

Are You Minding What Matters?

Description



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Introduction

Life is like a canoe upon a branching stream. As the stream flows, you come to bifurcations and must choose which path to take. Each time you take a path, you forfeit one set of future possibilities in favor of another. Where you start, together with which paths you go down, determines where you end up and what you experience along the way. You can see this in your own life. As a brief example, think of where your parents met and what decisions each of them made that led to the possibility of their meeting. If either of them had chosen differently, they might have never met, and you might have never been born. A little reflection will reveal that life is full of points of decision where a different choice would have resulted in a whole host of different outcomes.

Itâ??s impossible for us to see all the results of our choices, but it is possible for us to learn how to recognize whether we are on the wrong path and how to get onto the right one. The operative word here is â??learn.â?• We really do need to *learn* how to determine what makes a given path right or wrong to go down. What makes something a right decision or a wrong decision? There must be some set of principles that governs which path is best to take. Learning that set of principles, then, should be the chief aim of those who care to choose whatâ??s right.

Consider this article as something the wind has blown into your boat. It purports to give you a set of principles that will help you choose which way to turn at the future forks in your path. Whether you implement its lessons is up to you, but reading it will at least give you the option.

Lesson One: A Firm Foundation¹This first lesson is available as a podcast [here](#) and as a video [here](#).

If the set of principles by which we make our decisions is not grounded in reality, we donâ??t have much of a chance of heading the right way. It would be like a compass that doesnâ??t point north or a map depicting a fictional world. We might find the compass interesting and we might like the fictional world depicted in the map, but the fact is, using it to find

directions would be delusional. We need a means of navigating the real world, and for that, we need a basic awareness of the nature of reality.

There are multiple views as to what constitutes reality, but we can put these views into two broad categories: Materialism and Immaterialism. Materialism is the view that the one and only substance of which reality is composed is matter — physical — stuff — three-dimensional stuff with size, position, shape, structure, and so on. Immaterialism is the view that non-material, or non-physical — stuff — exists. Some forms of immaterialism state that both material and immaterial things exist while other forms of immaterialism state that all existence is ultimately immaterial, matter being an illusion. In any case, if any form of immaterialism is true, materialism is false. And if materialism is true, all forms of immaterialism are false. The two views are genuine opposites, one being the direct negation of the other.

Knowing whether reality is fundamentally material or whether immateriality exists is not a question of highfalutin philosophy with no relevance to everyday life. On the contrary, the answer to this question has downstream effects on virtually every other area of inquiry, including religion, health, politics, and the list goes on. Essentially, the answer to this question (whatever it may be) tells us the nature of truth. When we hear an idea and ask, “Is that true?” — what are we asking? If reality is solely material, then to call an idea “true” would be to say that it matches material reality. But if reality includes immateriality, whether in part or in whole, then to call an idea “true” would be to say that it matches that immaterialistic reality. The answer to the question of whether reality is materialistic or immaterialistic will provide us with the basic idea of what truth is and thus give us the standard by which to test all other ideas. It is difficult to imagine any question more fundamental and important than that!

So, how can we know the answer? Finding out whether matter exists wouldn’t give us the answer since some forms of immaterialism say that both matter and non-matter are real. Determining whether immateriality exists, on the other hand, would give us the answer since if it does exist, that would mean that some form of immaterialism is true, and if it doesn’t exist, then materialism must be true.

In order to know that a thing exists, we first have to have at least a basic idea of what that thing is; otherwise, what are we even talking about? So, what is immateriality? Well, the word “immaterial” literally means “not material.” But that just tells us what it isn’t, not what it is. Other common terms for “immaterial” are “non-physical,” “incorporeal,” and “supernatural.” But these terms just mean “not physical,” “not corporeal” (which is to say “not bodily”), and “beyond nature.” But again, all of these expressions are only saying what it is not, not what it is. The word “spiritual” doesn’t help either since people define “spiritual stuff” only by reference to these other terms like “non-physical” and so on. So, what is immateriality?! Well, it’s hard to say based on the labels people use to talk about it since those labels don’t actually tell us anything about it.

The other way people try to describe immateriality is by using analogies. For example, some

may say that immateriality is like electricity. As with all analogies, this is supposed to be saying that immateriality is in some way *similar to* electricity. But in what way? Electricity is all about currents of charged particles passing through a conductor, but with immateriality there are no particles, no currents, and no conductors. To say that immateriality is like electricity other than it has no particles, currents, or conductors is to say that immateriality is like electricity except for everything that makes electricity electricity! In other words, it isn't like electricity at all! And if there are no similarities, the analogy isn't even really an analogy.

Some use air as an analogy for immateriality, but air is a layer of gas (one of the fundamental states of *matter*) composed of oxygen, nitrogen, and other elements. Immateriality is supposed to be "not material," so it can't have a material state, like gas, nor can it be composed of elements or have physical motion like air does. Once again, it isn't like air at all! For one thing to be used as an analogy for another thing, it doesn't have to be the same in fact, it needs to be different (otherwise it would be identical, not analogous), but it can't be different in literally every way it has to be similar in *some* way in order for the analogy to mean anything. Since every analogy for immateriality compares it to something material, but then says it is like it in none of its attributes, they are all false analogies and get us nowhere in terms of understanding what immateriality is.

When all is said and done, all anyone can ever say about immateriality is that it is "not _____" (fill in the blank). Again, that is "not physical," "not material," "not solid," "not liquid," "not made of particles," "not composed of elements," and "not ____ [literally anything and everything]." Indeed, this blank is filled by literally anything and everything that anyone could ever think of. What this means is that no one actually has any idea as to what immateriality actually is; we just think of what it isn't and it isn't anything.

There is literally no difference in the content of the idea people think of when speaking of "immateriality" and the content of the idea people think of when speaking of "nonexistence." Both terms evoke the negation of all things we can possibly imagine. And since there is literally no difference between these ideas, they are, in fact, the same idea merely expressed in different terms. And since they are the same idea, saying "immateriality exists" is the same as saying "nonexistence exists," which is a contradiction of terms meaning basic logic prohibits such a statement from being true. Therefore, the word "immateriality" is nothing more than a mask, a charade, granting its unwitting users a false sense of understanding the illusion of talking about "something" all the while concealing the inherent contradiction of its purported existence; a contradiction all too visible when using the other term denoting the negation of all: nonexistence.

Let's not miss the point here. What we have found is that the idea conveyed through the word "immateriality" is actually the same idea conveyed through the word "nonexistence"; thus, immateriality cannot exist. And, as we pointed out earlier, immaterialism and materialism are direct opposites, thus forming a genuine dichotomy. If

immateriality (non-matter) does not exist, that means that all that does exist is material (made of matter). We can express this in simple and concise terms in the form of a deductive argument:

Premise 1: Either immateriality exists, or materialism is true.

Premise 2: Immateriality does not exist.

Conclusion: Therefore, materialism is true.

The nature of a deductive argument like this is that so long as the premises are true and the argument follows a logical structure (one in which the conclusion can be deduced from the premises), the conclusion is guaranteed to be true. In these few pages, we have demonstrated quite conclusively that both premises are true. If you need to be sure, reread this article from the beginning.

As for the structure of the argument, it is very straightforward. Here it is, with each idea replaced by a letter just so you can focus on the structure:

Premise 1: Either A is true, or B is true.

Premise 2: A is not true.

Conclusion: Therefore, B is true.

We now have our first principle: Materialism. The fundamental nature of reality is that it is made of material substance. As I mentioned earlier, knowing the answer to this question has downstream effects on a great number of other things. But for now, we can celebrate the fact that we now have a clear understanding of what makes something true. When you hear someone claim that such and such a thing is true and you find yourself asking, "Is that true?" you can now have a more concrete understanding of what it even means to ask that question. You are asking, "Does what they are saying match material reality?"

Before moving on, it is worth it to take a moment to appreciate the hopefulness that comes with materialism. If some form of immaterialism could be shown to be true, logic and honesty would compel one to admit it. At the same time, our prospects of gaining more knowledge by an immaterialistic definition of truth would be somewhat grim. The reason why is that even if immateriality were to exist (which is a pseudo-idea even as a hypothetical), it is evidently beyond our reach. Even those who believe in immateriality have no means of accessing it and certainly no way of showing that what they say about it is true. This is why people who believe different things about the so-called immaterial world can seldom persuade each other of their views, and when they do, it is for non-empirical reasons. They can't compare their views with the immaterial reality to see which view better matches it. With materialism, on the other hand, we actually have a means of accessing reality. We have sensory organs and experimental methods by which we can test our understanding of the material world. We can put forward a hypothesis and then test it and all come to the same answer. This is why science (the experimental investigation of the material world) tends to bring people to united agreement regardless of their prior beliefs and cultures.

A materialistic reality — our reality — is one in which we have access to truth and we have at least a good shot at finding answers to our questions.

Lesson Two: The Reality of Morality This section is available as two podcast episodes ([1](#) and [2](#)) and also as two videos ([1](#) and [2](#)).

While most would grant that some questions have their answers in the material world, it is still common to think that some things are just beyond what materialism can help with. Most important among these is the foundation of morality. Understanding the foundation of morality is essential for choosing the right paths in life. If we care about doing what is right, we need to know what makes something right or wrong. Let's consider a few common theories on the foundation of morality.

I. Theories of God-Based Morality

For centuries, the most popular theory for moral foundations is that God is the originator of morality. But this has long been recognized to be problematic. If God decides what is moral, could not God have decided upon different moral values? For example, could God have decided for stealing to be moral? Or for racism to be moral? How about murder? — genocide? — infanticide? — sex trafficking? — torture? If — Yes, — then morality is arbitrary and the fact that God would be the arbiter of morality would be nothing more than a case of — might makes right. — But if the answer is — no — if for even one of these examples God could not have decided for it to be moral — then that shows that morality is beyond God and has its foundation in something else.

And for those who say that God didn't decide what is moral, but that morality still has its foundation in God in that it stems from God's inherent character, that still leaves other problems. If morality is defined as that which is concordant with God's inherent character, then how do we know his character is actually good? We can't compare it to itself since that would be circular reasoning, but we also can't compare it to something else under this view because that would mean something else sets the moral standard. One would have to just take for granted as an unsubstantiated assumption that God's character is good and then use that to judge everything else. And this is also fraught with another difficulty; that is, which God are we talking about? If different religions each claim their own God to be the foundation of morality and the moral systems ascribed to these Gods do not agree with each other, how would one arbitrate between the possibilities? One couldn't argue that a particular God's moral system is wrong because one would have to assume the moral system of a different God to make that judgment. But then, upon what basis did one accept the moral system of that different God? Ultimately, one could choose any God and use that God as the foundation of morality and judge all other Gods to be immoral on that basis. As you can see, trying to use God as the foundation for morality just doesn't work.

II. Theories of Society-Based Morality

Another popular theory for the basis of morality is that morality is determined by societies. While no one can deny that societies make systems of what they consider to be right and wrong, theories of society-based morality go beyond that simple description to say that what a society considers morally good and bad actually is morally good and bad for that society. In other words, there is no external morality by which the morality of a society can be judged; morality is what it is within a society, and nothing more. But in reality, most societies don't live in moral isolation from each other, and members of one society often do judge other societies as part of their own moral systems, and sometimes societies even form their own moral positions in response to the morals of other societies. And, of course, there are inner-societal debates over moral issues as well. All this is to say that things just aren't that simple. We can't divide societies up into separate bubbles and say, "What's right and wrong for society A is right and wrong for them and what's right and wrong for society B is right and wrong for them."

If we say that morality is defined by societal moral systems and that each society gets to define its own morality, but the actual moral systems of those societies make moral claims for societies beyond themselves, the theory collapses. You would either have to deny the part of each moral system that makes moral claims regarding the actions of other societies, or you would have to grant that different societies actually do get to play a role in deciding what is morally right and wrong for other societies, in which case we would have to deal with the conflicting moral claims of different societies upon each other. Doing so would require some sort of moral standard beyond any society by which to arbitrate between the different moral ideas. Thus, morality could not be ultimately based on society. Alternatively, one could just let the various societies fight it out and say whoever wins gets to decide what is moral for everyone. This would be another case of "might makes right," and I don't think any rational person would seriously think such a bullying mentality is "moral."

The situation is complicated even more when we include in our considerations the fact that the boundaries of a given society are sometimes disputed. Some portion of a population may consider their society to include all the members of that population and thus their moral system should apply to the whole population. But another portion of this population might consider the population to consist of two societies, neither of which should impose moral standards on the other. Alternatively, a group may consider themselves part of a broader population while members of that broader population regard the group as outsiders, or members of the broader population may be split as to whether to consider the group as part of their society. Here you have three sections of the population: 1) the group, 2) non-group population members who exclude the group, and 3) non-group population members who include the group. Let's say each of these three sections of the population have different moral systems. Even if every member of the population believed that their moral system only applied to their own society, they disagree as to who is included in their society. In such a

case, whose moral system applies to whom? There is simply no answer that could be given that doesn't conflict with at least one of the moral systems. No matter how you slice it, basing morality on society only ends in contradiction and bad principles.

III. Theories of Morality Based on Human Nature

Another view is that morality is based on human nature. We can point to certain features that seem to be built in to human psychology, such as a desire for freedom, a sense of fairness, or a degree of in-group loyalty, and given that these traits are generally considered moral, they might seem like good candidates as foundations for morality. But explaining the origins and operations of our moral intuitions is not the same as providing a basis for why we should consider these intuitions to be moral. Furthermore, there are plenty of other built-in features of human psychology that no one would point to as a foundation for morality; these include (but are not limited to) jealousy, selfishness, confirmation bias, tendencies toward violence, etc. If we don't accept the whole suite of traits included in human nature as determining what is moral, then we are obviously deciding between them to determine which is moral and which is not. But if that is so, then we are using something outside of human nature as our standard by which to judge which aspects of human nature are moral and which are immoral. It may also be argued that science has made a lot of progress in illuminating human nature and that we can use this scientific understanding to structure society in such a way that will reduce the expression of immoral traits while increasing the expression of moral traits. However true that may be, it doesn't say anything about the foundation of morality; it doesn't explain the basis upon which we can judge what is moral and what is not. In using an understanding of human nature to morally improve society, one still has to make judgments about which aspects of human nature they consider moral and immoral and only then can an understanding of human nature be used to shape society in the direction of the desired outcome. Understanding human nature is doubtless relevant for dealing with numerous moral issues, but human nature cannot itself be the basis for morality.

