

# **The Bankruptcy of Knowledge**

Everett DePangher  
SCTR 128R  
June 15, 2006

---

*And for all you know  
This could be  
The difference between what you need  
And what you wanna be*

*For all that you know  
This is what you wanna be*

Matchbox 20

---

## **Table of Contents**

Part 1: Fundamentalism	1
Part 2: Relativism	6
Part 3: Atheism	11
Epilogue	16

## Part 1

# Fundamentalism

---

*Just what we all need  
More lies about a world that  
Never was and never will be*

*You don't know how you've betrayed me  
And somehow you've got everybody fooled*

*I know the truth now  
I know who you are  
And I don't love you anymore*

*You're not real and you can't save me*

Evanesence

---

Justin sighed and leaned his head against the shoulder harness. The van continued to bounce along the rural highway that clearly needed a repaving. He looked out the window and saw more of the same: light brown dirt as far as the eye could see dotted by brush and an occasional shack or barbwire fence. The emptiness outside of the van, he thought, was nicely matching the emptiness inside his own heart. He was now on his church's high school group's annual beach weekend just as he had been the year before. But a lot had changed since last year.

He had been active in this church for his entire life. A suburban, middleclass church that preached a standard Evangelical theology, it had mostly been a great experience for him. Yet now in the last year he had stopped fitting in. It was still hard to describe. As he had gone through his biology class during junior year, he had quickly accepted evolution after seeing his instructor's professionalism and the many slideshows depicting the comparable anatomy of humans and other animals. By that point, he had read most of the Bible and was finding it decreasingly reliable with each new chapter. The genocide after genocide that it celebrated had also wearied him, and he had subconsciously begun distancing himself from these so-called holy texts.

Finally, one day—while he was just sitting in his room talking to a high school group friend about the church—it had suddenly dawned on him: he did not believe in his church's teaching anymore. It had been a horrible feeling. He was now an outcast from his friends. Their whole way of life that had once bonded him to them was now a point of nauseating division. As things turned out, his friendships had almost immediately begun dieing a show death. Still, all of his friends were at the church, and he had not wanted just to abandon them before he graduated. He had decided to stay with them for these remaining months. Hopefully he would soon go away to college, but in the interim there was nothing else to do: superficial relationships were better than none at all. That was why he had signed up for this trip again.

Justin now found himself sitting in the middle bench next to a junior he did not know very well and who had been soundly asleep with her face buried in a pillow ever since the caravan had left the Jack in the Box an hour before. Three sophomore girls were in the back talking over the Christian rock music they were playing over the stereo. He had never really spoken individually to any of them before, but the group was small enough so that everyone could feel some comradery with everyone else. He had jumped into their conversation a few times so far to be friendly, mostly talking about the trip itself (they had not gone on it before while he had) and also their favorite musical artists. In front of him was the driver, Clyde, a member of the staff in his late twenties. He was not one of Justin's closest friends on the staff, but they had spoken together many times. Daniel, another student whom Justin only knew a bit, was in the passenger seat. Over the music, Clyde and Daniel had been talking for a good half hour. Unfortunately, most of Justin's closer friends had ended up in another vehicle in the caravan.

He sighed again. He felt alone, as alone as if he were just standing out there by some tumbleweed. It was amazing to him that he had been able to keep his theological differences subconscious through junior year. They were constantly apparent to him now. The fact that his friends believed that precisely two armadillos were on Noah's ark—and he did not—drove him mad, mad for having to be different from them and mad for having friends who were, as he now thought, so backward in this regard. The worst part was that it was so awkward talking to people about it. He was rarely called upon in the group actually to do something that he could not, for out of politeness his conscience still let him bow his head during prayer and listen to sermons. He had talked to some friends about his changes, but for one reason or another they had not paid much attention. They did not want to hear bad news.

He started listening more intently to Clyde and Daniel's conversation over the music. They had mostly been talking about the trip itself so far, but now Daniel was beginning to talk about the upcoming summer. A senior like Justin, Daniel too would soon be leaving high school. The question before Daniel now, as Justin listened, was whether he should offer to staff a missionary camp for three weeks in August.

"It sounded like a lot of fun," Daniel was saying, "there are a lot of kids there, and the other counselors seem cool from what I've heard. I could see myself doing it."

"Sure," Clyde said, quickly glancing at Daniel before returning his eyes to the road. "That would be great. I helped out at a place sort of like that for summers during college. It always had a great counseling staff."

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure that I'll give them a call when we get back. I think my mom is going to want me at home...."

"Well, you know moms." They both laughed.

"Yeah, it should work out fine. I just need to pray about it to see what the Lord wants me to do."

Justin winced. Even back when he had been a Christian, he had never understood that sort of statement, but somehow it had always been very popular among his friends. Justin had lost count of the times that someone had either said privately or publicly that God had caused something to happen or showed some truth. There was a lot of, "God was really moving in the team today." Or, "I was running late, but God so totally let the traffic be light." Or, "God really showed me that I need to start doing this." And on and on and on. Was God really giving them good ideas, or preventing their cars from breaking down, or giving them job opportunities? Justin greatly doubted it. It was not that God could not do those things but simply that God had become a throwaway line to

attach to anything that happened. It also showed, as Justin now realized, a real arrogance. Saying that you knew what God was doing in a particular area was a claim exactly on par with the prophets in the Hebrew tradition who had revealed God's will and actions. Justin laughed to himself. Knowing that God had delayed Aunt Suzy from calling until after you had gotten out of the shower was only slightly less impressive than knowing that he would allow Israel to be invaded.

