

Without the Net of Providence:
Atheism and the Human Adventure
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At first glance, it may appear that those who believe in divine providence have a happier lot and are much less prone to despair than those who reject god and divine providence altogether. That alone may seem to give us good reason to prefer belief to non-belief. I shall argue in this essay that there is almost nothing to be said for either the view that belief in providence provides invincible armor against despair or for the view that the atheist who rejects providence need surrender to a paralyzing despair.

1. Against Providence

Many theists evidently do take comfort in the belief that there exists a god who both loves humanity and who guarantees, through divine providence, that human history will ultimately culminate in an unqualifiedly good outcome. Such comfort is not entirely unreasonable. If history is guided by divine providence, then whatever apparent ills may befall us along the way, we may be assured that moral darkness will not ultimately triumph over light and that the innocent are not destined to suffer injustice at the hands of their persecutors to eternity. To be sure, the long run of history may be a very long run indeed. Already, entire epochs have known far more oppression than liberty, far more war than peace, far more famine than plenty. Of the roughly 106 billion human beings who have so far lived on the earth, it seems a fair estimate that an extraordinary percentage have lived in circumstances of considerable material, political, and/or spiritual deprivation. Not even the providential theist can be certain that many more millennia of moral darkness do not still await us. To acknowledge this is to acknowledge that the belief in divine providence need not be a sufficient guard against deep despair about the likely course of any particular span of human history or the course of any particular human life. Indeed, to the extent that the theist concedes, and even insists upon, the inscrutability to human reason of god's divine plan, it would seem to follow that nothing merely in the world as we cognize and experience it can directly ground or justify a belief in providence. Nor is it merely a matter of the currently unfinished state of the human drama. For all we know, the culmination of god's divine plan may come only in the great hereafter, once human history has run its entire earthly course. But just because the culmination of god's plan might take place outside of history, there is no reason to suppose that even if we could survey in one glance the entire earthly course of the human

adventure, we would ipso facto have sufficient grounds for the providential hypothesis.

Advocates of the providential hypothesis typically do not, of course, profess to believe it on entirely rational grounds. The belief in providence involves a faith that is supposed to transcend mere reason. But it would be hasty to conclude, for that reason alone, that there can be no rational grounds for adopting the providential hypothesis. Suppose we execute a Pascalian gestalt shift and consider not the “upstream” evidential support, or lack thereof, for the providential hypothesis, but the “downstream” practical consequences of accepting or rejecting it. Suppose we ask not what we rationally ought to believe, but how, all things considered, we should rationally prefer to live. The answer cannot be that we should always rationally prefer to live a life guided by beliefs that are rationally grounded in the evidence or even that we should always prefer that our beliefs be true rather than false. Some beliefs, even if they are both true and rationally grounded in the evidence, may serve only to undermine our deepest, most identity-constituting projects and thus to undermine our very being in the world. Whatever else beliefs are, they are instruments for guiding and supporting our practical projects. If holding a belief would be instrumental to the success of a practical project, then that by itself may give us sufficient reason, in particular sufficient *practical* reason, for adopting that belief, even if that belief is false or unwarranted by the evidence. There is, to be sure, a legitimate fear that by considering the instrumental value of holding a belief rational grounds for adopting it, we may slide off into rationalizing self-deception or willful neglect of the evidence. Think here of the spouse who, desperate to save a marriage, is willfully blind to all evidence of betrayal. Though belief in the straying spouse’s fidelity may be instrumental to keeping the marriage alive, self-deception of this sort seems hardly to be a cognitive virtue.