Instead of looking to human traits and psychological features, some look to human well-being as the basis for morality: whatever increases well-being is morally good, and whatever decreases well-being is morally bad. The problem here lies barely beneath the surface. What exactly is "well-being"? Obviously, the word is a compound of "well" and "being" the "well" part meaning basically the same thing as the word "good". But words like "good" and "well" are expressions of value. And this raises the question, "Who is the valuer?" "Well-being" is a famously ill-defined term, there being many different types of well-being, and the measure of an individual's well-being is often determined by self-reporting, which is ultimately subjective. Happiness and pleasure are usually taken to be large parts of what constitutes well-being, but different things make different people happy and experience pleasure. And the conditions necessary to make some people happy are sometimes precisely the conditions that would make others unhappy. Ultimately, since well-being is interlaced with a great deal of subjective value, it runs into the

same dilemmas and difficulties as the other potential moral foundations we have discussed. And, of course, starting with what one subjectively values as "good" as a basis for determining what is morally good and bad is circular and fails to justify why the initial thing being valued is good.

Material Reality as the Basis for Morality

As you can see, the popular theories fail to provide a sound basis for morality. If we want a guide for making moral decisions, we have to look elsewhere. In Lesson One, we learned that materialism is true and that material reality is thus the standard by which we can measure the truth of any statement. Morality based on material reality, or truth-based morality, holds that morality is not an exception to this rule. We can evaluate the truth of moral statements in the same way that we evaluate the truth of other statements.

Any time we evaluate whether a statement is true, we engage in reasoning that can be represented in an argument-like structure. And by "argument" here, I'm not talking about heated disagreement or dispute. I'm just talking about providing reasons for a certain conclusion. We need to take a couple of minutes to make sure we understand "argumentation" since it will help us in seeing how morality relates to material reality. If this seems a little technical at first, hang in there; this is knowledge worth learning.

Any idea we are evaluating can be stated as a conclusion of an argument, and any proposed reason in favor of that conclusion can be stated as premises. This is what we did in Lesson One with our argument for materialism. Here it is again:

Premise 1: Either immateriality exists, or materialism is true.

Premise 2: Immateriality does not exist.

Conclusion: Therefore, materialism is true.

With any argument, there are two aspects that need to be considered: its structure and its content. The structure of an argument consists of the relationships each component has to the other components. When the structure is such that the conclusion is completely derivable from the premises, it is called a valid argument. I'll show you what I mean. With the above argument, the premises take the structure:

Premise 1: Either A or B

Premise 2: Not A

Conclusion: Therefore, ___

What should the conclusion be? If the answer didn't immediately jump out to you, please take a moment to reread the above argument and it should become pretty obvious pretty quickly. The answer is "Therefore, B." Notice how you are able to determine what the conclusion has to be based solely on the information provided in the premises. That is what it

means for an argument to be valid. And when we have a valid argument structure, it means we are reasoning correctly from our premises to our conclusion.

The second element, as I mentioned, is the content. This is where one has to consider whether each premise is true. Sticking with our example, is it true that "either immateriality exists or materialism is true"? As we saw in Lesson One, that is indeed true since the existence of immateriality is genuinely dichotomous with materialism. And for premise 2, is it true that "immateriality does not exist"? Again, as we saw in Lesson One, "immateriality does not exist" is necessarily a true statement since the very notion of immateriality is the notion of nonexistence, and thus, to say that it exists would be an inherent contradiction. When all the premises of a valid argument are true, it is called a sound argument. Since a sound argument has true premises and correct reasoning from the premises to a conclusion, the conclusion is unavoidably true.

If someone makes a statement that is not true, you can know for certain that somewhere in their reasoning process they have either used an invalid reasoning structure, or they have used a premise that is not true (or both). To know whether an argument is valid, one simply has to determine whether the structure of the argument allows you to derive the conclusion based solely on the premises. And to know whether it is sound, one has to additionally consider whether the premises are true by seeing whether they match material reality. This is done by considering potential evidence and reasoning about that evidence (ideally, with valid reasoning). And what is evidence? Evidence is any aspect of material reality that is exclusively concordant with a certain idea over any competing idea. Take, for example, the fact that wherever one might stand on the earth, the point of the sky directly overhead has the appearance of the top of a dome. This fact is exclusively concordant with the idea that the earth is a spheroid. No competing idea regarding the shape of the earth matches this fact of material reality, and thus, this fact is evidence for the idea of a spheroid earth. (If the earth were flat, for example, the closer one would get to the edge of the earth, the further away the center of the sky-dome would appear.)

Every time we evaluate whether an idea is true, what we engage in is a process that involves both reasoning (represented by the structure of an argument and expressed in terms of validity) and material evidence (represented by the content of the premises of an argument and expressed in terms of truth). The reason both aspects are involved is that, when we are evaluating what is true, we are engaging the intersection between some portion of the material world and our mental model of that portion of the world.

This intersection between the external world and our thinking about the world is at play whether we are evaluating descriptive statements about how the world is or whether we are evaluating prescriptive moral statements and the actions based upon them. Thus, argument and evidence are just as relevant for morality as for any other subject.

To have warrant for considering a moral statement to be true, the reasoning by which we support that moral statement needs to have a valid structure and the content of the premises needs to be true — the premises need to match material reality. Whenever someone makes a moral statement that is not true, it is guaranteed that somewhere in their reasoning process

there is an invalid structure to their argument, or they have at least one untrue premise (or both).

When it comes to the basis for considering an action to be moral or immoral, it comes down to whether the action is based on a true or false idea. For example, the action of stealing a car is, in a very direct and immediate sense, based on an idea in the mind of the car thief that goes something like this: "I should steal this car." And they may support this idea through any number of justifications which can be represented as premises in an argument for the conclusion "I should steal this car." If stealing the car is immoral (and it is), then somewhere in the reasoning process in favor of the statement "I should steal this car," there will be an invalid structure to the argumentation or an untrue premise (or both). For a positive example, consider the action of getting vaccinated against COVID-19. This action is pretty directly based on an idea that can be represented by the statement, "I should get vaccinated." If getting vaccinated is moral (and it is), then one should be able to support the proposition "I should get vaccinated" with arguments that are valid in their structure and true in their premises (and thus sound).

Taking materialism to heart shows us that morality must have its basis in material reality. If everything just said hasn't been enough to convince you, consider this argument:

Premise 1: The truth of every claim is determined by whether it corresponds to material reality.

Premise 2: "Every claim" includes "every moral claim."

Conclusion: Therefore, the truth of every moral claim is determined by whether it corresponds to material reality.

This shows that the reach of materialism extends even to morality. And as we have seen, this extends from ideas related to moral issues to moral actions themselves since every time we choose to commit an action, that choice is an action of our mind — a thought process wherein we are considering ideas and making choices based on those ideas. The actions we choose to carry out are based on ideas that can be represented as prescriptive statements, the truth of which can be evaluated just like any other statement. The terms "moral" and "immoral" are thus parallel to "true" and "false." When a *statement* matches material reality, it is true; when it doesn't match material reality, it is false. When an *action* is based on an idea that matches material reality, it is "moral;" when it is based on an idea that doesn't match material reality, it is "immoral." And whether we are evaluating a descriptive statement or evaluating an action via the prescriptive statement upon which it is based, we can do so by careful and sound reasoning with material evidence.

Lesson Three: Our Moral Possibility

Knowing how to differentiate between truth and falsehood (Lesson One) and between right and wrong — moral and immoral — (Lesson Two), is certainly getting somewhere. But

how far does it get us if it turns out to be impossible to change our behavior? Say you have been in the habit of carrying out a certain action but, through reflecting upon our previous lesson, you have discovered that that action is immoral. Your awareness of the immorality of your action would only be of practical benefit if you are able to change your behavior to no longer carry out that action. Otherwise, it would seem that all you would gain from the knowledge of the immorality of your action is a sense of guilt and perpetual entrapment as you continue making the same action with no hope of change. Thus, it is imperative to determine whether it is possible to change our behavior to become more aligned with material reality to be more moral. In short, What is our moral possibility?

Is it Possible to Change Our Behavior?

On one hand, the answer to this question seems so obvious that the question itself appears a little ridiculous. After all, all children are taught to change their behavior in an increasingly civil direction (we hope). Complaining, hitting, and tantrums are discouraged while patience, politeness, and consideration of others are encouraged. And though these changes do not take place in all children equally or at the same pace, the fact that these changes actually occur can hardly be denied.

Likewise, there are countless examples of individuals reforming their lives from less moral patterns of behavior to more moral ones. There are abusers who stop abusing, addicts who stop using, and haters who stop hating. Examples aren't hard to come by; you have probably reformed your behavior in some respects yourself or have witnessed someone you know do it. One inspiring example of moral reformation is the more than 200 Ku Klux Klan members who left the Klan through the influence of Daryl Davis, a black man who engages in respectful conversations with KKK members out of a desire to understand how someone could hate another person merely because of the color of their skin. [Googling Daryl Davis](#) will bring you to some concrete examples. If members of the KKK can reform if they can abandon the immoral beliefs and actions integral to racism, then, once again, it seems that the changeableness of our behavior (even in a positive moral direction) is a fact that can hardly be denied.

Or can it? Despite the above-mentioned facts, there are a couple of challenges sometimes raised to the idea that we can actually change our behavior. The first is quite radical when viewed from the experience of everyday life, yet it is taken seriously by a large number of educated people. What I'm referring to is the idea that change, and time itself, is an illusion. And, of course, if change itself is an illusion, then the idea that we can change our moral thoughts and actions is ultimately an illusion as well.

The Denial of Time

As disconnected from reality as this time-denial may seem, even the quintessential genius of modern times, Albert Einstein, held the view that ultimate reality is timeless. A few days

after the death of a close friend and colleague, Einstein wrote a letter of consolation to the family of the deceased that contained the following:

“Now he has again preceded me a little in parting from this strange world. This has no importance. For people like us who believe in physics, the separation between past, present and future has only the importance of an admittedly tenacious illusion.” Einstein to the Besso family, March 21, 1955

The separation between past, present, and future is only an illusion?! That was, and is, the position of the majority of physicists from Einstein’s day until today. But why is this? What is it that has led physicists to this conclusion?

First of all, it is important to understand that physics before Einstein was dominated by Newtonian Mechanics within which space and time were viewed as two separate aspects of reality that comprise the background upon which objects exist and move. Space was essentially an empty void that could be visualized as a stable grid upon which you could map coordinates. Time was universal and absolute, with the flow of time being constant and everywhere the same. Space was like a stage upon which all the objects of the universe act in the play of the cosmos. The beginning of time was the start of the play, and its flow could be tracked by a single clock hanging upon the wall of the cosmos, marking each moment as it passed. This was the view of Newtonian Mechanics.

In 1905, Einstein published his theory of special relativity and, shortly after that, he developed his theory of general relativity. Together, these two theories (along with their experimental verification) showed that space and time are not merely the background for the cosmic play. Further, they are not independent of one another. Instead, they interact with each other and with the objects in the universe. Einstein showed that the rate at which time passes for any given object is affected by the speed at which it travels and also by its proximity to centers of mass. For example, if two people were traveling at different speeds relative to each other and they both observed the same event (event X) from their respective positions in space, the speed at which event X occurred would appear to be different to each observer. In fact, if these two observers witnessed two events (events X and Y), those two events could appear to be simultaneous to one observer and not simultaneous to the other. What is more is that neither viewpoint is privileged – neither is more true than the other. This means that one’s experience of time is relative – it differs depending on one’s position and speed in relation to other objects.

But does this mean that time itself is an illusion? Some think so. Yet, it isn’t enough to say, “Our ideas of time within Newtonian Mechanics were wrong; therefore, time doesn’t exist.” It is, after all, possible to be wrong about something while not being completely wrong about it. But, too often, this sort of leap is made.

There are other factors at play when it comes to why physicists have generally adopted a non-temporal view of fundamental reality. Einstein’s theory of general relativity showed that gravity warps space and time, which added extra weight to the idea that space and time

are in some way inseparable. This gave rise to the now popular expression, "spacetime". In seeking to express general relativity through the language of mathematics, physicists and mathematicians developed models that described space and time together as a four-dimensional object. With a mathematical object such as this, a given point in time is represented as a location of "spacetime". Time was thus spacialized, and the way we conceptualize space was largely transferred to time. With space, a location in front of you or behind you is no less real by virtue of it not being *your* location. Likewise, with time, the moments in your past and in your future are considered no less real by virtue of them not being *your* moment in time — your location in spacetime. Every moment of time is theoretically part of this four-dimensional spacetime object and so all time — past, present, and future, is real as a single whole. The idea that the past no longer exists and that the future doesn't yet exist is thus, according to this view, a mere illusion.

This view of the universe and of time is sometimes called "block time" or "the block universe" since you can imagine yourself standing outside of the 4-dimensional object and viewing it as an unchanging block with every point of space and time all co-existing as part of that one spacetime object. "Eternalism" is another name for this same view since every point of time is considered co-eternal with every other point of time.