Clyde, of course, disagreed. "Always a good thing to do," he replied to Daniel. The conversation about the camp continued and eventually turned to sports.

This was not Justin's forte, so he returned to looking out the window. They drove past a cow. He had not seen one yet. He sighed to himself again and started listening to the music. A Stephen Curtis Chapman song, a favorite of his, was now playing. "I'm diving in, I'm going deep..." Justin began to smile a bit. The song celebrated the assertive Christian life, one that put itself in communion with God amidst life's challenges. "In over my head I want to be, caught in the rush, lost in the flow, in over my head I want to go..." Justin remembered back to what a staff member had once said: being a Christian is the hardest thing that anyone could do. In a way, he still thought that that was true. Living a mature life of loving family, acting responsibly, being altruistic to neighbor and stranger, and thinking introspectively is, he still believed, a very admirable life and a very hard one.

He looked around the car and reflected that, to the best he knew, there was no drug or alcohol user present, nor was there anyone who had gotten in serious trouble or come from a bad family. Christians were proud of this sort of result, and rightfully so. They were, in a very real sense, the remnant—the seven thousand who had never bowed to Baal on the American high school campus. Of course, it was not full sectarianism. His friends looked much like everyone else. The boys liked to drive over the speed limit but would never drink to do so. The girls were virgins running around in spaghetti straps. They were an odd mixture of various influences, a sort of liberated conservatism.

Of course, there were bad exceptions to this. The parents of a kid in the car right behind them had recently gotten a divorce, and a couple of other kids in a van farther back had some substance abuse issues. Yet this group was where they escaped from all that. This was the wholesome part of their lives whether they realized it yet or not. That is what gave the group its appeal. Justin smiled again. It still appealed to him, after all. That was part of the reason why he was still here. He probably still looked very much like a Christian, he thought. He was not in any trouble, and he still tried to be loving and self-aware of his own sin.

The van ran through some potholes. After bouncing around for a few seconds, Justin leaned his head back against the window. The fact that he was still similar but did not fit in made everything even more painful. Why did they insist on being really into Moses and all that? Over and over, he had heard people say that without the Bible, the world would turn to sin and destruction. But that did not even make sense. He granted them that without a love for God, they might become depraved. Even though he himself was now undecided about God, he understood the argument that the only way for this world to make sense was for it to be created with order and meaning. Fine. That was a viable notion. But they went far beyond that. They said that you not only had to believe in God but also that David killed Goliath and that Daniel was in the lion's den. You even had to believe that Habakkuk wrote Habakkuk. But why did that matter? How significant of a difference was there between someone who believed both in God and that Habakkuk had written Habakkuk and someone who believed in God but that Habakkuk had never

existed? Justin knew that the rebuttal would be (beyond simply laughing at the question) that knowing that God exists is not enough. You also had to know his teaching, and since he had chosen to give it through Habakkuk, you better listen to Habakkuk. Justin looked around the car again. The biggest problem with this argument was that probably no one in this car—except maybe Clyde and, ironically, Justin himself—had ever even read Habakkuk, yet they seemed to live happy lives nonetheless. Nevertheless, if Justin announced right now that he did not believe in the inerrancy of Habakkuk, people would think he had committed some profound error. There was something grotesque in this irony.

He realized that he was starting to stew, so he turned his mind to other things. A new song had come on that he had never heard. The girls behind him seemed to like it, so he turned to ask who the artist was. He did not recognize the name that they gave, so he started asking about the band. After answering, the girls started talking about their school. He turned back around but kept listening. Eventually some girl came up who had been caught cheating on a test and was now going to have to retake biology.

“Isn’t she a Christian?” one asked after awhile.

“No, a Catholic,” said another. Justin winced again. For reasons that he still did not fully understand, his church had long maintained a strand of anti-Roman Catholic bigotry. He had heard people be called “a Catholic, not a Christian” countless times, and it was only in his own recent struggles that he had started to see just how deeply destructive this was. Of course, he had lived in the Reformation tradition for too long not to see some major flaws in Roman Catholicism, but still it had always been intuitive to him that Protestants and Roman Catholics were subgroups within Christianity. The two groups obviously did disagree but not *that* much, and they were both under enough attack from society to need each other as allies. Yet for some reason, his church did not want to recognize this. It was not even that Roman Catholicism were denounced in sermons (the pastors actually hardly mentioned it), but it was that comments like this one were always popping up in the congregation. As a result, apparently, now only Protestant and not Roman Catholic Christianity taught that cheating was bad.

The conversation, as Justin expected, continued without recognizing the girl’s patently wrong comment. “Well,” said another, “maybe we could get her to come to church sometime. I know her pretty well, and she seems pretty open about that sort of thing.”

“Maybe. I mean, I’m not sure if she’d do it.” An explanation then emerged regarding how her closest friends were part of some popular group, and she was too busy to do anything else. A debate arose about whether she was on yearbook and, if so, how time consuming it was. The conversation trailed off to other things.