We need not, however, go all the way to endorsing the practical rationality of self-deception to appreciate that we can have reasons for believing, even where epistemic warrant of the purest sort falters. Sometimes good evidence is simply not to be had. We may believe, and be rational in believing, nonetheless. A thoroughgoing sceptic might well insist that the very conviction that we believe without warrant should itself undercut the rationality of believing. In believing, after all, we stake out commitments with respect to how things are. If we are convinced that we merely believe and do not know or that we believe groundlessly, we must thereby acknowledge that things may not be as we have committed ourselves to their being. But then, the sceptic will ask, in what sense can we be rational in believing? The answer rests on the necessity of acting, of getting on with our practical projects. For creatures like ourselves belief, or belief-like commitment, is often required to carry us “all the way to action.” If we did not have to act, we might remain in a state of suspended judgment. But the exigencies of life often require us to act and so to place our doxastic bets on how things are in the world. We do sometimes hedge our bets when the evidence provides us less than full warrant. Sometimes, for example, belief is accompanied by a preparedness to find out that things are otherwise than we have committed ourselves to their being. But we should not suppose that this preparedness entails that we are not really committed, that we do not really believe, but only surmise or suppose or provisionally accept without making a flat-out commitment.

If we look at matters this way, it seems perfectly reasonable to wonder whether the exigencies of life as a human being on earth might not give us a kind of practical ground for placing our doxastic bets with divine providence, despite the fact that the world as we experience it provides no decisive epistemic warrant for that

hypothesis and provides ample grounds for doubting it. Just because the providentialist already believes in providence, she may contemplate the entire course of human history and even the ultimate course of her own or another's life, with a confidence that no atheist can muster. Even in her most despairing moments, the providentialist may face all the ills that may come her way with equanimity and a quiet confidence. And that equanimity and confidence may lend the providentialist an inevitable determination and steadfastness in the face of what might otherwise be a paralyzing despair. Armed with the belief that history is directed by divine providence, she need only content herself with playing the part that it has been given to her to play. The rest is in the hands of one whose wisdom is superior to her own.

Many theists, including those who believe in providence, believe in a freedom of the will so complete that we may simply choose not to cooperate with the divine plan. Such thoroughgoing freedom is no doubt metaphysically problematic on its own terms. But let us grant the possibility for the sake of the present argument. A question immediately arises. If our freedom is so thoroughgoing that we may introduce departures from god's plan into the created universe, does it not follow that god's entire plan is hostage to our choices? But if that is so, it is hard to see how the providential hypothesis can provide the promised invincible armor against a potentially paralyzing despair. If we, with our merely finite wills and intellects, may divert creation from its divinely decreed course, then it would seem to follow that history is not after all guaranteed to culminate in a perfectly good outcome. Only if the outcome of history is guaranteed by god in a way that is beyond our capacity to undermine can the providential hypothesis even purport to provide invincible armor against despair.

I do not mean to suggest that the providentialist must view human will and agency as entirely irrelevant to the course of history. One can imagine a universe in which god keeps history on course by making compensating adjustments for departures from the plan that would otherwise be brought about through the exercise of human will. In effect, god creates a universe that simultaneously meets his own providential aims and responds to the free exercise of human will. God may "intervene" in this way either "in" time or "all at once" from outside of time. On either way of looking at matters, god is to be understood as being prepared to "respond" to all contingencies. The Christian Bible, with its long narrative of the fall from Eden, centuries of alienation, and ultimate reconciliation through the Christ, is plausibly understood as telling the story of a god who is in constant interaction with humankind over the long course of human history, directing all toward the good in a way that respects the ultimate freedom of humanity to choose its own destiny.

I will resist the temptation to plumb the alluring metaphysical depths of a universe in which human will and agency compete with divine providence to determine the course of human history. However exactly we resolve or attempt to resolve our metaphysical puzzlement about the workings of providence, it should be clear, I think, that no real security can be purchased with the coin of providence in the first place. God has a plan for the universe. Assuming our freedom, we may either cooperate with that plan or fail to cooperate with it. But if god foresees and prepares for all contingencies, then history will culminate in a state of god's intending, no matter our choices. Consequently, it is hard to see how it *matters* to god's plan what *we* do. Our freedom and our choices are entirely irrelevant to the outcome of history. Because god is prepared for all contingencies, god evidently has no particular need that we perform any particular action, no particular need that we make one choice

rather than another. Rather than supporting and validating our practical projects, the belief in divine providence would seem to undercut the very significance of them.