This scientific eternalism is just a modern incarnation of more ancient forms of eternalism. For centuries, the most influential Jewish, Christian, and Muslim philosophers and theologians have promoted the doctrine that God exists beyond space and time. Thus, the ultimate and most fundamental reality, in their view, is atemporal. And where did these philosophers and theologians get that idea? As is clearly expressed in their writings, they got it from the ancient Greek philosophers, especially Plato, with his Theory of Forms (also called Theory of Ideas). Plato's theory was that the physical reality we experience with our senses is not the true reality — it is only a shadow of the true reality. The true reality, according to his theory, was immaterial and timeless. The thinking goes something like this: whatever changes cannot be permanent, and whatever is not permanent cannot be fundamental reality. The true reality, according to Plato, was a world of abstract objects that are the perfect forms of all the things we experience in physical reality. The physical world was understood to be a mere shadow of reality. Each physical object was but a dim and fading reflection of its perfect form in the eternal realm. In the physical world, we have things that are round, though not perfectly so, and not everlastingly so. Plato's explanation for why there could be a multitude of objects that are different and yet are the same in their attribute of roundness is that they are all imperfect copies of the real object in the eternal realm that is "roundness". This is true for "blueness", "beauty", "triangleness", etc. Any time there is an attribute shared across multiple physical phenomena, it was as though that attribute was an essence feebly expressed in those objects. The thought was that this pure essence must exist somewhere and that it must be what is truly real. While Plato asserted that these essential ideas, or forms, were real, it is important to remember that for him, they were still abstract, immaterial objects — not physical objects — and they dwell in an eternal, unchanging realm.

This view was picked up by Christian theologians in the early centuries of the common era and was heavily theologized and combined with Christian doctrine. The focus in Christianity is on God as the fundamental reality and as the primary subject of interest in the eternal realm. God's non-temporality and non-locality (his existence beyond time and space) is the foundation, in this view, of his omniscience and omnipresence. Since he isn't bound within time, he has all of time before him as a sort of block universe. He thus has perfect knowledge of all past, present and future events, as though they were all present for him since he experiences all of them as a co-existent eternal reality.

Modern science emerged from a world dominated by Abrahamic faiths, especially Christianity. And many of the leading scientists in the early days of modern science were Christians seeking to understand God's creation. It was due to this that scientific discoveries of regularities in nature were expressed in terms of laws (a natural mode of expression when describing what comes from a Lawgiver). In turn, these laws were expressed in terms of mathematics, partly because that is the most accurate and fitting language to use to concisely and precisely describe certain physical regularities. But this bolstered the already long-held impression that mathematics was a mystical window into the abstract and eternal (changeless) world — the "true" reality. While scientists today do not often bring God into their equations, the ideas of timeless laws and abstract (yet "real" mathematical objects still persist.

If these eternalistic ideas (whether in their classical, theological, or scientific incarnations) are true, it would mean that change really is an illusion, and we really would have no hope of reforming our behavior to become more moral. We would be doomed to Einstein's "admittedly tenacious illusion" of the passage of time — perhaps wishing we could change, but with the future already just as settled a fact as the past, we could do nothing but sit through the ride being constantly deluded into believing we are experiencing change, all the while knowing we are not.

Thankfully, we can know that this is not the case. The history of the various manifestations of the eternalistic theory reveals that it has its roots not in materialism but in immaterialism, which, as we observed in Lesson One, has no hope of being true. Furthermore, while the theories of special and general relativity are often used to dismiss the reality of time, understood more fully and with more clarity, they actually evidence the reality of time. As we already discussed, these theories reveal that time is integrally connected with space — that is, three-dimensional physical reality. The word "space" in special and general relativity is not a synonym for "emptiness" or "nothingness." It is, instead, the three-dimensional extent of continuous matter. And, in fact, general relativity shows that space has material properties; it can be bent and warped by mass; it has curvature, and it can take on different structures in different circumstances. Since time in special and general relativity is integrally related to space, it is integrally related to matter. Thus, one cannot have timelessness without spacelessness and matterlessness, but since matterlessness is impossible (as we saw in Lesson One), spacelessness is impossible and so is timelessness.

When the connection between space and time was first explained by Einstein, most were

inclined to make the mistake of specializing their view of time, when they could have just as well (actually â??more wellâ??) temporalized their view of space. A major factor that inclined them to interpret general relativity in a time-dismissing way was the eternalistic notions dominant in society due to the influence of Christian theology and philosophy which itself stemmed from ancient Platonism. Another factor was the view that mathematics describes a world of abstract entities more real than the world accessible through our senses (this is a kind of Platonistic mathematics). A fuller explanation of the metaphysical biases influential in physics (in cosmology and quantum mechanics in particular), along with a time-realist approach to physics, can be found in the work of a few (yet noteworthy) contemporary philosophers and physicists such as Roberto Unger, Lee Smolin, and Marina Cortes (among others).

At this point, it should be clear that the denial of the reality of time is not only unfounded but untrue. Still, there is another aspect worth understanding; that is, the internal inconsistency of the notion that time is an illusion. Basically, the problem arises from the fact that to be deceived by an illusion requires undergoing an illusory experience. But illusory experiences, like all experiences, canâ??t take place without time. Every experience is a process, and every process requires time. Since the very notion of having the illusion of the experience of time requires time to be real, it shows that the experience of time cannot be an illusion. If time were not real â?? if there were no time â?? we couldnâ??t have the experience of the illusion since we couldnâ??t have the experience of anything â?? we couldnâ??t even think since thinking is a process of a brain. No time, no process. To be clear, illusions are possible â?? it is just that the basic experience of time cannot be one of them due to the self-conflicting nature of that idea. Furthermore, this doesnâ??t mean that we canâ??t have illusions about the ways in which time operates â?? yes, it is certainly possible to have illusions in that area of perception, but the experience of time â?? of moment to moment change â?? cannot, by logical necessity, be an illusion. Time, then, must be real, and so must change, since it is constituent of time. What this means is that the first challenge to the possibility of us changing our behavior has proven to fail; the reality of change and of time cannot be denied, at least not without denying reality, and we are thus at least guaranteed that some sort of change will occur.

The Denial of Possibility

The denial of time isnâ??t the only challenge to the possibility of us changing our moral behavior. The denial of *possibility* is equally subversive to genuine moral reformation. Going back to our analogy of life as a canoe on a branching stream, the denial of time suggests that the stream does not flow â?? that you and your boat do not actually travel from point A to point B. This isnâ??t to say that your boat stays at point A and is never at point B or anywhere in between; rather, it suggests that you and your boat exist eternally at each point in your journey. Each moment of your life, according to this view, is just a point in the four-dimensional object that is the block universe. Every minute movement you have ever made

or ever will make, along with every nanosecond of what you (misleadingly) experience as time, is eternally, timelessly, co-existent. Not only do all the moments of your journey co-exist with each other, but they co-exist with every other moment of all spacetime. This is the denial of time — the denial of change.

If it were the case that time is not real, that would also imply that possibility is not real. Since the future would be fixed due to already eternally existing, there would be no alternative futures. With only one future, its probability would be 100%, leaving no possibility for anything else. Thus, the denial of time entails the denial of possibility.

Yet, one might deny possibility without denying time. This would be akin to saying that the stream of time really does flow, and you and your canoe really do travel from point A to point B, but there are no bifurcations in the stream — there is only one path to go down. Under this view, anything that looks like a fork in the stream is nothing more than an illusion. You might come to a point where you have to steer your boat left or right, and you may think you could go either direction, and you may even feel like you are choosing one direction over another, but in reality, the path you end up taking is the one you *must* have taken since, ultimately, there was no other path, only an illusion of one. All of our experiences, all of our actions, all of our — choices, — and all of our thoughts are thus fixed ahead of time and there is no way for us to do anything differently.

This basic doctrine of the denial of possibility has had many manifestations, justifications, and names, but the end result is the same — there is no possibility of a future other than the one that is already fated, or determined, to happen. Obviously, if our every thought and action is already determined, none of our thoughts and actions are changeable. They will be what they will be — moral or immoral, and there is nothing we can do about it. The nonexistence of genuine possibility entails the nonexistence of moral possibility.

But even if genuine possibility is real, the mere belief in the idea that possibility does not exist would severely impair, if not abolish, one's ability to deliberately realize new possibilities, moral or otherwise. How many people try to achieve what they believe to be impossible? To take this one step further: say genuine possibility exists, and you don't take the position that possibility is an illusion, yet you also don't believe that genuine possibility is real; perhaps you just don't know or you are confused on the subject — even this, even the lack of belief in genuine possibility, could undermine your ability to actualize what you possibly could. Thus, it is essential that we find out whether or not genuine possibility exists.

We'll now consider the main forms of possibility denial:

I. Logical Fatalism

Logical fatalism is the belief that the future is fixed *by logical necessity*. There are long and complex arguments for logical fatalism that involve specific hypothetical scenarios, but here is an argument that summarizes the main idea:

Premise 1: The truth or falsity of all statements about the past is fixed.

Premise 2: All statements about the past includes all statements about past truths regarding the future.

Conclusion: Therefore, the truth or falsity of all statements about past truths regarding the future is fixed.

If you find this hard to follow, no worries. The hardest part is understanding what a statement about past truths regarding the future is. Here is an example of such a statement:

1000 years ago, it was true that you would be reading this article today.

Notice, this is a statement about the past, but the specific part of the past being spoken of is a truth regarding the future (that is, the future from the perspective of that moment in the past). Thus, it is a statement about past truths regarding the future. The idea is that since the past is fixed, any statement about the past must also have a fixed truth value (whether true or false). And since our statements about the past can have as their subject past truths regarding the future, then past truths regarding the future must also be fixed. And since you can arbitrarily pick any time in the past in which the given truth regarding the future might reside, then it must be that truths about the future were always fixed from the perspective of any moment in the past. Thus, the entire history of the universe must be fixed from the first moment of time since all future truths would be true from the perspective of that first moment. And, of course, if everything you or I could ever do has been a fixed logical truth from the beginning of time, there is nothing we can do to change it.

There are numerous problems with this line of reasoning that we must expose lest, by illogical cecity (blindness), we actualize a possibility-bereft future. First of all, any statement about past truths regarding the future (from the point of view of the past) seems to take it for granted that simply because something is true at some future point, its future truth is somehow contained in the past. To use our example: to say that 1000 years ago, it was true that you would be reading this article today is to say that for a person living 1000 years ago, it would be then presently true that you would read this article today. In other words, they could say, it is true today, that 1000 years from now, person X will read *Are You Minding What Matters?* But the mere fact that it is true today that you are reading this article doesn't prove that it was a present truth 1000 years ago that you would read it today. The only thing that your reading this article today warrants us to say about 1000 years ago is that it would become true 1000 years later that you would read this article today. Note: it is not that it was true then; it just would become true later. And the fact that it would become true 1000 years later is a truth about later, not a truth about 1000 years ago.

This seems like it should be a really simple point, so why the confusion? It seems to be partly due to people not being careful to use tenses consistently, or at least with caution to not over-literalize nuances. The fact is, it is not strictly and literally correct to say it is true that

some future thing will happen (as though a future truth were already true). This would be to thoughtlessly and unjustifiably combine the future with the present. When talking about the future, it is really only correct (that is, strictly and literally correct) to speak of what will be• not what is.•

Another aspect that likely contributes to the unfounded belief that present and future truths must have existed in the past as past truths about the future is the idea that truth is timeless. But as we have already seen, timelessness does not exist. Taking this to heart, we realize that everything that is true is true in a moment, and it is important to keep straight what is true in which moment.

What would it even mean for the past to contain truths regarding the future? The future itself certainly wasn't in the past. In fact, the future wasn't and isn't anywhere • it didn't and doesn't exist. Of course, it will exist (future tense), but it didn't exist (past tense) and it doesn't exist (present tense). All that does exist exists now and is true now. What is true is thus time-bound. Yes, there were truths, there are truths, and there will be truths. But present truths are the only truths that are true now. Future truths aren't true yet; they will become true only as they are realized in future present moments. Past truths are not true now either; they were true when each respective moment of the past was not yet the past, but the present. What this means is that what is true is true in its own time. So, to pull future truths into the past, or present truths into the future, or any other dyssynchronous arrangement of moments with truths, gets us nowhere • at least nowhere sensible.

A point of clarification: The way things are in the present has been shaped by the past, and so we can learn what the past was like by carefully studying the present. Likewise, the present will shape the future, and so we can infer what the future might be like from combining our knowledge of the present with our knowledge of how events shaped other events from moment to moment in the past. In other words, we can infer how the present will shape the future from knowing how distant past events shaped less distant past events. We can even make reasonable suggestions as to how different future actions would likely shape the more distant future. But all of this • all of the present facts from which we can learn about the past, all of the present facts and our present knowledge about causation from which we can infer what the future might be • all of these things are present realities. While we can gain information about what the past was and what the future might be, that information is still present information • not past or future truths temporally displaced into the present.

This brings us to another problem in the •logical• argument for •logical fatalism.• It is exemplified in our above-stated second premise:

Premise 2: •All statements about the past• includes all statements about past truths regarding the future.

This statement assumes that •past truths regarding the future• exist. In addition to the fact that we have seen that such dyssynchronous suggestions are not reflections of reality, this poses another problem; namely, circular reasoning. The idea attempting to be supported by

all arguments for logical fatalism is that the past endows its "truths regarding the future" with its own fixity. Since both fatalists and non-fatalists alike acknowledge that the past is fixed and since the fixity of the past does not itself imply logical fatalism, it seems that logical fatalism's central claim is actually that the past includes truths (even all truths) regarding the future. Since this is the central claim being argued for, including it within a premise is ultimately circular. In other words, stating that there are truths regarding the future that are already truths in the past assumes that those future truths are already fixed from the perspective of the past, which is the very thing being argued for. Thus, the argument is circular; particularly, it is begging the question.

Another problem is that the sorts of arguments that are usually given for logical fatalism are less than straightforward. Saying things like "the truth or falsity of all statements about the past is fixed" or "all statements about the past" includes all statements about past truths regarding the future" is interesting, but why bring "statements" into it? This is typically how the arguments go "they are about statements, or propositions, that are considered true or false at a given time, but are regarding some time future from that given time. But ultimately, the truth of a statement about the past isn't dependent on the statement; it is dependent on the past. So why not just say:

Premise 1: The past is fixed.

Premise 2: The past includes all truths regarding the future.

Conclusion: Therefore, all truths regarding the future are fixed.