The van hit a few more potholes. Justin shifted in his seat—he was getting stiff from all the sitting. He looked over at his bench neighbor. Her face remained smashed into the pillow. He envied her a bit: things would be more pleasant if he was asleep right now. He leaned back against the shoulder harness with a vague hope of trying to sleep himself although he knew that he would almost certainly be awake for the remainder of the trip. He started reflecting on the girls’ comments about bringing this person to church. They were actually being pretty bold about it, he realized. Although the church’s community always encouraged evangelism, only some students actually did it. If these girls went ahead with it (and even more so if they got the girl to come), they would have put out some real effort. If they got the person to stay and become involved—which only

happened ever so often—they would legitimately deserve some credit for caring about the person and sticking with her.

Still, Justin knew, there was also something disturbing about how evangelism was practiced here. Behind evangelistic efforts was a clear notion that only Christians (by which was often meant Evangelical Protestants) went to Heaven while everyone else went to Hell. Justin had been increasingly realizing just how simultaneously easy and nonsensical this was to believe. It is, of course, very comforting to convince yourself that you and your buddies will be going to heaven. It is also easy to believe that entire continents of people are damned: the idea is concrete enough to give a soft ego boost but far too big, distant, and abstract to compel a proper sense of tragedy.

He was also strongly inclined to think that they were wrong. This was mostly because they never really defined their terms. It is nice to say that only Christians go to heaven, but what is a Christian? Even among those who define Christianity more broadly than simply Evangelical Protestantism, there is remarkable ambiguity. What about the unborn or the mentally ill? There seems to be an exception for them. When you ask about Jews living before Jesus, of course the answer is that they too are saved (or at least the ones who were messianic and somehow believed that the Anselmian propitiation theory was clearly laid out in the Old Testament). But even this answer is not particularly clarifying. When, for instance, did properly orthodox but Diaspora Jews begin being damned for not being Christians? Was it when Jesus was born? When he died? What happened if a Godly Jew, living in the Diaspora and thus unaware of Jesus, died during the day between the crucifixion and the resurrection? Would that Jew be saved while an identically Godly Jew dieing the next day be damned? Of course, Justin knew, most people would answer by backing away and saying that only God really knows these things. Yet Justin found this answer inadequate. After all, it was not he but they who claimed to know who was saved and who was damned. If they suddenly became agnostic about the unborn, mentally ill, and Jews dieing up to some unclear point, why not also be agnostic about the crassly labeled “righteous pagan”? Maybe his friends could think up good answers to these questions, but no one around him seemed interested in doing so.

And that was the problem with so much of the thinking around here: there was little that was fully thought through. Of course there are a lot of problems with society today. Justin knew full well that America was seeing a lot of divorce, abortion, alcohol and drug abuse, and apathy. But is inventing Noah, Moses, and Elijah a proper answer? Justin slid down a bit in his chair. He really did have honest, serious questions, and he would prefer to get answers from people who were truly trying to live good lives and build a community. But critically developed answers seemed to be in short supply around here.

He started shaking his head a bit. When he had finally realized his differences with the church, he had started doing some reading. He had not even done that much—only a few websites, a few articles, and part of a couple of books—before he had raised questions that had never been discussed at his church. Looking back out at the fields of nothingness outside, he knew that it was these very questions and their inability to answer them that made him so lonely in the group. When he had learned about Q, pseudepigraphy, and other religions, he had entered into a world about which his friends simply did not know or care. They lived piously and boldly, but they did so by thinking so small and ignoring so much. Justin sighed yet again. The van bounced over a few more potholes. Well, at least the beach should be fun. It would be a bit fake, though.

## Part 2

# Relativism

---

*Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor sexual perverts, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.*

*I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.... if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ.... If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins... [and] we are of all men most to be pitied.*

Paul

---

Leticia almost looked like an alien creature. At very least, she looked nonhuman. Her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes watery, wide open, and blank. As she rounded the corner, she pitched forward a bit. Justin was startled and for some weird reason the mental image of a person falling through a gallows's trapdoor came to his mind. She then leaned to the side and corrected herself. With a small crowd behind her now emerging around the corner, she walked past Justin and was soon gone.

Justin swallowed hard, dug his hands deeper into his pockets, lowered his head a bit, rounded the corner in the opposite direction, and trudged deeper into the night. He was now finishing his freshman year in college and had decided to go for a walk before going to bed on this Friday night. As he had been learning for the last year, the very act of taking a walk on a Friday was stunningly countercultural. He was about a block away from campus, and all of his senses—except, significantly, his sense of taste—were ringing with the night's intense presence. He heard shouting coming from a couple of different directions, and music throbbed faintly in the distance at some house party. Periodically, people in small groups would pass by him, either going in the other direction or crossing a street perpendicular to him. The houses around him were usually dark, so he could tell from the window lights which were having parties.

It was about midnight now, but the sky was clear with a few stars shining through the suburban lights. A mild breeze also bathed his face and calmed him a bit. But it was the smell that was most powerful. The smell of party was seared into his consciousness by now: alcohol slightly accentuated by cigarette smoke, body odor, dirty houses, and the outdoors. He had tried to judge that smell objectively a few times before, and in each case he had concluded that his emotions were not playing any tricks on him. It was a nasty smell. The litter all around rounded out the ambiance. He regularly came across a new shattered bottle or Dixie cup in either the gutter or someone's lawn. This trash had always

struck him as perfect icons of college. Even more disturbingly, he thought that a majority of the student body would agree—and would do so with pride. Justin kept on walking. He came to another Dixie cup. Usually he walked around or over them as if they were items from another world best left alone. This time, though, he was out of sorts. He crushed it under his foot.