The theist may respond that what matters to god is not the particular outcome – which, after all, god himself guarantees – but the particular *path* that history must travel in order to reach that outcome. Perhaps that is why god rewards those who “cooperate” with his plans and condemns those who fail to do so. But just why god should punish those who fail in this way to cooperate with his plans is itself something of a mystery. His plans are, after all, inscrutable to us, by the theist own concession. It is not as though we can discern through our ordinary cognitive means *which* path is the path that will put us in solidarity with god’s will. Moreover, whatever path we choose, we can do nothing that can possibly interfere with the ultimate fulfillment of god’s divine plan. The universe will be as god wills it to be, whatever we do. To be sure, in Dante’s *Inferno* we read that the gates of Hell were forged with divine love, rather than with divine wrath. Dante’s thought, I think, is that god wills, from an abundance of love, that we choose freely at least our own destinies, whatever we will that they be. If we choose for ourselves eternal damnation, then it is an expression of god’s love that we in fact endure such damnation. So here is at least one place in god’s creation in which our own choices make an absolute difference, according to the theist. But that reply still leaves it a mystery just what it is to “side” with god, to “cooperate” with his inscrutable plan. That mystery is only deepened when we add the Socratic question of whether anyone would knowingly choose her own eternal damnation.

2. Against Secular Stand-ins for Providence

I have been arguing that it is neither epistemically nor practically rational to take solace either for oneself or for humanity at large in the providential hypothesis. But where does the rejection of providence leave us? How shall we live in a material universe “guided” by nothing but the unyielding laws of blind nature? What confidence can we have in a social world founded on nothing but the finite and all too fallible wisdom of humankind? With what degree of hope shall we contemplate the long sweep of human history or, even, the course of our own lives? I ask these questions as one who lives in circumstances of relative plenty, freedom, and security, as a member of a privileged elite in a powerful, wealthy and consequential nation. I do not ask them from the gulag or the concentration camp or on the field of battle in some fruitless, forlorn war. Still, they strike me with an urgency borne of a deep sense of the contingency and fragility of all merely human arrangements. The prestige and influence of my consequential and powerful nation will someday diminish as surely as did that of Rome or the Soviet Union. The elite to which I belong may be supplanted by another, hostile, perhaps, to all that I value. My own individual life projects may run aground and come to naught. My deepest loves may end in betrayal and recrimination. I may endure loss upon loss of those I hold most dear. If, in the face of such real possibilities, I contemplate the future, confident only that there is no god who cares for and guides human history toward the good and no god who has loving concern for my own being in the world, what but a blind and blithe trust that the good will out, that my projects will not come to naught, that my loves will endure, could shield me against a paralyzing despair?

Many take comfort in one or another secular vision of the historical inevitability of a broadly encompassing moral community. Some see history as culminating in the realization of the manifest destiny of one or more nation states, or

in the transnational triumph of global capitalism or in the world-wide revolution of the proletariat or in the triumph of reason or of sympathy and fellow feeling. To live one's life under the banner of some such vision is to imagine a life spent advancing the cause of the morally right and winning side. Living under such a banner is no doubt as tempting for some atheists as the providential hypothesis is for some theists. But nothing in the world as we cognize and experience it could convince a clear-eyed person that there is any guarantee. From where we now stand, it seems no more likely that history will culminate in thoroughgoing moral community and fellow feeling than that history will culminate in moral fragmentation and mutual enmity. Indeed, the long sweep of human history bears ample witness to the darkness that has been spread under the banner of one totalizing fantasy or another of an all-encompassing moral community. Empire, subjugation and exploitation of every variety, even genocide and murder on massive scales have been "justified" by appeal to such visions.

I do not mean to gainsay the very possibility of our ever achieving a global moral community in which the dignity of all is equally affirmed and respected. In fact, I take the building of such a community to be an urgent project, a project that largely defines the grandest hopes of the liberal, secular modernity to which I find in myself a deep allegiance. But the hope of an all-encompassing and all-affirming moral community is merely a project, a project barely begun and far from completion. Between where we now stand and where we may hope to end, there lies a yawning chasm. And nothing in our experience of the world warrants great confidence in our collective ability to cross that chasm without falling into fragmentation and discord. My point here is that all totalizing secular fantasies heretofore on offer about the inevitable moral dynamic of human history are no more grounded in the facts of human life and history as we experience them than are the transcendental fantasies of the providentialist. Indeed, to the extent that such secular fantasies merely represent an attempt to find an immanent and secular stand in for providence and divine command, this is not an entirely surprising outcome. The world as we cognize and experience it no more warrants belief in a grand secular narrative about the inevitable moral dynamic of the human adventure than it warrants belief in the proposition that history is providentially guided by a supremely good and loving being.