This would seem to be a far more straightforward argument for logical fatalism. But, of course, its weakness is far more apparent since premise two is more obviously indefensible. It is far easier to defend a premise like "All statements about the past" includes all statements about past truths regarding the future" or at least its indefensibility is less obvious (yet, it is nonetheless present). While the versions of the argument that have been "propositionalized" (made to be about propositions) have the advantage of hiding their baseless character beneath a layer of additional language, they also come at a cost. That is, rather than arguing for the fixity of future events or even of truths regarding the future, they sometimes end up arguing for the fixity of the truth-value of propositions about past truths regarding the future. But even if one were to grant past truths regarding the future as though they were future truths stuck in the past, arguing for the fixed truth-value of propositions about those past truths is not the same as arguing for the fixity of the actual future.

To illustrate, the first version of the argument (the propositionalized version), if accepted, really just means that a statement like "1000 years ago, it was true that you would be reading this article today" has a fixed truth-value. But it doesn't actually say what that truth-value is, nor does it say that the actual future is fixed. In light of what we have learned here, we can conclude that the truth-value of this statement is "false" since it actually wasn't true 1000 years ago that you would be reading this today. And if we haven't already bought into the idea of "timeless truth" or "fated truth" then there is no

problem in saying that it wasn't true then and also that it became true later that you would read this article. At the end of the day, it is apparent that so-called logical fatalism must meet its own fate, with its true character laid bare as ironically illogical.

II. Theological Fatalism

Most theologies regard God as timeless, but since we have already addressed the fallacious character of time-denial, I won't be dealing directly with that aspect again here. I will, however, briefly explain how theological time-denial and theological possibility-denial relate. The timelessness of God places him outside of the universe, viewing all space and time as an eternal, changeless block. If this were an accurate description of reality, it would mean that all things are co-eternal and that time is an illusion. Therefore, we can locate the conceptual hotspot of theological time-denial in the "divine realm"• the (super)natural habitat of the timeless God. It is in the description of this supposed-to-be fundamental reality that time-denial occurs. But these theologies do not stop at a description of things from the perspective of standing outside of the block universe (that is, from God's timeless perspective); they also offer a description from the perspective of being inside of time and space (from "our perspective"•). From within time, the dominant denial is not time-denial; it is possibility-denial. And this comes in two main flavors: predestination and divine foreknowledge. The predestination we are talking about is not the idea that God ordains *some* things ahead of time; it is the doctrine that he ordained *all* things ahead of time. Likewise, the foreknowledge we are talking about isn't the idea that God knows *some* things ahead of time; it is the doctrine that he infallibly knows *all* things ahead of time. God could predestine and foreknow *some* things without eliminating genuine possibility from our future, but for God to predestine or infallibly foreknow *all* things would result in a possibility-bereft world. Before looking at each view independently, let's not miss the fact that while both views are descriptions from an "in-time"• perspective, those who believe these doctrines also tend to affirm the timelessness of God. And, for a timeless God, there can be no genuine "predestination"• since there is no "pre"•. From his timeless perspective, there was no moment prior to the actualization of events at which he destined them. Why? Because in the eternal realm, there is no moment prior to any other moment. Thus, God's predestination of events is not an "act"• in any comprehensible sense but is supposed to be a timeless, eternal truth. There is no "pre"• about it. "Predestination"• is an "in-time"• description from "our perspective"• suggesting that "before"• all events, God ordained what would happen. This same scenario applies to "foreknowledge"•. To God, from his timeless perspective, there is no "fore"•• there is just knowledge. "Foreknowledge"• is just an in-time description from "our perspective"• suggesting that God knew all events "before"• any of them happened.

While predestination and foreknowledge share the fact that they are in-time descriptions of God's relationship to the history of the world, they are also different in a number of ways. The doctrine of predestination holds that God decidedly ordained all the events of history "•"

that all things unfold according to his will. Nothing, in this view, happens that was not determined or fated by God to happen. Predestination depicts God as, in a very literal sense, in control of all things. Divine foreknowledge, on the other hand, doesn't describe God as having Himself decided the precise way that everything would be. It just says that he knows the entire future exhaustively and infallibly, without necessarily asserting that he causes it. We are about to look at each of these views on their own in more detail, but before that, it needs to be emphasized that so long as the proponents of these views tie them to a timeless God, the views themselves cannot stand. The reason why is that if the ultimate nature of reality is timeless, then all temporal descriptions are only descriptions of our time-bound perspective, which is ultimately an illusion in this view (even though such an illusion would, in fact, be impossible as we already covered). Since these descriptions would only be descriptions of illusions, they would ultimately be untrue. If fundamental reality were timeless, both predestination and divine foreknowledge would be, at best, misleading descriptions — doctrines not of truth, but of appeasement to the time-deluded mind.

Predestination

If we ignore the fact that those who believe in predestination tend to also believe that ultimate reality is timeless, and if we ignore that a timeless reality would require predestination to be false, we can still evaluate predestination from a purely in-time perspective. Let's say that within time, unimaginably long ago, God predestined all that would follow. This would naturally mean that, from that point on, there would be no genuine possibility. Everything would be fixed — fated — by God's decree.

But we must ask, What reason do we have to believe that such a doctrine is true? Unsurprisingly, those who advance the idea of divine predestination don't attempt to give reasons that would satisfy materialism. They instead point to Scripture and interpret certain passages as supporting their doctrine. Whether or not their interpretations are accurate is an important issue, but it ultimately wouldn't settle whether the doctrine is correct. As we learned in Lesson One, truth is that which comports to material reality. So, even if the predestinationist interpretation of Scripture was correct (and I don't think it is), one would still need to test the claims of Scripture in order to know whether they match material reality and are actually true.

For any who have trouble with this last point, consider the following short story:

The Tale of Desa Ibnu

In the year 2061, a new space station is assembled in orbit. The assembly is successful and a team of astronauts dock and board the vessel to settle into their new space-faring life. The plan is to stay in space for 15 years — the longest mission for a single team yet. Recent technological innovation has made it possible to stay in space for extended periods without major health risks and this station is more comfortable than all of its predecessors, by a long

shot. One couple on board, Dr. and Dr. Ibnu, even conceive and bear a child two years into the mission. Desa is the first human child born in space. Like all infants, she is pretty clueless about well-nigh everything, other than milk, mom, and mush. Life is good on board the space station.

Four years pass

It's an ordinary morning and the crew shift is about to take place. Suddenly, RED ALERT. Alarms sound and everyone is called to their battle pods. The hope that they wouldn't be necessary now just seemed naive; everyone knew that Space Forces weren't being created for no reason. The battle was silent and quick. If anyone had survived, they would have said it didn't feel historic, despite the hype. So much for the first space battle. Yet, unknown to the inhabitants of earth, there was one survivor - Desa.

As the battle started, she was placed in the control center - the safest place in the space station. Some modules of the station were damaged, but they were at the ends of the station, and safety programs sealed them off once the hall was breached. The worst part is that the explosions of the battle knocked the station out of orbit and cut off communications with earth. Even if ground control thought there might be survivors, the chances were slim and space was now a war zone.

Desa was now alone. Her only companion was the station's AI - thankfully, the most highly developed AI in the world, Siri. There was plenty of food and water, and the solar panels would provide all the electricity she needed. As time passed, her memories of her parents faded. Sure, she could remember some things, but it was getting hard to know what was imaginary and what were real memories. Sometimes she would wonder if she had always been alone. But whenever this thought would cross her mind, she asked Siri to play the song. It was a few lines her mom had recorded:

Feelings will change
Friends estrange
But truth is truth, no jest
Some will lie
And make you cry
But you must stay honest

Desa didn't have much to do. Her life mainly consisted of talking to Siri, wandering around the station, and learning to read. This was a long slow process since all she had were station manuals and Siri's definitions. Still, by the time she was 11, she had a good handle on it and was really getting to understand how the station worked.

One day while reading, she made a significant discovery; the station had a program to detach all modules from the control center and send the control center home. It took two years for her to prepare and to get up the nerve to do it. She knew if something went wrong, she could die. But the day came and she executed the program. It was a 6-year journey home; certainly longer than she would have liked, but it was mostly life-as-normal.

Much more could be said about the tale of Desa Ibnu, but the real lesson for our purposes is to be found in what she finds when she arrives back on earth. Here she is, a 19-year-old woman, confronted with a new and strange world. She had never heard of religion; she had no indoctrination, no philosophical biases from her parents other than the love for truth and honesty she gained from her mother's song.

Now, what do you think she should do as she encounters various doctrines? How should she differentiate between what is true and what isn't? Sure, some tell her that there is a God who predestined all things. But, even if they can prove that their doctrine is taught by some ancient Scripture, what reason does she have to believe it? She has also met adherents to Neo-Egyptian religion who say that the God Ptah indwells all living things, governing all their actions, and they can support this belief by quoting ancient Egyptian Scripture. In order to know which Scripture to believe, if any, wouldn't she have to test them by something beyond all of them? Of course, Lesson One shows us exactly what standard an unbiased truth-seeker like Desa should use — she should test all claims by the standard of material reality.

As I said earlier, I don't think the Scriptures to which predestinationists appeal actually support their position. But aside from what any Scripture may or may not say, could predestination possibly be true? Could it be what is actually happening in material reality?

The doctrine of predestination really suggests that God ordained all events. Typically, this is expressed in terms of a pre-creation divine decree. If we are to give this doctrine a chance by not involving timelessness, we are still left with the question: How could such a decree be given? If it were to be spoken, it seems it would take an unimaginably long time to say — even an infinite amount of time since the decree is supposed to predestine an infinite future. Aside from this problem, there is also the problem of God having in mind all future events. The fact is, thoughts are processes of a brain, and brains are limited by physical size, speed, etc. It is only possible to think so much at once. And if one wanted to scale up the size of the God-brain to be capable of simultaneously thinking of all the infinite future, one would run into the problem of a brain becoming too large to function. A brain too large would become compressed by gravity — just one of the many problems that arise when trying to get a brain with the processing capacity necessary for an infinitely data-heavy thought. But the limitations of what is physically possible cannot be evaded.

And yes, this "God-brain" is purely theoretical — no one really believes this about God; it is just the direction one would have to go in an attempt to retain physical plausibility for a divine decree that includes every detail of the future (however failing that attempt may be). But what people actually believe about God is even more unbelievable — that he is an immaterial spirit — a disembodied mind. Now that we have seen the truth of materialism, it is evident that a God like that cannot exist. Nor would it help to explain predestination if such a God could exist. In an effort to escape the physical limitations of a brain and secure a literally unlimited single thought for God, asserting that He is an immaterial spirit might seem like a solution. In reality, it just makes the problem worse. Rather than depicting a God capable of thinking an infinitely data-heavy thought, it depicts a God with no brain and thus

no thought. With Lesson One in mind, it should be apparent that speaking of an "immaterial mind" is really nonsense. It is truly inconceivable and is thus nothing more than a pseudo-idea.

To summarize this point: the only type of God that could possibly have existence is a material God, but the material reality of such a God would render it impossible for him to think of the entire future in all its details at once. With such a thought being impossible, a decree regarding the content of that thought would likewise be impossible. Appealing to immateriality, far from offering a solution to this problem, only worsens it, taking us from a God capable of thinking to a pseudo-God with no thought.

Lastly, even if such an exhaustive predestinary decree could possibly be made, that wouldn't show it would be possible for it to be enacted. By what means would it be possible for God to control every minute detail of the future? Is God everywhere present, moving the atoms around? If so, there is certainly no evidence of it, and a spiritualistic idea like this certainly fails the materialistic test. If he isn't personally everywhere controlling everything, how is he affecting his control? It seems anyone defending this belief would have to come up with increasingly complex, unsubstantiated, ad hoc explanations.

Divine Foreknowledge

First, it is necessary to get out of the way a common misconception regarding the problem of God's foreknowledge. Those who affirm God's exhaustive infallible foreknowledge and who also affirm genuine freewill for humans often simply misunderstand the problem. They might say things like, "Just because God knows what will happen ahead of time doesn't mean he causes it to happen." But this is nothing more than a straw man. Those who root theological fatalism in God's foreknowledge don't argue that God causes all future events; rather, the idea is that God's knowledge of the future implies that the future is already fixed. The reasoning is actually very similar to logical fatalism, but the argument is, in a way, stronger. Remember, the doctrine of divine foreknowledge doesn't say that God knows the future like we do - our knowledge of the future is very incomplete and it is fallible. God's foreknowledge, on the other hand, is thought to be exhaustive and infallible. If it were possible for something to happen other than what God has foreknown, that would require that God's foreknowledge would fall short of at least one of these two attributes. You would either have to say that 1) God's knowledge didn't foresee that event, in which case his foreknowledge wouldn't be exhaustive, or that 2) things happened contrary to God's knowledge, in which case his foreknowledge wouldn't be infallible.

Some try to reconcile things by saying that we can choose to do things other than what God foreknew and that when we do so, our action actually reaches back into the past and changes the content of God's knowledge retroactively. But this desperate attempt to relieve cognitive dissonance fails at every step. First, it is just an unsubstantiated assertion. Second, the past no longer exists to be acted upon so we know this backward time-traveling causation can't be real (and as we have already seen, introducing a block universe won't help).

Third, if present actions could change God's past knowledge, that would mean that up till now, God was actually wrong and thus didn't have infallible knowledge. Fourth, did God foresee that someone would retroactively change his knowledge? If so! did they really change it? (and if they did! why would God delude himself in the meantime while knowingly awaiting the change?) And if God didn't see the change coming, then clearly his foreknowledge wasn't exhaustive. Thus, granting ourselves the ability to change God's past foreknowledge retains all the problems that divine foreknowledge already has for freewill and adds to them to boot.

There is no way around it; if God's foreknowledge is both exhaustive and infallible, the future cannot be anything other than what it is already fated to be. Inescapably, therefore, the doctrine of divine foreknowledge, as typically taught, amounts to possibility-denial. And if there is no genuine possibility at all, there is no genuine possibility for us to change how we will be and the prospect of moral progress is nothing more than an illusion.

But as we have done with the other forms of possibility-denial, we have to ask, Is the doctrine of exhaustive infallible divine foreknowledge true? As with predestination, those who adhere to this doctrine don't offer arguments that even try to meet the standard of materialism. They instead appeal to Scripture, and once again, while it is important to question their interpretation of the Scriptures to which they appeal, even the rightness of their interpretation would not be evidence of the rightness of their doctrine. The claim would still need to be tested against material reality. And for those who may have a difficult time with the idea that Scriptural claims need to be tested, have you heard the tale of Desa Ibnu?