Justin felt confused and angry. He had been in college now for almost an entire academic year, which he had begun optimistic that he would get a chance to make new friends, see a change of scenery, and move to a place where he could thrive more than he had at his now former church. He had chosen a supposedly Roman Catholic liberal arts university. That it was Christian had not worried him much since he knew that the University allowed academic freedom and was religiously unrestrictive even while having an organized Christian presence on campus. As the year began, he had expected to get along well with one group or another on campus.

But that had never really happened. The sense of healthy community that he had known at his old church was totally absent. The great majority of students saw alcohol as the center of their social existence, and they had little interest in meaningful relationships. He had become convinced that—despite the very strong opinion of the student body to the contrary—alcohol was not a social catalyst but a tool of social isolation. People did not form community at parties. He had learned that within minutes of walking into his very first one: compact human bodies smashed into a backyard or, even worse, the hallways of a house, trying to dance or yelling at each other over the incredibly loud music while being enveloped in the ever present smell. They were remarkable experiences. He smiled to himself a bit. The only time in his entire life that his glasses had fogged while not near a shower was a few months ago when he had simply walked into the basement of a house having a party. There had just been too many bodies and too much alcohol in a small and unventilated area.

As for his religious reflections, he had not found much help thus far. Liberal Christianity, at least as it manifested itself here, had proven very disappointing. For some reason, at the end of high school he had developed a romanticized view of it. Liberal Christians had avoided the Habakkuk and soteriology traps that the conservatives had set for themselves while otherwise remaining Christocentric, ethically-conservative, and community-based—essentially Evangelicals minus the bad stuff. This had been totally wrong. Many of the so-called liberal Christians here could hardly be called Christians at all.

Justin rounded a street corner onto a block that was even darker than the last one. Two male students, both screaming either at each other or collectively at something else, were walking parallel to him on the other side of the street. Justin glanced at them and then looked back down at the ground. He focused on stepping within the lines on the sidewalk. In his years with the Evangelicals, Justin reflected, he had always accepted the notion that Christianity was rooted in the resurrection. He remembered that back when he was twelve he had made very sure that he believed in it before he was baptized. On the morning of the ceremony—conducted in a swimming pool in someone's backyard—he had lay in bed and mentally reviewed everything one last time. The apostles had all affirmed that the resurrection had happened. They had passionately gone out and evangelized. They had even risked their lives. What motive would they have had to lie under those circumstances? Nothing. The resurrection had happened. He was a Christian, and he could say so.

Justin shook his head. He had been naïve. As he had since learned, there were other issues. The names traditionally attributed to the Gospels' authors—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—were probably wrong. The Gospels were anonymous and gave few clues about their authors. Plus many of the Epistles were or at least might be pseudonymous. Thus the evidentiary basis for the resurrection, although still there, was weaker than he had thought, and other questions (could psychological trauma have made the disciples hallucinate?) were now circling in his mind. Yet despite this growing skepticism, he still accepted the basic definitions: a Christian believed in the resurrection (and a few other things like monotheism and the afterlife—the precise definition of “Christian,” Justin knew, was open to some limited debate); a non-Christian was not rooted in the resurrection. Justin himself was undecided, so he was a non-Christian. This was not a normative statement; it was a technical one. He was a non-Christian just like he was 5’10” or brown haired.

Justin was growing tired of his game of staying in the sidewalk squares. They were not matching his pace. He put one foot down deliberately on a line and resumed his regular walk. The problem with this place was that a lot of people did not respect these definitions. Many students associated themselves with the Christian community on campus without particularly wanting actually to be a Christian in a definitional sense. Of course, there were some true Christians among them. He vividly remembered once talking to a female student who had a neo-hippie look to her. She rejected some points of conservative theology, but when it came to him asking about the disciples hallucinating through psychological trauma, she had quickly cut him off in her Midwestern drawl with a “That’s crap.” That was true Christianity right there. Unfortunately, such moments were too rare, and most students who had any interest at all associated themselves with the now slavishly cliché “I’m spiritual but not religious.” Most disturbingly of all, some people who said this then turned around and attended a mass or service as full participants. What the justification for this was, Justin never knew. Maybe they did it precisely because it was unjustified.

All this, Justin now saw, was part of a lack of seriousness and commitment among the students. That lack manifested itself most acutely in the situation around him at this moment. Before he had come here, he had been incredibly unprepared for this whole lifestyle. He still did not know what to make of it. It was almost an inversion of morality. Human agency was not valued but rather the extent to which one was out of control. It was not memories but lack of memories that people cherished. Showing love to others was secondary to feeling good oneself. These were the values of this university.

Justin walked by a house that had an old couch sitting on its lawn and one window boarded up. Of course, the administration and faculty would never say that hedonism was the University’s central value. They promoted (or, rather, send out e-mails and held guest lectures saying) that, as their incredibly overused phrase put it, “social justice” was central to the University’s calling. Yet the facts on the ground spoke for themselves. Ironically, the University’s first act of social justice should have been to the neighbors living on these streets through which Justin was walking right now, but everyone knew that they did not even like the student body. People who feed the poor by day and urinate on your lawn by night are not particularly impressive.

