would turn to questions of moral normativity, and what is and is not required of humans, and so forth. The second strategy, then, would be the moral strategy, which will become the Moral Problem. So, the proper attitude of humans toward the cosmos is one of awe because that is what is morally required. In other words, in order for the result of the attitude of awe to be the proper or required one, one needs to explicate who or what is doing the requiring, and this makes for an interesting, but then off-field, disagreement of metaethics. But if the empirical world (the science, so to speak) doesn't demand it, then it would be a moral theory, and one runs headlong into the whose/which problems of morality and normativity writ large.

A moral realist position—holding that moral claims are claims about the way the world is, just like scientific claims, and at least one such claim is actually true—however, can elide the problems of moral requirement of the attitude of awe by arguing, again, that moral claims are non-unique in their description of reality when compared to scientific claims. At this point, the religious non-theist positions that I have come across are plagued by the Standards Problem or the Moral Problem, as the Standards Problem is, most suitably, handled by calling for a moral requirement, but few subscribe to the moral realism necessary for grounding such claims.

Dworkin's religious non-theism, however, is unique in this way. While it might not escape the critique of the Commitment Problem, Dworkin's view, via his commitment to moral realism and the reality of beauty, avoids the dead-end avenues of reconciliation after the Great Collision that offer standards that are either too subjective or unclear moral requirements. For him the entailing moral requirement

⁶³ Roy Sorensen, "Parsimony for Empty Space," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 92 (2014) 215–30, at 217, cautions of an "aesthetic prejudice" within certain scientific fields, in that "awe makes us big spenders," favoring the sublime and vast grandeur opposed to parsimony. This reflects a shift in preference from Enlightenment science to Romantic science, also discussed in Richard Holmes, *The Age of Wonder* (New York: Vintage, 2008).

⁶⁴ The notion of beauty as harmony or symmetry runs deep, of course, but there might be other elements as well (dissonance, say, as Palestrina might fruitfully argue). There is also something interesting about the scientific appeal to the beauty and symmetry of the cosmos before, essentially, its inception. Recall that it is with the breaking of symmetry that the perpetuation and expansion of the universe/multiverse occur, including the existence of humanity and so forth.

is then a religious conviction: “For those of us who think beauty real, the scientific presumption that the universe is finally fully comprehensible is also the religious conviction that it shines with real beauty.”⁶⁵

When put together—the view that beauty is real and morality is real in just the same way that scientific facts are real, and that not all claims to scientific fact, morality, or beauty are equal or valid—this version of religious non-theism is rather philosophically and rhetorically interesting. It presents a non-theistic account of humanity’s place in the world and order in the cosmos, respecting the classical triumvirate of truth, beauty, and goodness, and even notes that the proper attitude of awe toward the world is indeed a religious attitude, a religious orientation.

But Dworkin’s view raises a final, parting puzzle, and it is one that is central to his and other religious non-theists’ attitude of awe. Call this the Awe Problem. Let us grant that the proper attitude for humans to take toward the cosmos is one of awe, and that this awe is properly a religious awe. The object of awe is then significantly unclear. Awe, indeed religious awe, is something like mystery, reverence, sublimity, a sense of smallness, and so forth, distinguishable from mere curiosity or even wonder. Einstein’s description of religious awe above hits the mark. And so does Dworkin’s. But, in trying to follow the entailments of their religious non-theism, a puzzle arises: what are we to be in awe of?

One answer might be that the awe is of the complexity of humans who can observe the universe, have (self-reflexive) consciousness, self-organize, and so forth. But this seems rather trivial in certain scientific stories: if the principles and processes of establishment are correct, then the outcomes (of increasing intelligence and so forth in the cosmos) would be a matter of course, the logical conclusion of the instantiated premises, and not, therefore, an invitation to religious awe.

A more likely answer might be to hold awe for the numbers and the small chances in and of themselves. But this, surely, would be odd and seemingly unsophisticated, resolving in either mathematical bullet-biting (hey, someone has to win the lottery!) or classical theism (the odds are so small that surely it points to something else working here). Leslie’s license plate example is convincing on this point: if you get a new car and the license plate is your three initials and birth year, it makes sense to respond that yes, it is unlikely but nevertheless some numbers had to be randomly selected, and any number combination is as unlikely as any other.⁶⁶ Or it might also make sense to assume some design at work. But the religious non-theist has neither option available, since both give in to either reductionism or theism.