So, could the doctrine of divine foreknowledge be true? Could it reflect material reality? As might already be obvious to you, the answer is clearly "No."• The first reason is something we have already covered "the God-brain problem. Thoughts are processes of a brain. They require physical stuff in motion. The more information a thought contains, the more matter and motion is required for that thought to be processed. A thought containing infinite information "the data of every minute detail of every future moment" would require an impossibly large brain. There are physical limitations as to what is possible and efforts to escape those limitations by appealing to immateriality only make things worse.

There is another reason why the doctrine of divine foreknowledge can't be true. In order for God to know the entire future, it would seem that either the future must already exist and God has access to it, or that all the information to make the future is already contained in the past and that God not only knows the entirety of that information, but he also knows that it will produce the future deterministically and with unerring fidelity. If the first is the case, that essentially reintroduces the block universe and God standing outside of time, viewing the future, not from within a moment of time, but from outside of time. This just roots the possibility-denial of divine foreknowledge in the time-denial of eternalism "which we have already shown to be false. If one takes the second route, there are some serious questions that need to be asked about how it is that all the information needed to produce the entire future is already contained in the past and how it is that this information could produce the future with unerring fidelity. But even if one granted that as a reality, one would still have

the problem of God being able to acquire that information and “know” it all since knowledge implies a mind and mind implies a brain, bringing us back to the God-brain problem.

Regarding the future being produced by information in the past, this brings us to our next major type of possibility-denial.

III. “Scientific” Fatalism

Scientific fatalism is fatalism explained and defended in scientific ways. This is also called “causal determinism” since it proposes that all events are determined by prior causes. The thought is that you can take *anything* and ask, “What caused this?” Whatever the answer may be, it will be something that can be described by the laws of physics operating upon some prior conditions. What then caused the prior conditions? The same thing “the laws of physics operating upon even earlier conditions. And since this mode of explanation is thought to apply to everything, it implies that everything is simply unfolding as it *must* according to the laws of physics. It couldn’t happen in any other way since the laws of physics determine it to be the way it is. Within this view, if one was able to have a perfect understanding of the laws of physics together with a perfect understanding of the initial conditions of the universe (and have infinite computing power), they could know the precise placement of every particle in the universe throughout all of time. Why throughout all of time? Because the laws are thought to be timeless and thus unchanging. The natural conclusion, then, is that everything that would ever happen, including your every thought and action, was determined from the big bang. Like the other forms of possibility-denial, it is essential that we examine this as well.

While this view is held by many scientists, it is important to understand that it did not arise as a result of scientific experiments or methods. On the contrary, causal determinism is a philosophy that originated long before the birth of modern science. Consider this statement by Cicero back in the first century BCE:

Reason compels us to admit that all things happen by Fate. Now by Fate I mean the same that the Greeks call Heimarmene (Destiny), that is, an orderly succession of causes wherein cause is linked to cause and each cause of itself produces an effect. That is an immortal truth having its source in all eternity. Therefore nothing has happened which was not bound to happen, and, likewise, nothing is going to happen which will not find in nature every efficient cause of its happening. Consequently, we know that Fate is that which is called, not ignorantly, but scientifically, “the eternal cause of all things, the wherefore of things past, of things present, and of things to come.” Cicero, *On Divination*, Book 1, 125-126

Or, from the first century CE, consider this statement by Seneca:

Every cause depends upon some earlier cause: one long chain of destiny decides all things, public or private. Wherefore, everything must be patiently endured, because events do not fall in our way, as we imagine, but come by a regular law. It has long ago been settled at what you should rejoice and at what you should weep, and although the lives of individual men appear to differ from one another in a great variety of particulars, yet the sum total comes to one and the same thing: we soon perish, and the gifts which we receive soon perish. Why, then, should we be angry? Why should we lament? It is a great consolation to be swept away together with the entire universe Seneca, Of Providence, Section 5.

Clearly, causal determinism is a pre-scientific philosophy. This doesn't mean it's wrong, but it does mean it would be a mistake to think of it as a scientific theory like the theory of electromagnetism or the germ theory of disease. Determinism is sometimes spoken of as though it were a scientific fact. In reality, nothing in science has proven that we live in a deterministic universe; all we have are instances of deterministic processes. For example, the motion of comets can be accurately described by Newton's Laws. When Edmond Halley figured out that the comets of 1531, 1607, and 1682, were actually the same comet, he applied Newton's Laws of Motion to it and was able to predict that the comet should be seen again in 1758. And this prediction proved to be true! It was as though the comet was determined ahead of time to travel the path it eventually did travel. And the laws of physics don't just predict the movement of comets either; they also predict the motions of planets, galaxies, falling apples, and the list goes on.

If all these things can be predicted by mathematical laws, maybe everything can! But this last step is where the problem arises. Just because lots of things behave in predictable, law-like ways, that doesn't mean everything behaves in that way.

So, causal determinism is not a product of modern science. It is an ancient philosophical position that has gained popularity among scientifically inclined modern people. The scientific explanations and justifications for causal determinism usually involve asserting that the universe operates according to the laws of physics, which, if perfectly understood (along with the initial conditions of the universe), would, in principle, predict the entire history of the universe. Instances of such predictable processes can be pointed to, and the fact that they can be predicted with such accuracy is seen as confirmation of the laws of physics operating in a deterministic way. But, as already pointed out, the fact that some processes may be deterministic doesn't prove that all are. The leap from "some" to "all," or even "many" to "all," is nothing more than conjecture. Modern science has provided stunningly accurate descriptions of certain deterministic processes, but what it has not done is shown that all processes are deterministic processes.

Let's say we take as a hypothesis the idea that everything in the universe is governed by timeless and unchanging laws, producing a single, universal, deterministic causal chain. What should we expect if this hypothesis were true? Well, one would expect that everything

should be, in principle, explainable by deterministic predictive laws, and this is exactly what scientific determinists expect. But how does this expectation square with current evidence? The answer: Not so well. While some things certainly operate in predictable, law-like ways, other things simply don't. One can always say that future breakthroughs in theoretical physics will enable those predictions, but that is a hope, not an evidentially warranted statement.

It is not just that we lack deterministic law-like explanations for certain things, it is that we have well-studied phenomena that seem to defy deterministic explanation. Consider economic systems, social networks, individual human behavior, and history. Many careers have been devoted to studying and explaining these fields, and knowledge in all these areas has increased — yet the result is not predictive, law-like explanations, and certainly not deterministic ones. Even in physics, there are some things that seem to defy deterministic explanation. Take radioactive decay and atmospheric noise — all the evidence indicates that these are genuinely random processes. It isn't like they just aren't well understood. On the contrary, scientific explanations of these processes have been developed and they can be described mathematically. Predictions can even be made — but these predictions turn out to be probabilistic, statistical predictions about populations of atoms, not predictions of individual atoms. The behavior of the individual atoms remains unpredictable. The evidence so far thus indicates that these processes are not deterministic, but instead random.

All things considered, the "scientific" explanation and defense of determinism is lacking. So why does scientific determinism seem so compelling to so many? The reason is that it rests upon a widely accepted premise: the idea that the whole universe, from its initial conditions up till today, has developed and acted according to unchanging laws. But as we have seen, this premise is itself unproven and some of the evidence even runs counter to it (not that there are things that happen contrary to the laws of physics; just that there are things that defy law-like explanation).

Let's approach this from another angle: questions.

What are the laws of nature? — I'm not asking you to list them. I'm asking — What are they? — What is their nature?

Where do the laws of nature reside?

Do the laws of nature cause things to happen?

If so, how do they cause things?

By what mechanism do they govern the material world?

A serious contemplation of these questions has the potential to bring to the surface certain presuppositions many have regarding the laws. Very often, people seem to imagine the laws as some sort of mysterious force imposed on nature from outside of it — making things happen the way they do. Scientists sometimes speak of "the initial conditions of the

universe plus the laws?• as if the laws are not part of the universe. The fact is, this is how many think of it. Earlier, in our discussion of timelessness, we mentioned the belief in non-physical realities ? realms of forms, or ideas, believed to include mathematical objects. Since the laws of physics are expressed in the language of mathematics, they are often thought to actually be non-physical, non-temporal realities. While the laws of nature are claimed to be scientific, they sure do sound like features of religious, or at least quasi-religious, dogma.

It seems we need a reality check. If by expressions like ?the laws of physics?• or ?the laws of nature?• we refer to proposed non-physical objects or forces that are supposed to impose themselves on the natural world, or govern it, from beyond the bounds of time and space, then these laws do not exist at all. But, if instead of referring abstractly to ?the laws of nature,?• we speak of distinct statements and equations produced by scientists, commonly referred to as ?laws,?• they doubtless do exist and we can inquire as to their nature.

Kepler's laws of planetary motion, Newton's laws of motion, the laws of thermodynamics, the law of refraction, Faraday's law ? what are all these things? In reality, they are descriptions of aspects of the physical world. They describe certain types of objects and interactions between objects. That is really all they are. It's really quite simple. Yet, for some reason, people tend to give these descriptions an existence and powers of their own. They are treated very differently from how we treat most descriptions. On one hand, this is just weird. On the other hand, it isn't surprising at all given the theological context in which the descriptions we call ?laws of nature?• began to be produced. For example, Johannes Kepler, in formulating his laws of planetary motion, really thought that he was discovering divine laws that God had put in place to govern the planets. With this theological perspective, when one came up with a description of part of nature that concisely summarized a whole class of interactions, it would be easy to see that description as more than just a description. The laws thus inherited an out-of-this-world authority that has never completely vanished. Hence, the need for a reality check.

Again, all the things that we call ?laws of nature?• are just descriptions ? summaries of recurrent behavior of and between material objects. But a description should not be confused with a cause. The motion of objects like comets is not what it is because it obeys Newton's laws of motion. No! Newton's laws of motion are what they are because they describe objects like comets. The truth of the laws ? the descriptions ? depends on the physical reality of the behavior of the objects; the behavior of the objects does not depend on the descriptions. Thus, the so-called ?laws of nature?• do not actually explain why the world is the way it is, nor do they embody or enforce any causal power ? they simply describe things.

When proponents of ?scientific?• determinism appeal to the laws of nature, they aren't appealing to mere descriptions ? they are appealing to proposed unchanging laws that are supposed to govern the universe. These laws are said to be ?timeless,?• but as we have already seen, timelessness is impossible. They are also spoken of as though they are outside of the universe acting upon it, but materialism tells us there is no ?outside of the

universe.â?• Simply put, the laws needed to ensure a deterministic universe simply do not exist. Without these laws, the basis to which scientific determinists usually appeal is gone.

But suppose one was to say, â??Okay, forget the laws of nature â?? we still have simple cause and effect â?? and that proves determinism.â?• There are several problems with this â?? several reasons why cause and effect alone doesnâ??t give you determinism.

First of all, just because something is caused, doesnâ??t mean it is caused deterministically. The existence of randomness seems to indicate that some causes have effects that are not entirely determined ahead of time. A cause may have an array of possible effects, only one of which is actualized. Why that one? If the probability of each possible effect is equal to the others, it may be entirely random as to which is actualized. The cause made it certain that one of the possible effects would occur, but which effect would occur may be a matter of chance. But â??determinedâ?• and â??randomâ?• are just two extremes of a spectrum of types of causes. There can be probabilistic causes that arenâ??t entirely random, and some complex systems scientists have described various types of top-down causation that are neither deterministic nor random.

Secondly, for universal determinism to be true wholly due to cause and effect, there would have to be a single, deterministic, causal chain. But all it would take to make determinism untrue is for that chain to be interrupted even once. Iâ??m not referring to causation itself being interrupted, but to deterministic causation being interrupted. One random event would break the deterministic chain, rendering it impossible in principle to predict the entire history of the universe even from a complete knowledge of the initial conditions.

Third, there is no evidence that there is only one causal chain in the universe. If there was a big bang singularity, then there would have been a single point in time and space at which everything originated, and thus there would be a single causal chain (everything would trace back to a single cause). But the big bang singularity has not been proven and modern cosmology has many competing models, many of which donâ??t have anything like a big bang singularity.

The three above points show how the assumptions one would have to make to get determinism from causation alone are unfounded assumptions. But now, and more significantly, letâ??s turn our attention to some facts that show that determinism is not only unfounded but also untrue.

Materialism tells us that the fundamental nature of existence is material. Thus, matter is what is â?? everywhere. There is nowhere you could go where matter comes to an end. There is only matter, everywhere in every direction, without end. Furthermore, the fundamental reality of time tells us that there never was a moment before which there was no time, nor will there ever be a moment after which there will be no time. Thus, the universe is matter changing moment to moment, without beginning, without end. This means there is no single time to which everything can be traced, nor is there a single place that was the origin of all things. Thus, there could not have been a first cause for everything, and thus no single causal chain. There have always been multiple independent causal chains sharing this one universe. Even if a given causal chain could be described deterministically, it will likely sooner or later

potential that comes with genuine possibility. There are more lessons yet to learn, but for now, consider whether you have no reason to deny that possibility exists and every reason to think it does. What might be possible for you?

The Denial of Choice

There is still one more type of denial we need to consider in this Lesson: the denial of choice. Let's once again use our analogy of the canoe on a stream. Time-denial is like the stream not flowing and the canoe not traveling from point A to point B. Possibility-denial may grant the flow of the stream but it denies bifurcations, suggesting there is only one path you could go down. Obviously, in either of these cases, our ability to make free choices would be an illusion. But even if one grants the reality of time and of possibility, there is still the option to deny choice more directly. In our analogy, this would be like saying the stream flows and there are bifurcations, but you don't have a paddle or a rudder or anything else with which you could steer your canoe. Sure, with this denial, you will truly get somewhere in your boat, and where you get isn't predetermined, but you still have no control over where you end up.