Justin thought about Leticia. She was actually a pretty active member of the student body, a leader in a variety of politically liberal causes and the president of a civil rights club. By day, she was in fact a model student from the administration and faculty’s perspective. That right there was another problem with this University. People’s conduct

only ran skin deep. Commitment to ethics, or at very least to the avoidance of the appearance of impropriety, had been pathetically reduced to a notion of how corporations should behave. The idea that the students themselves should also live a certain way was largely foreign. It involved too much commitment, too much dogma. People would rather be open and tolerant. If that meant accepting someone vomiting and urinating while passed out, so be it. That was that person's choice, and we should respect that.

What was most ironic of all was that the one time that students could hold true beliefs was in condemning people who were themselves non-tolerant. This created an odd disparity: the students' own conduct was always a matter of personal choice while others out in the world were wrong being dogmatic. A homemaker who had never been divorced and kept her kids out of trouble was condemned for her heteronormative views while a student who engaged in extensive promiscuity was merely discovering himself if he also allowed his homosexual friends do the same. Governments that took military action were destructive while the hospitalizations, fights, and property damage that regularly occurred on weekends were simply part of having a good time. Conservative politicians who misrepresented information were liars while students who brazenly mischaracterized their activities to their parents were just becoming independent. The inconsistency was amazing.

Of course, there were a minority of liberal students who saw this and tried to live both a progressive and righteous life, but they seemed outnumbered and overrun. Some faculty and administrators spoke against it too, but most either outright supported this behavior or were willing to accept the hypocrisy as long as the students remained active on the left.

The whole situation showed Justin that his moving on to college had not really given him any answers. He had simply replaced a make-believe world with a shallow real one. Even if he did embrace it, what was he supposed to do next? The liberalism of the student body—precisely because it was mostly an external set of activist activities and not an introspective, holistic lifestyle—left one with very minimal guidance. It proudly exported its social activism by sending students into the community and around the world, but did it really have anything to offer? If the University was internally healthy, it could at least advertise its internal governance and community as exemplary for others. But it could not.

Justin walked through some shattered glass. It was ironic that this University was fairly antiwar while it itself spent its weekends in a state of nature. Justin shook his head a bit. In a way, he actually feared for the people out there whom the University was helping. The University was molding them in its own image. Once they had been liberated from economic oppression, they too would be free to drink and divorce. If the triumph of capitalism would be a McDonald's in every city in the world, the triumph of this University's liberalism would be the universal availability of Budweiser or Coors and, of course, the economic empowerment of the poor to buy them.

Justin came to the end of another block. It was almost 1:00—probably time to turn around. He breathed in the air. It was cool and refreshing. It was quieter here. He did not appear to be near a party at the moment. He turned at the corner. He felt awkward being seen walking alone on the same street twice, so he would return on the parallel street the next block down. He was always self-conscious about taking walks at night. Anyone who walks quietly and alone would be seen as out of place, and he did not really want to draw attention to himself. He buried his hands deeper in his pockets. Thankfully,

Leticia was the only person he knew whom he had seen so far. This was all a rather sad state of affairs, he thought.

Even his most abstract religious questions had made only minimal progress. The theological justifications here seemed weak. Many of the pseudo-Christians were actually Deism. They believed in God, a God of tolerance and economic equality. There was something seductively appealing about this, and it reminded him a lot of a time back in high school when he had tried Deism. The left, to their credit, had seen the right go bankrupt in their vastly excessive claims of empirical knowledge about God. As conservative Christianity had drowned when Noah's ark sank under the criticism of historical and scientific scholarship, many on the left had worked toward a non-empirical justification for God.

Justin moved out of the way to avoid a staggering couple walking towards him. The problem, Justin had decided, was that for liberal Christianity to be justified, we needed some reason to believe in God. Although some still held that Jesus and the resurrection could be that reason, Jesus was mostly an inconvenience for the left. He had actually lived and had done things, so he was far too empirical for them. Jesus may fall like a house of cards as Noah had. But what remained? Justin was still confused about what the liberal justification for God was. It actually appeared to be something like the justification of his old high school friends. They could feel God. He was in their heart. So on and so on. But this seemed shallow to Justin. The left thought that reason had failed to comprehend the supernatural, so they had turned to something that they celebrated as a purer rationale. Yet from all Justin could see, it was just emotion.

The left within Christianity, just like the right, deeply wanted God to exist, so they convinced themselves that he did. While conservatives were both historically and theologically dogmatic, the liberals were just theologically so. Justin hardly found this to be an improvement. Of course, the other difference was that while the conservatives believed that God was real, the liberals only found God to be real *for them*—polytheists, monists, and such were still right in some weird sense. On this point, Justin thought, the right was actually superior to the left. At least they thought they actually knew something. Justin knew something too. He knew that he was undecided—undecided not between the bankrupt lifestyles of conservative and liberal Christians but about what the real, greater truth was. Justin walked by another raucous house. Oh yes, he knew another thing too. A relativistic paradise seemed a lot like hell.

## Part 3

# Atheism

---

*All we do crumbles to the ground  
Though we refuse to see  
Dust in the wind  
All we are is dust in the wind*

Kansas

---

“Oh, how is it going, Justin?” Professor Charlton smiled as he looked up from his computer and rotated his desk chair to face the door.

Justin walked in, slung off his backpack, and took a seat in a guest chair across from the Professor’s workstation. “I’m good. Classes are busy as usual.”

Justin was now in his senior year in college and about to graduate. He had wanted to come to Professor Charlton’s office hours for a few weeks now but had not yet had the chance. Charlton was a religious studies professor and an atheist. Justin was currently in his class on medieval religion, and while the Professor had remained fairly neutral and had only brought up his personal views a couple of times, Justin could still feel that his passion came out more acutely when he was discussing critics of religion. However, since the class was not primarily about theology, Justin had had only a couple of opportunities to bring up atheism. Now he wanted to discuss it more thoroughly.