3. Creation of Value Ex Nihilo

I intend these last remarks to be sobering. But it would be to misunderstand the true nature and source of value, meaning, and morality to take them as a counsel of despair. Many religious believers maintain that only divine fiat could possibly be the source of universal or absolute morality and objective value. They believe with Dostoyevsky's Ivan Karamazov that if god is dead, then everything is permitted. But if everything is permitted, then there really is no distinction at all between what is permitted and what is forbidden, no distinction between right and wrong. In the absence of god, we live in a universe utterly devoid of meaning, purpose, and value. Correlatively, if we acknowledge that there really and truly are moral absolutes and objective value in the universe, it is supposed to follow immediately that we must also acknowledge the god who is their sole possible source and author. We simply cannot have it both ways, the theist maintains. Either we view our lives and the universe as governed by moral absolutes and suffused with objective value -- and thereby acknowledge the god who is the author of all value and all morality -- or we deny the

existence of god, and resign ourselves to lives utterly devoid of meaning and value, in a universe governed by no moral law.

This supposed dichotomy is a false one. The universe might possibly contain both absolute morality and objective value, even if there is no god to decree what these shall be. To say this is not to deny that settling just what these might be and just where they might come from in the absence of a divine author is a philosophically daunting task. Philosophers have devoted considerable energy and great ingenuity to just that daunting task. I will not, however, undertake a review of the prodigious fruits of those efforts here. The mistake to which I intend to draw attention is not the mistake of denying even the possibility that absolute morality and objective value might somehow subsist in a universe not authored by any supreme being. The mistake on which I focus is more fundamental and occurs one step earlier in the chain of reasoning we have just been considering. Theists may be particularly prone to it, but they are not alone in making it. The mistake I have in mind is the mistake of supposing that if the universe contains nothing of objective value and no moral absolutes, then human life must, as a consequence, be utterly devoid of meaning and purpose.

Suppose we grant that we live in a finite, merely material universe, containing at its core nothing of intrinsic or objective value, governed by no purpose, and no universal or absolute moral law. Still, whatever else the universe does or does not contain, *we* exist in it and through it. And we are creatures who value things. We do not *find* or *discover* value in the universe, as if values were antecedently present in the universe, independently of anything that we do or are. Value and meaning are not hidden in some deep reaches of the order of things, waiting merely to be uncovered by the inquiring human mind. *We create* values. And we create them more or less *ex nihilo*. We do so simply by engaging in the merely human and entirely natural activity of *taking* things to matter *to us*. By *taking* things to matter, we thereby *make* them matter. We make them really and truly matter, at least to ourselves

Now there is not and need not be anything either within or without the merely material universe to “vindicate” our merely human valuing – not god, not a transcendental realm of objective goodness, not a realm of natural rights, not a system of categorically binding commandments of reason. We may cry out with longing and despair to the cold uncaring universe to embrace our values, to vindicate our *right* to value what we value. But we will hear only silence in return. The universe is mute, devoid of all power to either affirm or deny the worth we place on either ourselves or on others. So be it. We do not matter *to* the universe. Still, we matter to *ourselves* and sometimes to others who sometimes matter to us in return. And that is all the mattering that it is worth our while to concern ourselves about.

It is often claimed that if value and morality are nothing but merely human creations, grounded in nothing but merely contingent facts about what we merely happen to value, we are left with a relativism that is destructive of all morality and values. What matters to one may fail to matter to others. If there is no external authority to which we may appeal to decide what is really and truly worthy of valuing, then each person becomes the creator and arbiter of her own values. Such an outcome, it is often thought, is really the end of all morality and of all mattering, rather than a vindication of them. But moral relativism in fact reflects deep and inescapable facts about the human situation. Though those facts may be unsettling to many of our most cherished dreams, if we are to confront the challenges that human beings collectively face in a clear eyed and life-affirming manner, we must accept and not recoil from them.