So, again, if we aren’t in awe of the small numbers and we aren’t in awe of ourselves or the processes, what’s left to be in awe of?⁶⁷ To be clear, awe at the well-

⁶⁵ Dworkin, *Religion Without God*, 104. For his full case for moral realism, arguing for a mind-independent morality and the unity of all value, see Ronald Dworkin, *Justice for Hedgehogs* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

⁶⁶ Leslie, *Universes*, 120–21.

⁶⁷ It might be that these smaller sources of awe are too quickly dismissed, as one reviewer cautioned. But the point I am after here is not that these smaller sources of awe can be explained

ordered universe and incredibly small chances, and then some sort of relationality with that well-ordered, nearly-impossible thing is certainly available to certain theories, but that would be a natural awe—literally, an awe of nature. But remember that the religious non-theist is explicit in the description and demand of a beyond to nature. So, what's left is to be in awe of is just this: that there is a beyond to nature and natural human understanding.

But if it is beyond nature—indeed Beyond—then, by definition, we are talking about the divine, which is to say at least supernatural (if not theistic).⁶⁸ For example, Abraham Joshua Heschel views awe as tied to divinity and transcendence necessarily, because “awe is a sense for the transcendence, for the reference everywhere to Him who is beyond all things. It is an insight better conveyed in an attitude than in words.”⁶⁹ There is overlap clearly seen in the breaking down of linguistic expression and the insistence on attitude not knowledge; but to a theist like Heschel this is precisely because all of these things—awe, sublime beauty, transcendence, Beyond—don't only, or merely, point to a divinity but are in essence enabled by Him. That is, it is in and through divine sustenance that things, human and non-human, are necessarily related: humans and “even inanimate things stand in relation to the Creator.”⁷⁰ Here “awe is a way of being in rapport with mystery of all reality”—but mystery is explicitly defined as “not a synonym for the unknown but rather a name for a meaning which stands in relation to God.”⁷¹

Whether one shares the theistic commitment or not, Heschel's view is possessed of a clarity of referent that is lacking for the religious non-theist: it is about rapport with the mystery of God, not mystery qua mystery. Let's use Howard Wettstein's usage of the Hebrew concept of being *yere' šamayim* to further the case. A *yere' šamayim* is one who stands in awe of heaven, but it is also meant to be an ultimate attitude, to “live in the presence of awe, a kind of background condition” against which humans carry on.⁷² So, in a certain kind of theistic picture, the attitude of

rather tidily in reductionism or theism or that these smaller sources are somehow insufficient (psychologically or philosophically). Rather, I am contending that these smaller sources are not awe; they might be surprising, exciting, stupefying, wondrous, and so forth, but they are not awe in the sense of permanent, religious awe—which is the kind under evaluation. Claiming to be scientifically sophisticated and then being in permanent religious awe about small odds seems incoherent on its face.

⁶⁸ William James notes the ordinariness, or at least non-uniqueness of the experience of awe, that “religious awe is the same organic thrill which we feel in a forest at twilight, or in a mountain gorge” but is keen to note that those experiences and objects, properly understood, are not enough to garner *religious* awe, continuing “only this time it comes over us at the thought of our supernatural relations.” See William James, *Writings 1902–1910* (Library of America 38; New York: Viking, 1987) 3. The need for religious awe in James's description is for precisely something supernatural in relation. Similarly, the worship or divinity of nature, in either the Spinozean or the Mother Gaia sense, both hold that there is some divine element. Perhaps this is why Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 175, says the worship of *gaia* is often thought the “prototype of all piety.”

⁶⁹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1976) 75.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Wettstein, *Significance of Religious Experience*, 38.

awe toward the mysteries of the cosmos is permanent, radiant, and it both speaks to and invites relationality between humans and Creator.

This option of relationality, though, is unavailable to the non-theist. It seems clear that wonder is appropriate for non-theists particularly of the reductionist variety, as there exists an expectation, however muted, of resolvability, of potential human knowledge of such mysteries and unknowns of the cosmos, that nature can and will, ultimately, be uncovered, even if just in theory. Wonder is temporary. But the attitude of awe that has been discussed by theists and non-theists alike as the mysteries of the cosmos shall persist due to the limits of human reasoning or scientific methods or whatever; in short, the mysteries of the Beyond to nature that are real must remain mysteries. If that sort of awe is held as the proper attitude toward the cosmos, what is the non-theist replacement for the relationality to Creator? To be clear, my claim here is not meant as a swipe deeming secular alternatives to be grasping at straws for replacements to orthodox religious theories and practices, nor as a territorial claiming of the history or concept of religion.