“I have a question for you. I wanted to ask you about atheism.” Justin waited to gauge his response. Justin liked Charlton. He was middle-aged and pretty well published, and he took an interest in his students. He had a reputation for being dry, but Justin had found him fine so far and thought he actually had a pretty good sense of humor. He usually dressed casually and today was wearing jeans and a tennis shirt. His black hair was beginning to recede, and he wore glasses that were slightly too big.

The Professor laughed. “What about it?”

“Well, I have never really heard it be fully defended, so I was wondering if you could do that for me.”

“Wow. Ok, let’s see what I can do,” he said modestly.

“You are an atheist, right?” Justin was sure, but he wanted the Professor to say so to get the conversation started.

Charlton laughed. “Yeah,” he said, shrugging his shoulders a bit as if to acknowledge that it was not his usual role to articulate his own views.

Justin decided to lay out fully why he was asking. “I guess I’m asking because I am trying to figure out what to believe myself...”

The Professor laughed even harder at this. “Ah, but aren’t we supposed to let you all figure these things out for yourselves?”

Justin laughed too. “Well, you know. I just wanted you to give the argument. I have spent my whole life hearing arguments in favor of the supernatural. I am leaning towards agnosticism now, but I wanted to hear what the argument for atheism was.” This was Justin’s shorthand way of saying that ever since that day in high school when he had

realized that he did not agree with his old church anymore, Justin had never found any belief system that satisfied him. He had looked into a couple of other religions, Hinduism and Islam, but he found in them a problem that was recurring in his search: almost every religious tradition went beyond what it could justify. It would inevitably adopt some tenet—either about another dimension, or some miraculous event here on earth, or its members’ supernatural abilities—that was just brute speculation. They would sometimes cite some amorphous concept like “faith” or “spiritual connection,” but it seemed to Justin that these claims usually boiled down to the religious community just wanting to believe in something and thus finding an arbitrary and meaningless justification for doing so.

Since a few years had come and gone now and Justin had seen how strong a cross-religious theme these arbitrary assertions were, he had begun to think that he may never find an answer. Maybe his indecision was becoming permanent. If this was true, then he was moving toward agnosticism. He was somewhat surprised at this, for back at the end of high school he had not particularly expected to go in this direction. Yet the longer he had been undecided, the more the indecision had become not a road leading to a spiritual home—as he had thought—but the home itself. It had to be. He had lived in indecision for long enough now that he needed to make himself comfortable in it.

Nevertheless, atheism remained on the table, and he wanted to deal with it. Back in high school he had rejected it, and he still found it unconvincing. However, he wanted to put it to the test. Part of the test would be this conversation. “And,” Justin concluded, “I was wondering if you could address some of my questions about it.”

“All right. Well, if you have questions, ask them, and we’ll see what happens.”

“Ok. Well, let me run this by you: from the way I see it, agnosticism and atheism are opposites with respect to the amount of knowledge that they claim we have. Agnosticism roots itself in the idea that we do not know that much about the supernatural; atheism, on the other hand, in the idea that we know a great deal, specifically that the supernatural does not exist. Does that sound right?”

“I think so. I wonder, though, if the agnostic is not also saying much the same thing. They are both, after all, saying that we do not have a reason for believing in God.”

“Well, that’s true. But isn’t there a big difference between disbelieving in something and believing that you do not know about it?”

“Why?” Charlton leaned forward a bit. He was now getting excited about the conversation. “They both require humanity to exist free and on its own. Neither believes in God—that’s the important part.”

This was good, Justin thought. He was being pushed as he had hoped. He took a second to glance around the office. Charlton had a couple of bookshelves filled with scholarly volumes, but the walls were also interspersed with photographs of his wife, two kids, and his mountain biking trips.

“All right,” Justin answered. “Well, let me ask you this. There are all these reports of paranormal events out there. Missionaries report going through security checkpoints with contraband that is inexplicably undetected. There are reported healings and mystical experiences and all that. Plus there are those people in history, like Jesus and the Prophet Muhammad, who have paranormal events very closely associated with them. How does the atheist handle all that?”

“Well, look, nature has the ability to explain an awful lot. Some of this is mere coincidence or the cause of an aggravated mental state, and even if there are some things that we cannot explain yet, we may well learn to in the future. Just think of everything

that we used to understand was supernaturally caused: whether, disease, astronomical events. The more science has grown, the more it has explained.”

“But what about the security guards at those checkpoints. That cannot be from some impersonal force. Are you saying that there may be a psychic connection that blocks them from noticing the missionary?”

“Oh, I suppose you could explain it psychically. Maybe there is another explanation too. The point is that if such an event occurs, we do not need to rush off and make up a God just to explain it. There are other options.”

Another student knocked on the open door. She apparently was an advisee of his who needed to pick up some paperwork. Charlton called her in and had her sit in another guest chair. After introducing her to Justin, he searched through a filing cabinet for a minute and then started signing some forms.