Each person is indeed the ultimate creator and arbiter of her own values. But it does not follow that one's own values and normative lights are destined to remain always and only lights of one's own, as if each of us were always destined to be and remain a moral community of one. Human beings collectively have the capacity to constitute moral communities, communities held together by systems of reciprocal obligations and commitments. Indeed, there has never been a time when human beings did not find themselves distributed in moral communities of varying scope and complexity. Our ancient progenitors formed themselves into normative communities encompassing only small circles, drawn around kin, clan or tribe. The rough general trend of human history has been haltingly toward normative communities of ever increasing scope so much so that we are now able to conceive of something barely dreamt of in many ages of the past -- the real possibility of a global moral community.

But let neither the rough general trend of history nor our current capacity to imagine alternative realities tempt one into the conclusion that an all encompassing moral community is either rationally or historically inevitable. If we survey the long sweep of human history, we find that one, then another moral community has taken its stand, flourished for awhile, then run aground. To be sure, though moral communities are one and all equally creations of human beings, they are not, from our current point of view, all created equal. Some moral communities have been instrumental to what we, here and now, by our own lights, take to be progress. Some have not been. Moral communities are often contested and always contestable. What one moral community regards as moral progress, another may regard as moral decline. There is no privileged stance, fixed once and for all, outside of history and culture, from which we may determine by which normative lights the "truth" is to be measured in such disputes. This is not to deny that we typically do measure by our own current lights. And we take ourselves to be justified in so doing. But as dear as our own lights may be to us, they enjoy no antecedent privilege except that of being our own. There may come a time when our own lights are entirely extinguished and when we are viewed by those who follow as having undertaken merely one more failed experiment in collective existence. With what right shall we then protest the verdict of history?

If each person is really an ultimate arbiter of values and a moral authority entirely onto herself, how have we escaped the Dostoyevskyan predicament that everything is permitted and nothing forbidden? The answer is already ready to hand. Though there is no external normative authority, either in heaven or on earth, that supercedes our own, there is genuine normative authority in the world -- the authority that lies within each of us. Each fully mature, intact, and reflective human being has the power to bind herself to norms and thereby to commit herself to living up to those norms in ways that may even entitle others to hold her to the relevant norms. Once one has committed oneself, it is no longer the case that everything is permitted and nothing forbidden. Some things are forbidden to one simply because one forbids them to oneself.

There is an intricate story to tell about the normative authority that lies within each one of us. That story explains the source and nature of our normative powers, articulates the factors that constrain and govern the exercise of that authority, and outlines the consequences for individual and social life that flow from that exercise. I lack the space to tell that story in detail here. But I need to tell a small bit of the story, if I am to be able say why the rejection of providence and of every totalizing secular stand in for providence need not lead to a paralyzing despair.

I begin by saying a bit more about what it takes for a person to be really and truly bound by a norm. The key lies with our powers of rational reflection. An agent is rationally bound by a norm N , if she would endorse N upon culminated competent reflection. To a rough first approximation, culminated competent reflection is a kind of “ideal” rational reflection. Since talk of “ideal” reflection is prone to carry certain unwarranted connotations, it should be exercised with great caution. For example, some philosophers tend to think of ideal rational reflection as reflection that tracks the “objectively good” whatever exactly that is. Others believe that under “ideal” reflection, rational agents are guaranteed to converge on endorsements of the same standards or norms. As used here, the phrase “ideal” reflection is intended to carry no such connotations. There is, on my view, nothing in the universe that merits the title objective goodness. Nor do I find it plausible that moral convergence is guaranteed to us. Even at some imagined ideal limit of moral inquiry, and even assuming the full reflective rationality of all, the norms that one endorses, and by which her life is thereby governed, may not be endorsed by any other. That is part of what I meant earlier on when I said that it is a real possibility that the human adventure will culminate in thoroughgoing moral fragmentation and enmity.