Rather, the claim is one of grammar: religious awe is about attitudes and relationships. To the theist, it is an attitude of humility at the limits of human reasoning in the face of the Divine. The relationship is between humans and Creator. To a religious non-theist, the story stops, it seems, with an attitude of humility at the limits of human reasoning. But that is not a relationship unless nature is all there is. But given that the religious non-theist's claim is precisely that there is a beyond to nature, then the relationship is precisely religiousness and awe as it attempts to be about humans and that beyond. That is, rather than between humans and Creator, the relationship is between humans and the Beyond.

But that Beyond is severely under-identified.⁷³ Now, an intelligent religious non-theist response here could simply be that the working concept of Beyond I have given here is severely over-identified with a Creator God.⁷⁴ But if the kind of theism available here is not the question, as theism is exactly what religious non-theists reject, then we are trying to examine or understand or reconcile with the Beyond in this pre-theoretic state. That is, the task for religious non-theists is about awe and relationality between human and the non-theistic Beyond; the religious non-theist is in awe of the Beyond.

⁷³ In the Christian tradition, one might think of Paul at the Areopagus (Acts 17:22–34), where, upon seeing the inscription to the unknown God, he says, in effect: “I see that you are very pious, and that’s good insofar as it goes; but now let me share with you the name and character of that God so that you might be strengthened and worship properly.” The fact that Stoic piety, in the sense of living in accord with Nature, is not a matter of merely accepting what befalls us but of loving it, too, might counter this argument. If so, this is because the enactment of a cosmologically-given function is an act of love (e.g., Marcus Aurelius, *Med.* 10.21)—though Stoics possess theological (if not Jewish, Christian, or Islamic) commitments (in contradistinction to the randomness and void of which the Epicureans made so much). One might also think of Heschel, *God in Search*, 77: “we must grow in awe in order to reach faith.”

⁷⁴ I thank an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this angle.

But the Beyond in this pre-theoretic supernatural state seems challenging to inspire or inform belief or a relationship without further commitments.⁷⁵ This is not to anthropomorphize relationships, as a concept, nor God, nor to equivocate on relationship, in the sense of having a human relationship and having a philosophical relation; I have a philosophical relationship to the coffee mug on my desk, not a human one; I have both with a friend sitting next to me, for example. However straightforward in the philosophical sense or strange in the human sense my relationship might be to the cup on my desk, it is easy to identify the constituents and the relationship. But in the claim of humans and a beyond to nature, one of the constituents and the relationship are both unclear. Again, a basic idea of relationality to the well-ordered cosmos is certainly an option, but that is simply a natural awe, awe of nature; that option is not available to the religious non-theist who posits the beyond to nature, with the permanence of mystery in that beyond being largely why they go in for the religious label.

If the response is, “Well, sure, *now* the constituent parts are unclear, but discoveries, et cetera, will reveal more about the Beyond, et cetera,” then religious non-theism runs largely aligned with the scientific reductionist picture, and generally holds little in the way of religious content. It is a trade of the permanence of awe for temporary wonder. In other words, the awe for the non-theist cannot be of limitations in (current) knowledge, for the scientific reductionist can easily partner with the theist and religious non-theist alike in claiming an attitude of humility in the limits of human reasoning—at least currently. The general premise, though, for the scientific reductionist is that reasoning and discovery will improve, continue, refine, and so forth. And, without a theistic picture muddling things up, why wouldn’t that be believed? That is, if there is an expectation of order, harmony, intelligibility, and beauty in the universe, this is an expectation that comes from God in classical theism, and the awe is of God and God’s creation. If there is an expectation of chaos and randomness and chance, then what is one to be in awe of? Randomness and chance? It might be surprising for me to flip a coin a thousand times and get heads every single time, but it would be strange (and mathematically unsophisticated) to be in awe of the coin or my flipping abilities.⁷⁶

And if the religious non-theist’s awe is of the gap between the Beyond and human, in short, an insistence on (perennially and necessarily) limited human faculties, the epistemology becomes murky. What is the source of this not-knowing? Why does the religious non-theist think humans cannot fully know the cosmos or reality? The insistence of the religious non-theist on permanent awe and the existence of a Beyond to nature would prompt a further question of how this permanent awe can

⁷⁵ High comfort level in calling the pre-theoretic Beyond something like the divine or the Absolute or the One might indicate one as a Cosmic Eco-Theist and not a religious non-theist.