Notice that with choice-denial, the focus isn't on how the universe at large operates. Instead, it focuses directly on the agents commonly thought to have free will and denies those agents that ability. Naturally, what one considers possible for an individual, or for any type of object, is influenced by how one views the universe, but still, these are truly independent issues. Both time and possibility could be real, as we have argued, and yet we could lack free will. The reason for this is that as much as real time and possibility are necessary conditions for free will, they aren't sufficient conditions — they don't of themselves produce free will. Take a rock. Does it have free will? Obviously not, and this is so despite the fact that it dwells in a universe in which both time and possibility are real. Clearly then, the existence of free will must require more than just existing in the universe we do; it requires having certain abilities, or capacities — capacities which not everything has.

What capacities are involved in free will? The goal in asking this question is just to get a clearer grasp on exactly what it is we are talking about when discussing choice, or free will. In other words, we aren't at this point trying to specify the actual mechanisms of decision-making; we're just trying to understand the basics of our subject. Usually, when people discuss free will, what is involved are things like the ability to consciously think, to contemplate options, to select among them, to have intentions, and to exercise conscious control over one's actions. On one level, no one denies that we have these capacities, as we all utilize them every day. The issue in the debate over free will is whether this perceived freedom of choice results from an actual ability to causally affect change with our conscious decisions or whether it is a sort of trick our brains play on us, concealing the fact that our choices are themselves caused by something outside of our conscious control and thus not ultimately free.

The question of conscious causal decisions is really at the heart of free will. The fact that I

am the cause of some action doesn't prove that I have freely chosen that action. My heart beats, and it can hardly be denied that I'm the one causing it to happen - the cause is internal to me, not external. Yet, I can't consciously will my heart to stop beating or to beat at a different rhythm. And this is just one example among many. Our nervous system, including our brain, is responsible for regulating and causing numerous operations that are outside of our conscious control. We don't consider these actions to result from free will even though we cause them for the very reason that we don't exercise conscious control over them. This shows that what we really mean by "free will" is conscious causal ability - it is the capacity of consciously deciding to cause certain actions with the possibility of consciously deciding to not cause them or to cause different actions instead.

Denying free will involves asserting that the choices of an agent do not actually take place in conscious deliberations. It is said that every choice is a physical process of the brain and therefore must have a sufficient cause in a preceding physical process in the brain. So, by the time you become consciously aware of a decision, your decision was already set by some unconscious physical process. If your choice was caused by a deterministic process that originated unconsciously, then it obviously isn't a free will choice. And randomness doesn't help here either since if your choice was caused by a random process, you likewise had no control of the outcome. So, the thought is we are damned to no freedom of choice either way. Our choices are caused by either deterministic or random processes, neither of which are consistent with you controlling your own choices.

There are several problems with this line of reasoning. First, it buys into a false dichotomy. While it is true that both total determinism and total randomness are inconsistent with free will, it isn't true that these are the only two options. They are actually just the two extremes on a spectrum of how options can be selected. Causation is actually very complex. Sometimes causes can produce effects deterministically and sometimes causes can produce random effects, but there are also many circumstances where there are several causal factors, each with different degrees of influence upon the effect and upon each other. We'll come back to this, but for now, it's enough to say that it is incorrect to assume that our choices must be caused either deterministically or randomly.

The second major problem is that it uses a double standard in its treatment of conscious and unconscious brain processes. On one hand, it denies conscious deliberation causal powers on the basis that this deliberation has prior causes in physical brain states. At the same time, it grants causal powers to those prior brain states even though they just as fully had prior physical causes themselves. By the way that some people emphasize the physicality of the prior brain states, it appears that, to some extent, they have bought into the idea that consciousness is somehow above or beyond the physical. But in reality, conscious brain processes are just as physical as unconscious brain processes. There is no reason to deny causal powers to one while granting them to the other.

The next problem is closely related. The standards that some think must be reached in order to justifiably say that our conscious deliberations have causal powers are not the standards we use to establish causal powers in any other case. Specifically, some seem to think that free

will requires escaping causation as though in order for a choice to be a cause of some effect, the choice itself must be utterly uncaused. But again, we don't use this standard for any other cause. As we just pointed out with unconscious brain processes they all have prior causes, but that doesn't stop us from recognizing that they themselves can also be causal. Those who deny free will too often apply overly simplistic understandings of causation to the question. In reality, free will doesn't require escaping causation, it only requires that our conscious decisions are among the various causal factors to the extent that they make a difference to the outcomes.

Conscious Choice as a Causal Factor

Very often, people think of causation in very simplistic terms, such as A causes B. A is the cause; B is the effect. This single cause to a single effect model may be sufficient to explain causation in a game of pool, but it falls far short of accounting for all the ways causation takes place in the world. The brain is the most complex single object yet discovered; it'll take a more complex model of causation to account for the causal operations in the brain. Thankfully models of causation have been developed in some of the more complex fields of science. To take us more in the direction of a model of causation that is appropriate and relevant for understanding free will, consider this model developed in the 1970s by an epidemiologist named Kenneth Rothman. It's called Causal Pies. The CDC has [an excellent web page](#) that describes this model using lung cancer as an example.

Lung cancer is a disease that can be caused in multiple different ways. Each way of getting the disease is referred to as a "disease pathway" or "causal pathway" for the disease. Rothman's Causal Pies model represents each pathway as a pie and understands each pie to be a "sufficient cause" for the disease. Each pie has several pieces, each of which represents a "component cause". So, each pie represents a collection of causal factors that together result in the disease. A given component cause (a pie piece) may occur in multiple disease pathways and thus be represented in several different pies. The aforementioned CDC web page gives smoking as one "component cause" and asbestos as another. One pie may have an asbestos piece but not a smoking piece while another pie may include smoking but not asbestos and yet another pie could include both. If a given piece occurs in all the pies, it is a "necessary cause" since there is no way to get the disease without it. If something all on its own was to cause the disease it would be considered a "sufficient cause" and be represented as a complete pie. As it turns out, smoking is neither a necessary cause for lung cancer (since people can get lung cancer without smoking) nor is it a sufficient cause (since some people can smoke without getting lung cancer). So if smoking is neither sufficient nor necessary for getting lung cancer, how can it be true that smoking causes lung cancer? The reason is that it is a piece of at least some lung cancer causal pies. Let's say one of these pies has 6 pieces, one of which is smoking. A person may have all 5 component causes (all 5 pieces) with the exception of smoking. In such a case, they will not have lung cancer since they do not have a sufficient cause for lung cancer. If they start smoking, the causal pie will

be complete and they will get lung cancer. Thus, the presence or absence of smoking may indeed be what makes the difference as to whether the person gets lung cancer. While itâ??s not the only cause, it is nonetheless a cause.

In order to have free will, it simply isnâ??t the case that our conscious decisions need to be entirely uncaused or to be absolute solo causes with no other component causes. Rather, what is required is that our conscious decisions constitute a piece of causal pie. So, is this the case? The answer is an unequivocal YES!

Hereâ??s an example: getting vaccinated. Letâ??s consider getting vaccinated as the effect. One could imagine several causal pathways (pies) that would result in this effect. Each pie would have several pieces representing the component causes. One such piece would be that a vaccine exists, another that it is available in the personâ??s local area. Another would be their ability to travel to the location of vaccination, and another would be that they choose to get vaccinated. Of course, not all of these pieces have to be in all the pies. For example, in some locations, there could be a service that brings the vaccines to the people so the people donâ??t have to travel anywhere to get them. Yet, in locations without that service, the ability to travel to the vaccination location would be an unavoidable piece of the causal pie. Likewise, one could imagine that some people could be forcibly vaccinated, in which case their causal pie would not include their choice to get vaccinated, but for anyone else, it is part of the causal pie.

At the time of writing this, we are in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and the choice of individuals to get vaccinated is one of the most causally relevant pieces of the causal pie, at least in the West. In most western countries, Covid vaccines exist and are available and most people are approved to get them and are able to in terms of their ability to travel and make time for it. But there is a sizable segment of the population who, due to their way of thinking about vaccines, are choosing to not get vaccinated. Their conscious deliberations and choices are thus a very real causal factor, as people concerned with public health are well aware. To deny the causal power of the conscious decisions of anti-vaxxers and the vaccine-hesitant would be just as dismissing of evidence as denying that smoking causes cancer.

And of course, there are many things for which conscious deliberation and choice are necessary causes. Take complex building projects like building a piano or a particle accelerator, or satellites, space rockets, MRI scanners, and the list goes on. Not only is conscious deliberation and choice a piece of the causal pie in all these instances, but it is a necessary piece in all of them. In other words, pianos never get built without conscious deliberation and choice. Satellites never get built without conscious deliberation and choice, etc. This makes it very hard to deny that we, as humans, really do cause things with our conscious decisions.

Letâ??s take another approach: tracing back from the effect to the cause. Say youâ??re in the middle of a Zoom call with a friend and suddenly you canâ??t hear them. This is the effect. What caused it? There are a few possible causes. One could be that your friendâ??s microphone malfunctioned, another could be that they muted it. Another cause could be that you muted your speakers. Upon noticing the effect, if you also noticed that your cat bumped

your elbow just before the audio cut out, you might think to trace back from the effect and discover that when your cat bumped your arm you hit a key on your keyboard. This would lead you to think you probably muted your speakers. If your friend was a few feet from their computer, they didn't mute their mic, which would probably lean you more in the direction of thinking the problem was on your end. Finally, you could hit the key to toggle your speakers and if they turn back on, you've discovered your cause.

Let's now apply this to a more complex scenario — one that is also more relevant for free will. Say you're a 50-year-old chemist and you're reflecting on your life and ask, "What caused me to be a chemist?" So, of course, becoming a chemist is the effect — what's the cause? You think back and remember that when you were 18 you made the decision to apply for university. At the time, you were equally in love with music and quite talented at it as well. Your parents loved both chemistry and music and were going to support you no matter what you did. Truly, the decision was yours. No external factor forced you into one or the other career. So, you thought long and hard about it. You considered what your life might be like as a musician and as a chemist. You considered the pros and cons of each, the effort each would take, the possible rewards, the likelihood of success, the potential impact you could have, etc. Ultimately, chemistry won out and you chose to apply for university and got in.

In this case, no one would argue that the choice is the only causal factor at play. Receiving early education and having a supportive family were also causal factors. Yet, the conscious decision of the individual is clearly among the causal factors, and in this case, the decisive one. I'm sure you can notice this same thing at play in your own life when it comes to decisions that don't have obvious right answers. You have to deliberate and come to a decision, and your decisions have a causal impact — they are sometimes the decisive factor in bringing about the effect or in selecting one effect among others. The only way to really deny this would be to say that your decision was itself entirely caused by something outside of your control like unconscious processes in your brain. But this suggestion is not only unevicenced; it is implausible. Material reality can be evaluated at many different scales and some scales are more or less relevant depending on the questions you're asking. If you want to know why a certain politician won an election, you won't find the answer by studying reality at the level of the motion of galaxies through the universe or at the scale of subatomic particles; the answer will be at the level of social interactions. Likewise, one can examine what happens in the brain at different levels. One could study it at the level of subatomic particles, or higher up, molecules, or higher up, neurons, higher up yet, neural networks, etc. Our imagination and our conscious deliberations are processes of the brain that we are only beginning to understand. Yet, it is a level of processing we know to exist. While understanding these processes more fully will doubtless be illuminating (See [Peter Tse's free online course on the neural basis of free will](#)), it isn't necessary to know how something works in order to know that it works. Consider radios, do you know how they work? In detail? Probably not. Do you know that they work? Absolutely! The fact is, when it comes to something like choosing a career path, we can know that our conscious

deliberations are the relevant level of analysis and the relevant level to find causation since lower levels are ignorant of careers and music and chemistry. When we make such decisions, what we do is imagine different possible futures and choose between them. The molecules and particles of our brain are the bits of matter out of which our brains are organized, but it is the higher-order organization, and the processes that take place within that organization, that produce our thinking, imagining, and conscious deliberation. Lower levels like individual neurons or subatomic particles know nothing of careers or the distant future and so it is implausible to think that those levels are causing our career paths in a bottom-up sort of way. The higher level of our conscious contemplation and imagination is the level that is aware of things like careers and thus is the correct level to find the causes for things like career choices, etc.

Now, let's approach this from yet another angle. There are true causes and there are pseudo-causes. Another way to put this is that there are things that are actual causes and then there are things that people mistake to be causes. There are numerous examples for this to be found in comparing genuine medicine with pseudo-medicine. And there are ways to tell the difference between true medical causes and pseudo-causes. Let's use a proven treatment -- vaccines, compared to a pseudo-treatment -- homeopathic remedies. With vaccines, there is a correspondence between the exact content of the vaccine and the effect it has upon the patient, which is why different vaccines need to be developed for different diseases. Not so with homeopathy; you could take any homeopathic remedy for any ailment and the effect will be the same (which is no effect on objective outcomes; only subjective outcomes are impacted since it is essentially a placebo). With vaccines, there is a dose-response relationship. Not so with homeopathic remedies, the amount taken has no bearing on the outcome. With vaccines, there is a biologically plausible mechanism of action; not so with homeopathic remedies. With vaccines, if you remove the cause (the vaccine), you remove the effect. Again, this is not the case with homeopathic remedies -- a sham homeopathic remedy believed to be a "real" homeopathic remedy has the same effect as a "real" homeopathic remedy.