Not just any form of reflection can bind an agent to a norm, however. Excessive emotion, illicit substances, mental dysfunction, and immaturity may all disrupt or distort reflection. Under such circumstances, the reflective endorsement of a norm would constitute no true rational commitment to it. Reflection is “competent” only if no such disruptions or distortions obtain. Competent reflection is thus the kind of reflection, whatever it is, that is more or less characteristic of mature, intact, well-functioning human minds. Only competent reflection about the course of our lives could suffice to bind us to norms. To be sure, standards of competence are subject to a certain variability. What counts as “competent” reflection in a pre-scientific, pre-literate, pre-philosophical age may differ radically from what counts as competent reflection in a scientific, literate and philosophical age. But we need not explore such complications in depth here.

The reflection that binds us to norms must not only be competent, it must also “culminate.” Intuitively, the culmination of reflection is a matter of reflection coming to a stopping point, at least temporarily. We may reflect and reflect, but until reflection culminates, we have not bound ourselves to any determinate norm. Very roughly, reflection culminates when it produces an endorsement that is “stable” in light of all currently relevant inputs. Reflection culminates, that is, when further reflection would yield the same endorsement at least given the same input. Now the stability in which reflection culminates is typically merely a local and temporary stability. The inputs to reflection change in a myriad of ways and for a plethora of reasons. They change in response to social and personal upheaval, in response to new voices, demanding recognition and respect, in response to new discoveries about either our individual lives or about our collective places in the order of things. Reflection is practically inexhaustible. We are subject to constant moral testing, to constant opportunities for discovery, for growth, for failure, for success. What stability and fixity reflection achieves, in light of the constant churning of the moral whirlwind, is likely to be but the fixity and stability of the dialectical moment. Still when reflection achieves a stable and fixed endorsement, if even only for a dialectical moment, we have *decisively* committed to govern our lives by the endorsed norm. For at least this moment, we have given that norm our full rational backing. Giving a norm one’s full rational backing amounts to decisively undertaking to govern one’s

life by the relevant norm. It is through such decisive rational commitments that we escape the Dostoyevskian predicament.

Now I alone have the power to decisively commit myself to governing my life in accordance with a norm. Others may attempt to coerce me into living in accordance with some norm. Such coercion may even play a role in causing me to “obey” the relevant norm. That does not, however, make the norm rationally binding on me. I am bound -- really and truly bound -- only to norms of my own culminated competent reflective endorsement. Yet, despite the fact that another cannot bind me to a norm, she may nonetheless be *entitled to hold* me to a norm, even to a norm by which I am not bound. We must distinguish, that is, between being bound by a norm and another’s being entitled to hold one to a norm. In particular, it is important that entitlements to hold another to a norm can arise in two different ways. They can be *self-generated* or *granted by the subject*. When x entitles herself to hold y to N , x has a self-generated entitlement to hold y to N . When y entitles x to hold y to N , x has a y -granted entitlement to hold y to N .

We endow ourselves with self-generated entitlements to hold another to a norm, when we endorse that norm not merely as norm for ourselves but as a norm for others as well, perhaps even as a norm for the entire rational order. In endowing oneself with a self-generated entitlement, one takes one’s own normative authority as a normative authority for all. Now the urge to take what is merely one’s own normative authority as an authority for all is both a blessing and a curse. Giving into such urges often leads us into moral conflict. But moral conflict is often a mere way station on the path toward more encompassing moral community. Moral conflict arises when I entitle myself, through purely self-generated entitlements, to hold you to norms by which you are not bound and which you may even abhor. When I do so, you may entitle yourself to resist my attempts to do so. For example, I may endorse a norm that requires the abolition of slavery everywhere, while you endorse a norm that permits slavery. I may thereby entitle myself to hold you, by whatever means necessary, to my abolitionist norm. You may entitle yourself to resist my so holding you. When that happens we have deep moral conflict.