⁷⁶ It could be that the religious non-theist is in awe of the surprise: that there is beauty when randomness was expected. But this too sounds like temporary wonder, not a permanent attitude of religious awe.

be interrogated. If part of the claim is that human tools, so to speak, by definition cannot get us there or uncover it, then what other tools are available for inquiry? And here the tools of many religions would turn up—sacred texts, divine revelation, rituals, handed-down epic stories, prayer practices, mysticism, and so forth. Or perhaps the claim is of religious non-theism as apophatic communication, as an attempt at negative theology.⁷⁷ But even still, negative theology is another method and practice with intelligible goals.

That is, the religious tools of prayer, mysticism, deep theology, or whatever are still just that: methods and practices in support of something else, in purpose toward something. Often, they are methods and practices that are meant to draw humans closer to God in theism, or toward other realities in certain non-theist religions. But the scientifically inspired, philosophically sophisticated religious non-theist has no such goal, no such object or reality toward which the practices and attitudes are meant to align.

The working critique, then, is something like this: *religious non-theism doesn't quite add up, in that it either isn't religious or it isn't non-theistic*. If the Beyond is not outside of nature, then it is not in the realm of religion; and if the beyond is outside of nature, then it must in this pre-theoretic yet supernatural state be open to the possibility of theism (i.e., at least theoretically to reject non-theism). Religious non-theism—of feelings of awe and religiosity and spirituality, but not toward anything in nature nor toward anything in specific at all, as our philosophical and scientific pictures cannot recommend anything specific but yet somehow are specific enough to rule out theism—seems incapable of being a bridge between scientific reductionism and classical theism. And as an alternative to those two options, the logic of the view seems to push toward being impaled on either horn,⁷⁸ or else a priori forecloses on the possibility of divine supernaturalism.

Now, one explanation might be that this inability to shake meaning and purpose as stemming from orthodox understandings of God, or to shake meaning(–lessness) and purpose(–lessness) as stemming from our best scientific inquiries, is the result of human consciousness being in a transitional state; our minds are still too closed.

⁷⁷ For example, the refusal to name the center, so to speak—in this case, the denial of theism—could be an apophatic communication strategy. The reference to something that is “beyond nature” but still unarticulated could serve as an implicit critique of meaning-reference theories of discursive rationality. But again, for the science-and-analytic-philosophy-heavy emphasis of the religious non-theism I’ve discussed here, that seems unlikely. And even if negative theology was intended in the “beyond nature” invocation, the fact that it must remain inarticulable, still bespeaks a position consistent with many classical theisms. For a case for understanding Dworkin’s religious non-theism as *onto-theology*, the idea that theology is bound up with questions of ontology, perhaps even most especially in attempts to otherwise excise theology from ontology, see Ronald E. Osbourne, “Ronald Dworkin’s Onto-Theology,” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 43 (2015), <http://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/articles/winterspring2015/ronald-dworkins-onto-theology>.

⁷⁸ Absurdity remains a possibility too, though the challenges of fine-tuning remain.

Or because the story is just too new, and once it becomes older, more mature, convergence will occur.⁷⁹

But perhaps the inability to shake the Great Collision and to know what to do in its aftermath is that only one of the two fully realized positions, classical theism, or empirical based science exclusive of religious awe and/or deities, is, and can be, true. While this is not to say that science and religion are inherently or always at odds with each other, the story presented in the formulation of absurdity would only logically allow for one or the other, as both are making claims about reality-as-it-really is, and they are presented as mutually exclusive. Theology, and its rejection, run deep.

At the risk of overreaching, indulge me in appropriating what is probably the greatest gentle insult of all time to summarize what either the scientific reductionist or the classical theist may reply: apart from agreement with reality, religious non-theism is at any rate a grand intellectual achievement.⁸⁰

■ Conclusion

The world is absurd. Or rather: “I said that the world is absurd, but I was too hasty. This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart.”⁸¹ The surprising facts of fine-tuning have yielded the world, from one perspective, less irrational, less silent. But to what answer does fine-tuning necessarily point about meaning and purpose and God and so forth? No single answer, at least not necessarily. That is what Hume gets right in his famous Is/Ought: there is no logically necessary connection between the empirical and the normative. But that does not mean that there is no meaning or that there is no reasonable, practically understandable, and rhetorically deliberative (set of) answer(s).⁸² So what, then, is the best explanation of the vast, expansive, contingent,

⁷⁹ In the same way that Parfit is hopeful about a similar trajectory of convergence for non-religious ethics. See Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984) 454. For an historically informed critique, on stadiad consciousness, of the “superiority of our current outlook over other earlier forms of understanding,” which is “variously understood as the story of Progress, or Reason and Freedom, or Civilization or Decency or Human Rights; or as the coming to maturity of a nation or culture,” see Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 289, 716.

