Tom Wade
Confronting the Unknown

I

In his essay "On One of Caesar's Sayings," Montaigne quotes Julius Caesar as saying "we trust more, and fear more violently, things to us unseen, hidden, and unknown." Reading it, I was nonplussed: What does he mean? In the essay from which this quote came, Montaigne laments humankind's inability to be satisfied even when our wishes are fulfilled. As he says, "Our appetite is irresolute and uncertain: it does not know how to keep anything or enjoy anything in the right way." I'll not argue with Montaigne. An element of what he's contending is reflected in the common adage, "the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence," which has proven a durable though unreliable tenet. Yet I perceive other meanings in Caesar's quote.

What gets my attention are the words "trust" and "fear more violently." When used with "unknown," they imply to me the metaphysical, the realm beyond our senses. Those who are religious trust in a god or gods, who though not visible or tangible offer solace and justice. Divine authority is manifest in mercy and in power that elicits fear if we don't abide by its edicts. But not everyone associates the unknown with beings who can control our lives. Those who don't believe cite insufficient evidence these gods are an actuality, but even if they are real, there are inconsistencies between what we see of their handiwork and their purported character. Nevertheless, we've survived as a species against long odds; hence our existence could entail otherworldly help, a point some thinkers support and others find implausible.

The impetus for the origin of the universe is a scientific unknown. But outside the realm of observation and experimentation there are explanations for its birth, one of which, the cosmological argument, holds there is a supreme being. Its proponents may believe science can account for what happens in the universe— the Big Bang and evolution, for instance, could be acceptable—but they have a non-scientific theory for what brought the universe into being. Their case starts with the premise the world's reality is contingent: It doesn't have to exist in the first place; its existence is explained by something other than itself; and it will eventually come to an end. Further, they hold there are grounds for why the universe exists. Possible causes are either contingent beings or a non-contingent, known as a necessary, being. Other contingent beings, on their own, are an inadequate justification, so there must be a necessary being. Hence, it follows a necessary being—"a being such that if it exist cannot not-exist"—is a reality and the creator of our world. For a number of theologians "necessary being" is synonymous with "supreme being" or "God."

The above assertion strikes me as declaring there is a necessary being (i.e., God) because its existence is possible. I realize I'm being simplistic but, in my view, this position isn't a product of logic as much as hopeful conviction. My reading of Jim Holt, in his search for an answer to why there is something rather than nothing, is the rationale underlying this argument could cut the other way—it could be used to hold there is no supreme being or God. Why? With the necessary being concept, notwith-

standing the requisite a necessary being "cannot not exist," we still have to ask who or what created it. In reply, a proponent of the cosmological argument could contend something can be created from nothing, a notion the religious can support. However, a disconcerting note for the pious is the force derived from this theory doesn't have to possess the qualities of their God—omnipotence, omniscience and beneficence, among others. But the cosmological argument isn't the only rationale for a supernatural creator.

Some philosophers, notably Richard Swinburne, hold that, although it is highly unlikely, the existence of God is a more probable explanation for the world's presence than any other. In his opinion, a prior cause case—such as the cosmological argument— is deductively invalid. Swinburne asserts, as do many philosophers attempting to decipher unexplained phenomena, the plausible option is the simplest. The cosmos is intricate; God is simple. And while the likelihood of either one coming into existence is very low, the probability there is a God exceeds the probability of there being a cosmos. Thus, because God's existence is more likely than the universe's, Swinburne infers there is a God, whose presence explains the beginnings of the universe. Yet while this line of reasoning can be deployed to maintain there is a deity, as with the cosmological argument, it doesn't resolve questions about the deity's attributes, its moral rectitude.

The God of Judaism, Christianity and Islam is all knowing, all powerful and utterly good. Still we observe suffering and sin. Can these contradictory facts be reconciled? There are skeptics who say God's existence is incongruent with earthly malevolence. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy gives a summary of their position, known as the problem of evil. It enounces if there is a God, then this entity is "omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect"; if omnipotent, God can end evil; if omniscient, God knows there is evil; if morally perfect, God desires to eliminate any evil. Evil is a reality. If evil and God are present, then God lacks the power to eliminate evil, is unaware of it, or doesn't have the desire to end it. Thus, God does not exist.