I do not mean to say that agents are never mutually and reciprocally bound by a system of norms. When we self-generate an entitlement to hold the entire rational order to a norm, we may, in effect, offer that norm up to others as candidates for their endorsement as well. We ask others to ratify our self-generated entitlement by granting us entitlement in return. When agents do ratify each other’s self-generated entitlements by granting entitlement they thereby achieve *mutual ratification* of a system of norms. They thereby make the system of norms mutually and reciprocally binding on one another. They no longer enjoy merely self-generated entitlements. They have granted one another *mutual and reciprocal entitlements* to hold one another to the norms by which they are now mutually and reciprocally bound. They have acknowledged each other as full and equal partners in normative community. To acknowledge one another in this way is for each to say to the other that the normative authority of one is also a normative authority for the other.

None of this is automatic. It grows haltingly and dialectically from an initial tension generated by agents’ competing self-generated entitlements. These self-generated entitlements reflect first and foremost our self-recognition and self-valuing. Each fully reflective intact rational being recognizes herself to be an original, non-derivative source of reasons for herself. But almost without hesitation, we sometimes take what are merely reasons of our own as reasons for other rational beings. Our tendency to extend our own reasons beyond our own domain is brought short by the

recognition that other reflective rational agents value and esteem themselves in just the ways that we value and esteem our own dear self. To recognize another as a fellow reflective rational being is to recognize that other is an original and non-derivative source of reasons for herself. In this mere recognition, we have already elevated the other rational being above the whole of non-rational nature. Non-rational beings, who lack the power of reflection, are nothing at all either to themselves or for themselves. They are at best derivative sources of reasons for any rational being. Non-rational beings can indeed be sources of reasons for us, but only in virtue of the rationally optional interests that we happen to take in them. We may esteem non-rational beings as instruments, as objects of wonder and awe, even as objects of a peculiar kind of sympathy or love. But they are not the kinds of beings for which even the possibility of normative community arises.

But the mere recognition of another as a fellow rational being, a being capable of the deepest self-valuing and highest self-estimation, is not yet the achievement of normative community. In the bare recognition of another as a fellow rational being, one has not thereby reflectively owned the other as a non-derivative rational source for oneself. Nor has one thereby limited the presumed reach of one's own normative authority. Recognition does, however, set the question, "What, if anything, shall we do, be or believe together as fellow rational beings?" This happens when we confront each other with concrete demands for respect and recognition of the normative authority that lies within. I claim here and now a right to what I take to be mine. I demand recognition and respect of my claim from you. Correlatively, you claim rights to what you take to be yours. Our claims may conflict. We are confronted with a question. How, if at all, shall we be reconciled? How, if at all, shall we live together? The struggle to arrive at mutually acceptable answers to such questions, a struggle in which we sometimes succeed and sometimes fail, is what I mean by the dialectic of ratification.

Through the dialectic of ratification, I try to get you to ratify me and my norms. I try thereby to make it the case that me and my norms govern your life. Simultaneously, you try to get me to ratify you and your norms. You try thereby to make it the case that you and your norms govern my life. When we are each governed by the other, we constitute a normative community. We have made ourselves into original normative authorities and non-derivative sources of reasons for each other.

Normative communities are among humanity's highest achievements. Through the constitution of normative communities, we extend the reach of our own rational powers. For example, through the mediation of mutually ratified norms of inquiry and communication which direct the truth to be sought and told, my having reasons for believing a certain proposition may give you a non-derivative reason for believing that proposition as well. Through the mediation of mutually ratified norms of conduct calling for mutual aid and co-operation, my having a reason for pursuing some good may give you a non-derivative reason either to refrain from interfering with my attempts to pursue that good or perhaps even a reason for aiding me in my attempts to achieve that good. Mutually ratified norms are thus the rails along which reasons may be transmitted from cognizing agent to cognizing agent. Within a normative community, the rational powers of one become rational resources for all. Normative community thus makes possible the emergence of complex cooperative rational activity, including shared forms of inquiry, deliberation and argument.