⁸⁰ Hermann Weyl, working on his theory of gauge symmetry, had a temporary notion concluding that a moving clock could not keep time. Einstein wrote him a letter about it, quipping, “except for the agreement with reality, [your theory] is in any case a grand intellectual achievement.” See Albert Einstein, “To Hermann Weyl (8 April 1918),” in *The Berlin Years: Correspondence 1918* (ed. Robert Schulmann et al.; vol. 8B of *The Collected Papers of Albert Einstein*; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998) 523, <http://einsteinpapers.press.princeton.edu/vol8-trans/551>.

⁸¹ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 21.

⁸² One way to read reconciliation efforts after the Great Collision is as a rescue mission: the rescuing of value from its supposed annihilation by scientific methods and paradigms—in short, from cold impersonal universes by those of us with deep concern for value (which is to say, for example, justice, graciousness, goodness). On the idea of reigniting the sphere of value in a moral

and yet precise, cosmos that fits with the Existentially Nagging Intuitions about meaning and beauty and God? Religious non-theism is trying to earn a seat at the table to debate the merits of its version of a reconciliation story, offering a new take on the ethics of belief in a secular age, and it would be a mistake to ignore it.

While it is easy enough to take either scientific reductionism or classical theism as a dominant answer, it is worth highlighting that there are indeed significant and meaningful ways in which science and religion are precisely not the non-overlapping magisteria Gould claims they are,⁸³ as the work of, e.g., McGrath or Fleischacker argues.⁸⁴ The underlying caution here is to avoid arbitrarily selecting the most (subjectively or politically) appealing parts of each narrative, the scientific reductionist narrative and the classical theistic narrative, as if there is no dependence of the truth of certain claims, or dependence of the understanding of certain theories, on the narratives within which they are originally embedded. Theological defenders and critics alike have work to do in articulating clearly these contextual narratives.

In conclusion, I have discussed what I am calling a certain kind of postsecular position of religious non-theism, analyzing its primary motivations and certain antinomies. More interdisciplinary inquiry is needed into religious non-theism and contemporary attempts at reconciliation after the Great Collision. For now, is this kind of religious non-theism, then, philosophically mistaken and a conceptual nowhere-land populated by friends lacking the fortitude to commit to either classical theism or scientific reductionism?⁸⁵ Or is it the rhetorical carving of a new position, a rhetoric of the possible, in birthing pains? In either version, we can read religious non-theism as a unique and novel attempt to navigate what Taylor calls “the spiritual hungers and tensions of secular modernity.”⁸⁶

realistic project in just such a way—something on which we are in full agreement—see Dworkin, *Justice for Hedgehogs*, 417.

⁸³ Stephen Jay Gould, “Nonoverlapping Magisteria,” *Natural History* 106 (1997) 16–22.

⁸⁴ McGrath, *Fine-Tuned Universe*; Fleischacker, *Divine Teaching*. A Pew study on science and religion, despite assuming a fixity in either of those terms and practices, revealed an interesting set of statistics about the polled portion of the American populace: while 59% of respondents believe that science and religion are often in conflict, only 30% believed that science often conflicts with their own religious beliefs. Perhaps most noteworthy is that the least religious respondents held the strongest beliefs about science and religion being in conflict (73%). This could be explained by ignorance on the part of the science-committed about what certain religions actually claim, or by ignorance on the part of the religiously-committed about their own beliefs or ignorance about certain scientific implications. It could also be the case that the scientifically-committed better understand the implications of their beliefs. See Cary Funk and Becka A. Alper, “Religion and Science,” *Pew Research Center*, 22 October 2015, http://www.pewinternet.org/files/2015/10/PI_2015-10-22_religion-and-science_FINAL.pdf

⁸⁵ The theme of courage seems to run through much classical theistic, existentialist, and scientific reductionist literature—the courage to face reality, to leap, bite the bullet, and so forth. It is perhaps curious that I have made this charge of its being absent for the religious non-theist, when the point might just be that such courageousness gets us into trouble.

⁸⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 680.

Religious non-theism responds to the question of meaninglessness and the possibility of reconciliation after the Great Collision in a way that supposedly avoids the pitfalls of classical theism or scientific reductionism. Religious non-theism means to be, potentially, a spiritualization of exclusive humanism, a sensible otherness, or perhaps a scientifically attuned, non-anthropomorphic, non-theistic religion. I have begun to document and analyze the narrative and given causes for serious worry about this story as we struggle together to formulate an ethics of belief in a secular age, trying to find shape and direction for meaningful human lives, cosmically significant or not.