Of course, the above deduction doesn't rule out the possibility there is a god that is not omnipotent or not omniscient or not morally perfect or has none of these features. These possibilities are also consistent with the cosmological argument and Swinburne's position, which are solely concerned with the creation of the universe, not the creator's characteristics. The upshot is if there is a God, given the ubiquitous suffering we endure, it does not have the qualities we are taught it has. Yet, besides the suffering, we also see goodness and happiness, which brings about a disquieting predicament for believers: If there is a supernatural entity, the odds are it is indifferent and morally neutral, or worse.

II

Nonetheless, those who believe in one God reap the emotional benefits arising from having confidence in a trustworthy, beneficent power who guides their behavior. The effect is enormous. When encountering difficulty or doubt, for instance, they get direction from the Ten Commandments, godly revelation, doctrine, or teachings prescribing moral choices.

They are sustained in their struggles by belonging to a community of the faithful who are secure in knowing what they believe is the truth. To counter hardship and loss that can defeat a person, theists tap the psychological strength gained from creedal assurances, enabling them to overcome adversity, and for some even extreme adversity. They are embedded in a cultural cocoon bestowing protection and certainty.

Yet Abrahamic religions, established millennia ago, encounter opposing values and views stemming from philosophy and science. Discord intensifies as employment of reason expands. Belief in a supreme being isn't a rational notion, it's a function of faith predicated on trust and fear emanating from God (rather than the "unknown" in Caesar's quote). In pre-scientific settings, an all-powerful creator explains what was incomprehensible—lightning, the sun, drought and other natural phenomena, along with our mental states, the loss of loved ones and a myriad of unaccountable events. What's more, God's power was manifest in one's fate and fortune: He determined who was lucky, who was not. Despite their general acceptance of scientific evidence, remnants of these earlier convictions remain in the prayers and practices of modern congregants, who continue a quest to understand occurrences beyond their control.

I grew up in a religious home; my psyche (spirit to my parents) formed and sustained for twenty years by Catholicism. It gave me stability, a sense that in the long run harmony will prevail allowing the good to overcome the bad; and it gave me a biased picture of reality. As long as my surroundings supported it, I was secure. But when I left home I met people whose ideas didn't include divine influences, though they weren't doubters as much as uninterested in churches and priests and worship. Christianity is built on premises (like the necessary cause) that, without reflection, appear sensible. However, if a premise can't withstand a challenge—such as providing proof of God's goodness—its churchly edifice becomes a house of cards, collapsing in the mildest breeze. When I went out on my own, I lost my mooring to the justifications for a supreme being and found it made no difference in what is important and worthwhile. I didn't lose my faith from intellectualizing; I lost my faith from socializing.

III

While their assumptions can be contested, a question remains: Are the devoted happy? In his Aeon essay, "The Meanings of Life," Roy Baumeister reports survey responses showing a key feature of happiness is a focus on the present. However, the monotheistic traditions direct their followers to the eternal future, an afterlife in which they are rewarded for their suffering and goodness. While the religious don't dismiss happiness in this life, its import is secondary, but they know their existence after death will be euphoric. Nevertheless, the guarantee of life everlasting isn't a guarantee of joy everlasting; after all there is hell as well as heaven. While believers are confident of immortality, heaven's bounties are uncertain because they must be earned. Its endless beatitude is contingent on how one behaves, which is serious business for adherents both of the fundamentalist sects and the mainstream confessions.

During recent decades, we in Western societies have observed a decline

in God's followers. A good number of the added doubters were raised in religious homes, and though they're liberated from dogma, it will come at a price. The pious can allay existential anxiety through the certainty of their beliefs, but those who have abandoned their beliefs no longer have the consolations granted by an otherworldly power and the prospect of a hereafter. Nor do they enjoy the benefit of having hard moral choices made for them by divine "authority." Nevertheless, atheists have other avenues for attending to the complexities of personal and social issues. Not being restricted by supernatural doctrine, they can employ scientific findings and ratiocination when working on problems and making decisions. Science and logic, however, can't assist us with all, or every aspect of, the events, urges and circumstances with which we need to deal. For instance, many facets of our innermost selves remain unknown and we are left guessing at the causes of certain feelings and behaviors such as altruism and love. Too, in the realms of metaphysics and physics there are phenomena the religious can easily interpret that remain inexplicable "brute facts" for nonbelievers. One unanswerable query: If the cosmos wasn't created by the Almighty or some intelligent force, it becomes "an achingly pointless accident," so how can there be meaning in our lives if our world is pointless? Camus called this pointlessness the "absurd." And he surmises that when in an absurd environment full of mindless suffering the sensible person will seek escape by committing suicide. Though suicide is an option, it is not one widely advocated by those without faith.