So, how does conscious deliberation and choice fair with this sort of test? Is it a real cause or a pseudo-cause? Well, with conscious decision, there is a correspondence between the exact content of the conscious decision and the effect. If you consciously deliberate possible career paths and chose to be a chemist, the effect will correspond -- you'll become a chemist rather than waking up one day to find that you became a musician after all. This correspondence would not be expected to be so consistent if the true cause were on a level of brain activity that knew nothing of careers. Likewise, with conscious decision, there is something like a dose-response relationship. The more fully you imagine a plan and the more detailed your series of decisions is, the more precise and successful your result will be. Say I decided I want to learn ancient Hebrew, but my decision is as ill-defined as that. I won't get very far. But if I increase the level of conscious deliberation and choice by creating a schedule and a study plan, choosing resources, etc. I will see a corresponding increase in the response. If learning Hebrew was instead caused by an underlying neurological condition that

wasn't dependent on my conscious deliberations, why should I expect that an increase in my deliberations and choices relating to Hebrew-learning could increase the actual results? How about a plausible biological mechanism? Well, the areas of my brain responsible for higher-order processing, imagination, and decision-making certainly have the power to take in data from my senses at the beginning of the process and also to send the necessary instructions to the rest of my body once a decision is made in order to carry out the decision, so yes; there is certainly biological plausibility. Lastly, if I remove the cause (conscious deliberation and choice) do I remove the effect? Well, for areas in which conscious deliberation and choice are necessary causes, this is certainly the case. Take a group of piano makers and have them avoid making choices and no piano will be built. The only qualification here is that certain effects have conscious choice as a component piece in only some of their causal pies. In such cases, there are ways to still get the effect without conscious choice, but this doesn't mean that conscious choice isn't a genuine cause any more than the fact that you can get lung cancer without smoking proves that smoking isn't a genuine cause of lung cancer.

Let's go back to the choice to not get vaccinated. It simply isn't the case that people who choose to not get vaccinated are making that choice because they have some underlying neurological condition that is the unconscious cause of their vaccine refusal. We know this because there are people who at one point refused to get vaccinated but who later changed their minds and got vaccinated. How did the change come about? Not by treating some underlying neurological condition, but by ideas — by changing how one thinks about vaccines. Some of the most important issues in our world depend on the notion that we have actions that are caused by our conscious free-will choices and that by reasoning with each other and improving our ideas, we can thus change our actions and our future. Consider the civil rights movement and the method of non-violent resistance. Martin Luther King was influenced by reading the writings of Gandhi, and through his conscious deliberation of Gandhi's ideas together with the ideas found in the teachings of Jesus, he decided that non-violence could work as a method of effecting social change to the benefit of black Americans. The method of non-violent resistance itself works by causing those who observe it to realize the injustice of the treatment of the oppressed population. This is what happened in the early 60s when police brutality against black Americans was televised across America. People could see that the civil rights advocates were not violent and didn't deserve oppression but were standing up for equal rights for themselves and their oppressed brothers and sisters in a principled and irreproachable manner. The battle for civil rights was first and foremost a battle of ideas. And this battle takes place on the level of our conscious deliberations, imaginings, and higher-order reasoning. If our conscious deliberations and choices have no causal powers, this should have had no effect, but it did (not that the battle is won — but the victories of the early civil rights movement cannot be denied). The most significant changes in human history have been due to ideas. Liberal democracy, public health, scientific methods, social reform — these all depend upon human conscious deliberation and choice and the way that changes take place in these spheres is through

reasoning, dialogue, or changing one another's beliefs and ways of thinking in one way or another.

In conclusion, none of the varieties of choice-denial — whether through denying time, denying possibility, or denying our capacity for conscious causal decisions directly — are grounded in material reality or sound reasoning. Furthermore, we have compelling evidence in favor of the reality of time, of possibility, and of our capacity to exercise causal power through our conscious decisions. And now that we see more clearly how much our beliefs and imaginations matter, perhaps we can see how this knowledge can truly make a difference. The various denials we have discussed are not fringe theories that have had no influence in the world. Rather, they have dominated in science, philosophy, and religion, and whether consciously or subconsciously, they have informed our views on human nature, and have prescribed the limits of our imagination regarding what is possible for society and for ourselves as individuals. But in light of our new-found realization of the possibilities before us and of our capacity to cause the possible to become the actual, we are now ready to learn our next lesson:

Lesson Four: Our Moral Potential

How moral can we be? In our previous lesson, we established that moral advancement really is possible, but now we ask, to what extent? Are there limits to how moral we can become? Can we improve only in minor ways, or is it possible to undergo an entire moral transformation? Can a moral monster become a moral model? Is it possible to act morally all the time or are we doomed to commit some immoral actions at least some of the time?

These are all inquiries into human moral nature. To be clear, we are not at this point discussing *how* to reach our moral potential; we are seeking to understand exactly what our moral potential is. We need to know what we are capable of. Does our human nature prohibit us from reaching certain moral heights, or does it allow for pure, unadulterated morality? On one hand, if we overestimate our potential, we may make futile efforts only to be met with disappointment. On the other hand, if we underestimate our potential, we may justify continued immoral behavior in ourselves and in others to the detriment of all impacted by that behavior.

While we wouldn't want to make either error, we should be especially on guard to avoid the latter. If we make the mistake of overestimating our moral potential and we strive to achieve a moral character beyond what is possible to attain, sure we might be disappointed, but by overshooting, we will likely become more moral than we would be otherwise. None would be harmed by this overestimation. To the contrary, all would be benefited by the moral advancement. However imperfect, it would be the best that could be done. But if we make the mistake of underestimating our moral potential, the harm could be immense, both to ourselves and to others. We may justify wrongs, thinking they can't be avoided when, in fact, they might be. We may make no efforts to reform when such efforts might actually

make a difference. And, as we will discuss more fully in a future Lesson, immoral actions are not victimless crimes. By neglecting, through underestimation, to reach our moral potential, people would likely be wronged, harm would result, and the injustice would be excused. In reality, it's quite common for people to have a low estimation of human moral potential. How often have you heard it said, or said yourself, "I'm only human" in the aftermath of some moral failure? This is perhaps the most obvious and common expression of belief in humanity's moral impotence. It's supposed to convey the idea that we can't help but do immoral things, at least some of the time. Songs have even been written based on this expression. "I'm only human" is paired with lists of immoral acts and appeals to not lay blame. It is as though being human is enough to render moral integrity impossible. Over the centuries, there have been many theories of human moral nature that share this general pessimism. Some theories root their pessimism in the materiality of humanity, insisting that anything material is inherently corrupt. In light of Lesson One, I probably don't even need to explain why this is wrong. More popularly, though, there are theories which hold that human nature, while once morally pure, became corrupt. Such is the doctrine of original sin. There are several versions of this doctrine, but all share the idea that by Adam's sin, human nature was corrupted and that all of Adam's offspring thus have sin built in from birth. A popular theologian expressed it as follows:

"This state of corruption is called original sin. We are not sinners because we sin; we sin because we are sinners. The corrupt fruit flows out of our corrupt natures. When we sin, we are doing what comes naturally to us as fallen creatures." R. C. Sproul, *What is Baptism?*, p. 40

Views of human nature that embrace this doctrine not only say that without God, humans are morally corrupt, but they go further and say that even with all the help God can offer (help than which none can be greater), humans are doomed to still sin in this life. It is thought that so long as we have these bodies, sin will be in us and we will thus sin, at least occasionally. This idea that human nature has immorality built in has been so influential that even those who have abandoned its theological underpinnings, often retain its conclusion "immorality is an inescapable part of human nature. Thus, it is a cultural norm (regardless of one's religion or irreligion) to chalk up our immoral behavior to human nature. Whether or not we have inherited original sin as a corrupt and corrupting force in our nature, we have certainly inherited it as a belief in our culture. But we need to put this view of human nature to the test. Rather than taking this cultural inheritance for granted, we should seek to understand human nature by actually examining human nature using sound reasoning.

Our Moral Potential As Seen in Human Nature

Let's start with some basic principles — principles that follow from straightforward logic: If there is something that human nature does not allow, a human could not do it. Likewise, if there is something that human nature compels, a human could not refrain from doing it. We can restate these principles as the following maxims:

What a human has done, human nature does allow.

What a human has shunned, human nature does not compel.

So,

If a human has loved a friend, human nature allows the loving of friends. (Stated negatively, human nature does not prohibit you from loving your friends.)

If a human has sacrificed their comfort to help a stranger, human nature allows the sacrifice of comfort to help strangers.

If a human has shunned the temptation to steal, then human nature does not compel stealing.

If a human has shunned anger, then human nature does not compel anger.

If a human has cultivated hope, then human nature allows the cultivation of hope.

If a human has shunned sexual vice, then human nature does not compel sexual vice.

If a human has defended the oppressed, even at a cost to themselves, then human nature allows the defending of the oppressed, even at a cost to one's self.

The list goes on and on. Every moral act any human has ever done, human nature allows — it is within the reach of our moral potential. Likewise, every immoral act any human has ever shunned, human nature does not compel such an act — it is within our moral potential to shun all such acts. With this in mind, history becomes a database for understanding human moral potential. Has a human ever resisted overeating? If yes, then it is possible to resist overeating. Has a human ever loved an enemy? If yes, then it is possible to love an enemy.

You can also do your own experiments. If there is some moral deed that you don't do, do it just once and you will have proven that doing it is within your moral potential. If there is some immoral act that you have committed time and time again, resist it just once and you will have proven that resisting it is within your moral potential.

Another principle is that any moral deed done under severe pressure to not do it can be done under milder pressure to not do it. For example, Oscar Schindler was a member of the Nazi Party who chose to risk his life to save Jews during the holocaust. The pressure on him to simply not help them, but to instead go along with the Nazi program, was a greater pressure than most people ever experience. If caught, he surely would have been executed. If he was able to sacrifice his own mortal security to help others under such severe circumstances, surely we can sacrifice our security to help others under less severe circumstances.

The flip side of this same principle is this: Any immoral act shunned despite great pressure to do it can likewise be shunned despite milder pressure. Perhaps the most extreme examples of this are instances of torture wherein the victim resists the temptation to betray their friends

despite the intense desire to end their torment. If all the anguish of torture can be resisted in order to shun betraying a friend, surely we can shun any temptation to betray our friends under milder circumstances.

And actually, an act doesn't even need to be immoral for us to learn the lesson that what is resisted under severe conditions can be resisted under milder conditions. There have been many who have fasted and thus shown that appetite can be resisted. If a person who hasn't eaten in weeks can resist the temptation to satisfy their intense hunger, surely we can resist the temptation to overeat when we are already well fed.

In the movements of non-violent resistance led by people such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., the participants learned to meet violence and abuse with love and calm dignity. They walked streets in perfect peace for noble causes and were met with insult and violence — spitting, hosing, blows to the face and other hateful brutalizations. Some must have felt strong compulsions to fight back, and yet they resisted those compulsions. If they were able to resist what must have been strong urges to engage in violence under such severe oppression, (and in such a circumstance when returning violence for violence would be most easily justified), surely we can resist violent urges under milder conditions and ones in which violence is more apparently unjustified.

Under the severest circumstances imaginable, there have been people who have resisted immoral acts and who have persevered in choosing to do what is right. Since, even under the most intense pressure, human nature does not compel us to commit immoral acts, and since that which can be resisted under intense pressure can be resisted under milder pressure, we must conclude that there is no circumstance in which it is impossible to resist immorality. And if there is no circumstance in which we are forced to make an immoral choice, then it must equally be true that in every circumstance it is possible to make the moral choice.

A good that has been done, can be done. An evil that has been resisted, can be resisted. Every moral act a human has ever done, human nature allows — it is within our moral potential. Every immoral act a human has ever resisted or overcome, human nature does not compel that act — it is within our moral potential to be free from such acts. Thus our moral potential is greater than most realize. We are not doomed to be slaves of our own immoral impulses, nor are we inescapably inept when it comes to multiplying moral virtues. It is possible to live a morally pure life.

Our Moral Potential As Seen in the Nature of Morality

In seeking to understand our moral potential in light of human nature, we've seen that our human nature is remarkably unlimiting. This isn't to say that our nature is morally pure or that it makes reaching our moral potential easy or automatic; on the contrary, it includes a mixed bag of moral and immoral impulses. But, as we've seen, these impulses don't force our choices. However hard it may be, it is possible to resist immoral choices despite our strongest impulses to make them and it is possible to make moral choices despite our

strongest impulses to neglect them.

At this point, we need to return to examining the nature of morality itself to see what light it can shed on our moral potential. As a brief reminder, here are some of the major points from our first two lessons that are especially relevant to our current subject:

1. The nature of reality is material.
2. What it means for an idea to be true is that it accurately reflects material reality. Conversely, what it means for an idea to be false is that it does not accurately reflect material reality.
3. The truth value of every idea or statement is determined by whether it matches material reality.
4. Every idea or statement includes every moral idea or statement.
5. When we choose to carry out an action, that action can be evaluated via the idea upon which it is based.
6. What it means for an action to be moral is that the idea upon which it is based is true. Conversely, what it means for an action to be immoral is that the idea upon which it is based is false.
7. Morality and Immorality thus have a direct relationship with truth and falsehood. Indeed, the former are based on the latter. What truth and falsehood are to ideas is what morality and immorality are to actions based on those ideas.

One key aspect we need to be sure to not miss from these points is that truth-based morality automatically implies that not all actions are of moral relevance — only actions based on ideas are. In other words, if an action isn't based on an idea at all, it can't be based on a true idea or a false idea and thus it cannot be moral or immoral. For example, people who suffer from motor disorders may at times perform actions that result in harming themselves or others, but those actions are not based on ideas, being as involuntary as a heart beating or a stomach emptying. Thus, the moral value of such actions cannot be evaluated. If an action has no idea (either true or false) upon which it is based, the action itself cannot be moral or immoral; remember, what it means for an action to be either moral or immoral is for it to be based on an idea that is either true or false. Morality therefore properly relates to idea-based actions. And, as we discussed in our section on choice-denial, the parts of our brain involved in processing ideas are capable of volition; that is, choice. To do what is morally right, then, amounts to making choices to act upon true ideas. Likewise, doing what is morally wrong amounts to making choices to act upon false ideas.

What does all this mean for our moral potential? Well, first of all, it shows that morality is intimately connected to knowledge. We can only choose to act upon ideas of which we have knowledge, and we can only know what we have opportunity to know. Imagine a mother and father living hundreds of years before the discovery of microbes. They may have learned that bathing is important to maintain good health and thus chose to be diligent in bathing their children. If their water source happened to be contaminated with dangerous bacteria or

viruses, their actions might result in the death of their children. This is undoubtedly tragic. Yet, is it immoral on the part of the parents? The parents may have been using valid reasoning and they may have used the best knowledge available to them and thus all the best evidence they had (or even could have had) indicated that their premises were true. Thus, their choice to bathe their children was as moral a choice as any could be. The problem here isn't a failure on the part of the parents to make moral choices, the problem is the limits of knowledge and the corresponding limits of one's capacity to make choices based on ideas that are actually true.