Justin adjusted himself in the chair and then began to think. He was not fully impressed by the Professor’s argument. Over the last few years, Justin had increasingly seen a conflict in rejecting the supernatural completely. Religious communities had explained far too much through supernatural causes, and science had found natural explanations for much of it. Nevertheless, there were still some events that did in fact defy natural explanation. Some of these healings, visitations, miracles, and revelations sounded incredibly odd. Even the infamous resurrection, which had stood at the center of so much of his own life, still baffled him.

To accommodate for this, he had distinguished between knowledge of the divine through reason and through revelation. Reason was what the Deists did. They developed some sort of abstract rationale for believing in the supernatural. Religious communities did something similar when they claimed a vague mystical connection to the supernatural (such as his old friends’ “I know God exists because he is working in my heart”). None of this, Justin thought, was justified or justifiable. From our vantage point as mere humans, we cannot simply prove the supernatural, nor can we cite our emotional desire for it as evidence either.

However, revelation was entirely different. If there were unexplained phenomena out there, they could be the intervention of the supernatural into this world. If the supernatural was trying to communicate with us, perhaps we could listen and pick something up. That, Justin now felt, was our potential avenue for knowledge of the supernatural. Still, he knew that we would need to be careful in this. Rash over acceptance was what had turned conservative Christianity into a fossil clinging with all its strength to Adam, Eve, and Noah. Even so, inquiry into supernatural events might lead us somewhere. Of course, Justin also understood where Professor Charlton was coming from on the issue. Maybe they did all have natural causes. Still, Justin was not yet convinced that that was the case.

When the advisee had left, Justin explained his position to the Professor as best as he could, but Charlton remained unconvinced. In his view, we could safely say that everything had a natural explanation.

Justin then turned to his biggest question about atheism. “Ok, so there is this whole argument about whether an atheist can live morally.”

The Professor laughed again. Justin guessed that as an atheist, Charlton had probably been called immoral, degenerate, and so forth enough times that it was now a joke for him. Justin also knew that such accusations were clearly misplaced in this case. Charlton seemed to have a nice family and to hold himself to fairly conservative ethical

standards. In class—much to Justin’s delight—he had even been willing to criticize the hedonism in the student body.

Justin continued. “All right, so under a basic monotheistic argument, we are created entities in a broader created framework. Thus because we were born automatically into that framework, we have a natural relation and obligation to other things and people. Now, as I am understanding it, an atheist thinks—or at least can think, there are multiple views as I understand it—that while none of this is true, we can nevertheless build civil society on principles that maximize happiness and prosperity for everyone. Did I get that right?”

“That sounds pretty good. The big deal here is that we have existence and freedom, and that is valuable because it lets us make of life what we want. Life need not be depressing for the atheist at all. It is a tremendous adventure. As far as society goes, we are communal animals. We’ve proven that over and over. So we do want to work together for our common good.”

“But if morality comes from the value of our own existence and a situation came along in which acting for communal benefit was not advantageous, why should a person not harm others?”

“Well, that person won’t get away with it long term. Look, if I walked out of the room for a minute and you, say, stole my computer right now, yes, you could get away with it if you had it out of here before I got back. But think of what would happen. You would never be able to use it because people would notice that you magically had a new computer on the same day that mine was stolen. They would put two and two together, so you would have to sell it, probably at a low price. Also, security would go up around here, and that would minimize everyone’s efficiency. Right? We can get lost in the analogy, but the point is that it is very rare that a person could land in a vacuum where utter selfishness was feasible.”

“But what if a guy had a family and obligations to a bunch of people, and then he simply said, ‘I’m going to go off and live in a shack. I will plant a vegetable garden and take care of myself. I won’t be causing you much harm, but I am terminating my relationships with all of you. Have a nice life.’ Wouldn’t that be immoral?”

“Well, that depends a lot on the context. If his family and friends have not been good to him, maybe he should become independent of them. If he is happy, why would he leave? Very few people actually do that sort of thing, you know.”

“Well, they run off and had midlife crises....”

The Professor laughed and shook his head in scorn at the idea. “A lot of religious people do that too.”

“But does the atheist think that that person is right?”

“Well, no. Of course not. That person will end up living a very shallow life.”

The conversation continued in circles around this issue for awhile further. Justin remained unconvinced that an atheist possessed the philosophical mechanisms to say that people who behaved (by conventional standards) immorally was actually wrong. Even if we usually do benefit from each other and thus immoral behavior does often demonstrably diminish the quality of our lives, there have to be some cases in which someone leads a very pleasant life at the great expense of others. Surely that person is leading a philosophically shallow life, but what makes that *wrong* to the atheist?

The conversation continued on this subject, and he knew that he was taking up a good chunk of the Professor’s time now. He brought the conversation to a close with a final point, one that he had been thinking about for some time.

“All right, let me ask you this one last thing. So even if I am unconvinced by this atheistic moral framework, I think I can build a good agnostic one. I still think there is something to the whole monotheistic argument about our design being key to understanding morality, and I think that I can work it out so that the agnostic can still have that model too. Ok, so the agnostic does not know anything about the supernatural but has to be content with merely living here on Earth without knowing. However, one thing that we can know is that there are these principles that help society run better—call it the natural law or whatever. We should love each other, work enough to produce food, but not so much that we become workaholics, and so on. We know all this without any special insight into the supernatural. So can’t we build a morally not on the notion that we are created but that we *might* be, and that the natural law is the parameter within which we were made to exist (if we were made)? Under that thinking, we would still need to be altruistic to others even when it is not in our interest to do so (because other people may be a valuable, created entity). In essence, we would behave morally but would do so without justification in a larger context because we would already know that we know nothing about that larger context. What do you think?”