Contrary to Camus's somber assessment, Ronald Dworkin maintained an atheist can be "religious," giving Einstein as an example of a person who didn't believe in God yet found "what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty." Dworkin posits a religion not dependent on God, founded on two assumptions. First, our lives have objective value, which obliges us to be ethically responsible and committed to "living well." Second, the natural world has inherent worth, beauty and transcendence. Thus a "religious attitude" consists of esteem for human life and nature.

IV

Besides happiness, Baumeister and his colleagues asked survey respondents how they view meaning. For them it is based on the connection of past, present and future, which I interpret as occurrences or ideas that are bigger than us. Further, Baumeister's research showed meaning isn't engendered by material well-being but instead comes from serving others and usually involves struggle. There are devout worshippers who express their dedication and find meaning by serving others—exemplified by volunteers tutoring children or building houses for the poor—and in struggle—working to stop unjust wars or to rectify inequality. While through their faith, all adherents are assured of happiness and meaning in the hereafter, some will find it in their worldly pursuits, as well. Secularists, however, have no divine assurances. But if, as Dworkin advocates, they are able to take pleasure in nature's offerings, family, friendship, work or study, they can discover purpose and contentment.

"Meaning" as presented in Baumeister's survey—good works and the concomitant difficulties—has been my lodestar since adolescence,

yet it was transitory, its comings and goings outside my control, and the intermittence was discouraging. For instance, the visits I made as a hospice volunteer to dying patients at first stirred excitement and a sense of self-worth, but after a month or so the routine became tiring and stale, though at times I would feel inspired again, the high spirits were brief. It was a riddle I couldn't resolve until I came across musings by David Brooks. Brooks claims today's culture "has grown inarticulate about inner life." Meaningfulness, he says, is grounded in emotion; hence being personal and ephemeral, it lacks content. Though I can't draw a clear-cut conclusion, I'd speculate that nonbelievers are prone to this feelgood state because seeking happiness and meaning offsets the absence of inviolable truths and a hereafter. But that's not to say a person holding to creedal doctrines can't be preoccupied with mawkish meaningfulness. Rather than pursuing ephemeral bliss, Brooks argues we should be espousing "moral systems . . . based on a balance of intellectual rigor and aroused moral sentiments." The point he makes applies to the God-fearing as well as the godless: One must embrace a set of precepts, in a sincere, disciplined manner.

V

Since I like to think I'm a person who accounts for reality in a reasoned fashion, joining a communion would be dishonest. While god-centered sects provide answers to queries about the origins of the universe and humankind, promise an immortal soul and have among their followers those who speak to justice, they also hold illogical tenets and engage in inhumane practices. In the past and to this day, a number of the faithful persecute minorities and pagans; many use Scripture to rationalize war and oppress women. Notwithstanding the consolation it could bring, I don't indulge in supernatural convictions. I admit, however, to a nonanalytical basis for my position that gives me a sense I'm on the right path. It's the bandwagon effect: There are thinkers, averring opinions I respect on metaphysical, social and ethical issues, who are, in a quiet and non-assertive fashion, atheists such as Baruch Spinoza, Derek Parfitt, John Rawls, and a host of others. Identifying with them bolsters my irreligious sentiments.

Despite my skepticism, I wish to make the most of my time on Earth: to be open to sensation and feelings and intellectual stimulus. In this respect, the beliefs limned by Dworkin have appeal. His viewpoint rings true in experiences in which I've benefitted from human goodness, participated in loving relationships, and savored the allure and sublimity of nature. In a similar vein, even though happiness as described by Baumeister is not a priority of mine (an effect of a churchly upbringing?), I know the felicity of satisfying moments.

Nonetheless, while I credit religion without God for bringing harmony to the way I live, it can only carry me so far. Although elevated, it's a perception I have as an individual. It alone doesn't instill a motive to devote time and energy to social justice; what I used to call being involved in meaningful activities. Convinced that meaning as we ordinarily think of it is a vacuous abstraction, I must adopt more precise ideas about my personal aims. In spite of Caesar's claim about the sway of "things. . . unseen, hidden, and unknown," I don't have to let them dictate my sentiments

and behavior. In striving to enhance social fairness I'll need guidance that transcends emotional highs, which will come from embracing, in the Brooks vocabulary, moral standards and structures supporting justice.