I stress again, however, that contrary to the dreams of, say, Kant, an all-encompassing community of reasons, is not an a priori, rationally mandatory

imperative categorically binding on all rational beings as such. Indeed, there are myriad ways in which we might fail, despite the full rationality of all who are a party to the failure. The norms by which I would see the world governed, that I most urgently offer up for mutual acceptance to the entire rational order, may simply be rejected. That would make them an insufficient basis for normative community. But it need not make them any less dear to me, nor in any way weaken my commitment to them. Not out of mere hubris or self-love, but out of deep concern for the entire rational order, one may self-generate an entitlement to shape the unyielding world by one's own normative lights. One may prefer to shape the world by the force of argument, if argument will suffice. But by what imperative must we abandon our deepest convictions about the governance of the world, if argument should fail? Yet, were one to succeed through mere coercion in imposing norms upon a reluctant world, one would not have achieved true normative community, but the mere domination of one over another. With fellow rational beings who succeed through coercion in holding me to norms of their own endorsing, despite my abhorrence of those norms, there can only be rational enmity and a discord of reasons. Even if I appear to endorse their domination over me through incompetent or non-culminating reflection, that amounts to a mere semblance of normative community, not its reality.

I do not mean to say that discord and domination are inevitable. I mean to insist only that the building of normative community is always an achievement – a local, rationally optional, historically contingent and politically precarious achievement.

4. Conclusion

With this understanding of normative community in hand, it is time to face our final challenge. If we reject not only the providential hypothesis, but also all totalizing secular moral fantasies about the historical or rational inevitability of an all-encompassing moral community, how might we rationally orient ourselves toward the human adventure? How can we avoid a paralyzing despair in the face of such utter fragility and contingency? We must begin by acknowledging forthrightly and without hesitation that we are left with no simply-mindedly uplifting alternative narrative of human history. The voice of human reason speaks throughout history in a cacophony of competing ends that may never be reconciled. It is a real possibility that the human adventure may end in discord and thoroughgoing enmity or in the domination of some over others. But we modern secularists should take this real possibility not as a counsel of despair but as an urgent call to arms. The moral order is an order entirely of our own constituting. If we would build a world in which all stand equal before all, in which all are equally valued, then it falls entirely on our shoulders, and on the shoulders of no one else, to constitute that world. The work of building from the bottom up an all-encompassing moral order is heroic work, invigorating work, work that calls upon the best of ourselves.

There are, to be sure, many with whom we would achieve normative community who will reject from the depths of their own rational self-valuing the defining dreams of a secular liberal modernity. That very fact sets up a dilemma. If all-encompassing normative community is neither historically inevitable nor rationally mandatory, with what right do we seek to impose that vision on a reluctant world? Down the path of forceful imposition lies Stalin's gulag, Mao's cultural revolution, George Bush's misbegotten invasion of Iraq and the dark dreams of Al Qaeda. But if we abandon the dream of an all-encompassing moral community in

the face of resistance, we open the door to unending discord and division. One might seek a middle ground in a tolerant relativism that acknowledges that each person lives by her own normative lights, that recognizes that normative lights may vary from person to person or culture to culture but refuses the very idea of self-generated entitlements to hold others to norms which they do not themselves endorse. Though I count myself a relativist of the deepest kind, such tolerance is no option in our times. The contingencies of history have guaranteed that there are no peoples of the world with whom we can escape asking the question what, if anything, shall we do, think or be together as fellow rational beings. We are enmeshed with all rational beings in the struggle to constitute ourselves as beings in the world. We are brought into fraught contact through the relentless globalizing of commerce, through the world wide degradation of the environment caused by our thirst for ever greater consumption, through the imperial hubris of the world's leading military powers, through the power of the media to bring the suffering and poverty of the world's teeming masses to the attention of distant and indifferent elites and the corresponding power to make that indifference manifest to all.

So what is the answer? How shall we orient ourselves in a world where nothing is guaranteed to us, where the pursuit of even our deepest, most life-affirming aspirations, may lead us into moral darkness? How shall we live in the face of utter moral contingency? I suggest that where the providentialist recoils from contingency, we atheists should embrace it. What could be more exhilarating than to know that it falls entirely in our hands to make the world as we would have it be? If Nazism or Stalinism or Islamic fundamentalism or American imperialism are to be beaten back, only we all too fallible humans can beat them back. If there is to be progress and moral harmony, only we humans, divided and at odds as we find ourselves, can bring them about. Is humanity really capable of building an all-encompassing moral order, in which all are valued and respected? Let us try it and see.