The Professor smiled and with a note of humor in his voice said, “Nice try.” Well, at least Justin had thought that it was a good idea, but then he was not the one with the Ph.D. He got up and started putting on his backpack. They talked for another minute about what would be happening in class next week, and then Justin departed. He liked Professor Charlton and had found the discussion helpful. Still, Justin thought as he walked down the hallway, there was still a lot more for him to figure out.

# Epilogue

---

*I can't stand to fly  
I'm not that naïve  
Men weren't meant to ride  
With clouds between their knees*

Superman

Five for Fighting

---

We really do not know much about the supernatural. For as far back as we can remember, humanity has tried to explain its own existence—how did it get here, what brought it here, where it is going, and what it should do with itself until it arrives. Humanity has often answered these questions by saying that it is part of a grander scheme caused, directed, and supervised by the supernatural. Thus the religions arose to explain this supernatural framework and how society should organize itself in accordance with it. This continued for thousands of years until technology and communications improved and a stunning truth became increasingly clear: the world's many cultures had in their respective isolations developed fundamentally different and contradictory models of what this supernatural construct was. The religions were in total disagreement.

To dull the violent clash that these religions sometimes had upon meeting each other, some stressed cross-cultural tolerance and respect. However, those who did so failed to appreciate how significant it was that the religions had not attained a global consensus on the questions so dear to our hearts. We as a species did not have the answers that we sought, and no celebration of tolerance could fill that vacuum.

Still others argued that this lack of consensus showed that the supernatural was merely a figment of our imagination, but in doing so they merely added their voices to the already muddled chorus of voices claiming to have knowledge of the supernatural, in their case claiming that it did not exist.

This has been the story of these three view points—of those who held to their original religion; those who sought global peace and emphasized the value of all religions; and those who concluded that the very notion of the supernatural was bankrupt. However, this has also been the story of a fourth way, a way analogized well in the song quoted above. In it, a Clark Kent more human than in other depictions is acutely aware of his own emotional limitations and considers that the great deeds expected of him go beyond his true calling. Physically, he can fly up into the clouds and perform as Superman, but he also feels the tug of his human fallibility, reminding him that the rest of humanity is tied to the ground and thus both incapable of and also not called to such greatness. Is he to be the great super-human capable of incredible feats or the regular man bound but yet content within his own limitations?

Humanity faces that tension too. Clark Kent, of course, *was* able to fly, so the question for him was whether it was his duty and calling to do so. However, perhaps we

are trying to fly even when we are fundamentally incapable of it in the first place. Perhaps our attempts to rise to the supernatural and explain it have failed because we humans simply cannot reach that high. Perhaps, as we have been haunted by these fundamental questions of meaning, we were arrogant to think that we could answer them. Perhaps the supernatural—if it exists—is out of our reach. Perhaps we were not meant to fly.

Such a view is agnosticism, an alternative to the other three perspectives (which for shorthand I have called fundamentalism, relativism, and atheism). The question is whether agnosticism can provide us with a more sufficient answer than the other views. Humanity as much as ever wants the fundamental issues of life resolved, and great pain and suffering comes when they are unsatisfactory or incorrect. Will training ourselves to be content without answers actually work? Well, perhaps the better question is whether any other view has succeeded. None can make that claim.

Finally, I wish to distinguish between two types of agnosticism. The first says categorically that we as humans cannot know about the supernatural. This is a problem because in saying this one is thereby actually claiming knowledge of the supernatural, namely that it is incapable of conclusively revealing itself to us. This is an overreach. Believing this also opens the agnostic to a legitimate line of attack from the fundamentalist. Despite the many and contradictory constructions of the supernatural offered by the different fundamentalists, each one can still claim that it possesses conclusive evidence that justifies its own construction while the other groups are wrong. To say without inquiry that a given group does not possess conclusive evidence is to affirm that the supernatural did not give them that evidence, an arbitrary assertion eerily similar to the fundamentalists' own arguments.

A second and far stronger approach is to root one's agnosticism in one's personal experience. Whether the supernatural can reveal itself and whether it actually has done so to other people are both questions that themselves deserve the agnostic answer: *I do not know*. If such revelation has occurred, I do not believe that it has happened to *me*. Yet perhaps it will happen to me tomorrow, or maybe in ten years someone will convince me that they have received revelation. Again, I do not know. One of the great advantages to this approach to agnosticism is that it keeps dialogue open with the fundamentalists. It allows us to hear their case rather than dismiss them off hand. Of course, as I say this, some will wince at the idea of continuing to hear out some of their ridiculous claims of proof via the historical Adam or Noah or someone else who clearly never existed (or, perhaps even worse, by reading the tea leaves in a Tsunami or Ariel Sharon's health). However, while for some reason many of them do seem inclined to make their worst arguments their main arguments, there are others who are more legitimate. Reported paranormal phenomena through history present us with puzzles that we cannot simply ignore. Perhaps we can explain them all naturally, but that cannot be our assumption in advance. For instance, some more liberal Christians who are committed to historical Jesus studies through critical historical methods claim that the historical record does contain sufficient justification for believing in instances of divine intervention. We may prove them wrong, but we cannot ignore them and others like them. Like a good agnostic, let us begin by saying that we do not know whether we cannot know. Maybe some birds will come down and tell us what life is like up there. Until then we accept that we cannot fly.