It is as though we all inhabit a moral sphere the limits of which are prescribed by our knowledge. Yet, this sphere does not represent our moral potential; it only represents our current moral capacity. The limit of our current moral capacity is set by our current knowledge, but our moral potential is set by our potential knowledge.

To use a slight variation of our example of parents bathing their children in contaminated water, let's say it's not parents living several hundred years ago, but parents living today in a part of the world that lacks knowledge of microbes. These parents would be in the same moral position as those living hundreds of years ago with the exception of having a greater likelihood of increasing their knowledge. So, let's say someone with knowledge of microbes travels to the area and discovers that the water source is contaminated. They inform the locals and provide them with a different (and uncontaminated) water source. If the parents receive the knowledge of this truth newly available to them, they will expand their moral capacity (or, enlarge their moral sphere) and thus more fully embody their moral potential. At each step, they were as morally perfect in their sphere as they possibly could be, and could not be reasonably faulted for their former ignorance. In other words, prior to receiving knowledge about microbes and the new water source, they had no real choice to do better than they had done. Thus, in principle, they didn't make any immoral choice.

But what if, instead, they rejected this new knowledge? Let's say they were presented with a chance to learn what is wrong with the water, but rather than willingly investigating, they rejected the opportunity, perhaps holding on to former ideas that caused them to favor their current water source. To choose to reject potential knowledge amounts to choosing to base future actions on ideas of questionable truth-value - it is to abandon the process of sound reasoning for establishing the truth of the ideas upon which we base our decisions. This virtually ensures future immoral choices. Thus, the decision to limit the growth of our knowledge is in itself an immoral act. Morality depends on truth, and truth unknown is truth demoralized. We must know the truth in order for the truth to set us free from immorality.

What this implies is two-fold. On one hand, we can't be morally culpable for acting contrary to truths we have no possibility of knowing. On the other hand, we are morally culpable for acting contrary to truths we do know *as well as truths we have neglected to learn*.

It is possible to live in such a way that all your choices are moral according to the best of your knowledge, and it is possible to accept every ray of knowledge that shines upon your path and to be actively engaged in seeking more knowledge. But even this doesn't mean

you have reached your moral potential. So long as it is possible to increase your knowledge, it is possible to increase your moral capacity and you have not yet reached your moral potential. Is not your level of knowledge capable of constant development? If so, then our moral potential must be beyond what we can possibly imagine. How sad, then, if we fail to increase our moral sphere, or even worse, if we fail to live morally within our comparatively small current moral sphere — our current moral capacity. Our human nature does not make us fail to attain moral integrity (that is, living consistently moral lives to the fullness of our current capacity). Rather, immoral choices are due to not giving truth its proper place as the only standard for our ideas and actions. But, we can, and indeed should, choose truth and thus live up to our moral capacity. And we can, and indeed should, increase our knowledge and thus enlarge our capacity to embrace more of our potential.

In short, combining what we have learned of human nature with what we have learned about the nature of morality lets us know that our current moral capacity is comprised of the following three things:

1. We can reject everything we know to be immoral.
2. We can choose to do every moral good within our reach.
3. We can actively increase our knowledge.

When it comes to our ultimate moral potential, we can see that it goes well beyond the limits of our current knowledge, being equal in extent to our *potential* knowledge. We should therefore expect to be ever increasing our moral capacity, ever advancing in the discovery and embodiment of greater and greater extents of our moral potential.

Lesson Five: The Moral Obligations of Coexistence

Now that we've learned something of the expansiveness of our moral potential and the achievability of living consistently moral lives to the fullness of our current moral capacity, we are brought to the question of whether such progressive moral perfection is merely a privilege to be taken advantage of at the leisure of those who decide they want it, or whether attaining it is a moral imperative. To put this another way, in these lessons we've learned that it is within our reach to 1) live without known immorality and 2) constantly expand the sphere of our moral capacity. In light of this, we ask, is living up to our current moral capacity, and continually enlarging it, morally optional? None would deny that it would be good to do, but is it also bad to not do it? Is it merely a noble venture of self-improvement for those seeking personal enrichment or is it a moral obligation resting on all of us?

As we established in the last lesson, since morality is based on material reality, moral choices must necessarily be choices to act in harmony with truth. And we cannot choose to act in harmony with truth if we don't have a knowledge of truth. Thus, to limit our own knowledge by rejecting truth, or refusing to investigate, is to guarantee future immoral acts. It is choosing untruth over truth, ignorance over knowledge, thus planting one's feet upon

the ground of immorality. Another way to express this same reality is that neglecting to fulfill, and continually enlarge, the sphere of our moral capacity is itself immoral. Moral principle, then, does demand progressive moral perfection. It isn't a moral option; it is a moral obligation. To say otherwise would be to say that immorality is morally okay, which is clearly a contradiction and thus couldn't possibly be true.

Learning From The Present Crisis

Currently, we have another means of learning this lesson — the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic is already tragic enough, so let's not fail to learn what moral lessons we can from it, lest we increase the tragedy and pave the way for another. The current pandemic teaches us the lesson that the things we do — the choices we make — have an impact on others; an impact that can mean life or death. Five years ago, if you met someone who expressed anti-vaccine sentiments, you might have thought it was too bad they were mistaken and you might have thought it was sad, but you probably wouldn't have thought they were guilty of some major moral offense. After all, everyone's entitled to their own opinion. But now, so far into the pandemic, the consequences of such views can be seen more fully. The Kaiser Family Foundation recently published a brief showing that from June to December 2021, there were 163,000 Covid-19 deaths in the United States alone that would have likely been prevented if everyone who could have, had just gotten vaccinated.³[COVID-19 mortality preventable by vaccines — Peterson-KFF Health System Tracker](#) They also showed that in roughly the same period (from June to November), hospitalization of unvaccinated persons sick with Covid-19 cost the American people approximately 13.8 billion dollars.⁴[Unvaccinated COVID-19 hospitalizations cost billions of dollars — Peterson-KFF Health System Tracker](#) Vaccines were available during this whole period, as was more than sufficient information for honest investigators to have their vaccine questions answered, but a substantial enough amount of people chose to remain unvaccinated resulting in this much death, sorrow, and debt (with its attending hardships). And of course, these are only some of the detrimental results of failing to live in harmony with the truths regarding Covid-19 prevention. At present, nearly 5.5 million people have died of Covid-19 worldwide and there have been about 295 million cases, with a yet unknown percentage of survivors suffering long-term health problems. These numbers would doubtless be fewer if more had been diligent with mask wearing and physical distancing from the start.

Imagine if everyone in the world considered it a moral obligation to act in accordance with ideas that match material reality (aka truth). All would have diligently put into practice the necessary measures immediately. The pandemic would not have been nearly as bad; in fact, it may not have even become a pandemic. Instead, millions have died, millions more have suffered, and society across the globe has been thrown into various degrees of dysfunction. This shows that individual morality is a necessary condition for long-term functional society. Notice, it isn't just a condition for a Utopian society; it is a condition for the continuance of functionality in an ordinary society. So long as people act in ways that are contrary to

material reality, society will be continually thrown into bouts of dysfunction — not merely to the degree of inconvenience, but to the degree of devastation.

Back in 2019, before Covid hit, the World Health Organization named vaccine hesitancy as one of the major threats to global health.[5Ten threats to global health in 2019 \(archive.org\)](#)

And boy were they right. Again, the fundamental problem here is acting upon ideas that simply don't match material reality. In material reality, to stop a virus like SARS-CoV-2, it is necessary to implement a combination of measures including masking, distancing, and vaccinating. To deny the reality of the virus or the efficacy, safety, or necessity of any or all of the measures to stop it is, simply put, a form of reality denial. To deny any of these realities results in acting in a way that ignores them, which in this case results in allowing the virus to spread and to cause disease and death.

To think that so much devastation could come with those through whom it came bearing no moral responsibility would be nothing short of moral blindness. If there had been no way for them to do better or know better, they couldn't be reasonably blamed. But the sad truth is that they could have known better and done better. What is the right response to this? Is it to start grabbing pitchforks and require blood for blood? No. While it is understandable, and even justifiable, to be enraged by the actions of those who have caused so much harm, we also need to ensure that reason and sound judgment reign supreme in our thoughts lest we fall into a way of thinking governed by rage or revenge rather than truth and thus add immorality to immorality. The truth is that those who have chosen to remain unvaccinated have not done so because they want people to suffer or die. Most, if not all, of them would be horrified to realize the true end of the path they tread. Most people who have refused to get vaccinated against Covid-19 didn't suddenly adopt anti-vaccine sentiments once the pandemic started; they had formed at least the start of these sentiments already, at a time when the negative effects weren't so apparent.

For many years, there have been people who have formed beliefs about vaccines based on personal experience, prejudice against the medical field or government, conspiracy theories, alternative medicine beliefs, or political ideology rather than on a careful, unbiased investigation of the material facts. It's unfortunately quite normal for all of us to find it hard to change a view once it's embraced. Confirmation bias makes us feel justified in the course we've already taken and we become convinced that we're right. It's rare to critically re-examine the evidence for a position already held. This is something we've all been guilty of — not just people with anti-vaccine beliefs. The conditions of things happened to change in a way that brought the danger of anti-vaccine beliefs and actions to the forefront, but the fact that the danger was less obvious before the pandemic should make us examine whether we have beliefs and habits that are just as dangerous and just as immoral, but the negative results just haven't ripened. Do we have any beliefs that simply aren't based on material reality? Do we act based on ideas that aren't true? Is it possible that these beliefs and behaviors could have negative effects on others that just haven't been manifested yet?

Other Examples of Our Impact

One increasingly well-known example of the negative impact of our actions is human-caused climate change. Before it was known that this was happening, no one was morally culpable for their actions in producing unsafe amounts of CO₂. But once it was discovered that our collective actions are causing harm, this knowledge brought moral responsibility (along with the chance to change our behavior and minimize damage). While the carbon footprint of an individual may not be all that substantial, with literally billions of people on the planet, it adds up. Plus, we all play a part in creating social norms, which end up affecting policies and we thus ultimately have a large impact. If we don't care to find out the truth about how our actions may be negatively impacting the environment, and to make sure we're acting based on true ideas, we are morally responsible for the impact our actions will have on others, even if we never see the results due to the brunt of the blow falling on people far away or in future generations.

All of this is an outgrowth of the simple reality that none of us are totally isolated. We all share this world and our actions impact others. We coexist with other humans and, indeed, other animals, and there are certain moral obligations that unavoidably go along with that. None of us chose to come into existence, but given that we have, we cannot escape the fact that we have an impact on others, and thus, we need to do everything possible to ensure that our impact is good and not bad.

We can divide our impact into two basic categories: passive and active. Our passive impact is the impact we have by just existing. Say a couple has been trying to get pregnant. They have difficulties and don't conceive until after several years of trying. If they have a miscarriage, the little life has still had an impact on them (potentially a major impact), even as an embryo or fetus. Obviously, embryos and fetuses don't make conscious deliberations and choices and thus can't be morally responsible for any impact they have. This is the nature of our passive impact – it is the influence we have just by existing. We have no control over it and it isn't morally relevant.

Our active impact, on the other hand, is the impact we have by the actions we take. We deliberate, and make choices, shape our own characters and influence others as they shape theirs. The choices we make leave their mark on the lives and memories of others, on the well-being of animals, on the environment, the economy, social norms, etc. All of this is our active impact. This is the arena of our choices and thus the arena of our moral responsibility. We've already discussed some of the obvious examples, like how our choices can impact public health, or the environment and, through the environment, future generations. Other obvious examples include things we directly do or say to family and friends, or to others we know. We all know that we influence those with whom we are in direct contact – just think of how great an impact others you know have had on you.

Another example that is very easy to discern, though thought of less, is the impact we have on others by the degree of aid we require from them by our own choices. Obviously,

sometimes people need aid due to factors totally outside of their control, like genetic diseases or falling victim to accidents or crime. But many enter into neediness through their own choices. People who engage in unhealthy habits like smoking, alcoholism, drug abuse, overeating, etc. increase their likelihood of developing a whole host of diseases that take time, effort, and money to treat. On average, those who lead unhealthy lives are more likely to have a more unpleasant and prolonged demise, spending perhaps years needing aid from family, friends, or social institutions. Again, those who have such a demise through misfortune are not at fault, and it is only natural to have compassion for all in such a position. But those who ruin their health through their own choices by gratifying their appetites do so to the detriment of themselves and others. And to keep the point fresh, if one were to engage in unhealthy habits with no means of discovering those habits to be unhealthy, they wouldn't be guilty of a moral violation. But we all know that smoking, overeating, or living on junk food is bad for our health. So to engage in these habits anyway is to act contrary to what we know to be true in material reality. These decisions impact others and we are morally responsible for that impact. The same is true when it comes to acting irresponsible financially and thus putting a financial burden on people or institutions that might have been avoided.

This brings us to another instance of our impact: our impact on other animals. We share this world not only with other humans but with other animals as well. Yet we seem to care little for their habitats or their lives. We destroy the forest homes of many animals (even driving them to extinction) only to grow feed for other animals we've destined for slaughter to put their flesh on our plates. Here in the west, along with plenty of other places in the world, we don't depend on animal flesh for sustenance; we just eat it because we like it. But at what cost? Most know that factory farms don't generally treat animals well, but even if they aren't beaten or shoved around, or physically abused in overt ways, living just to be fattened and slaughtered is far from justifiable. People generally know this, dislike it, but then ignore it to gratify the appetite for flesh. Is this morally justified? Millions upon millions of animals are killed each year to gratify the appetites of those who could live just as well without their flesh. Once again, this is an area where people commonly know at least the basics of the material facts, but put those facts out of their minds to allow themselves to enjoy their habit. This behavior is clearly not based on truth, but is done in spite of truths and is thus as immoral as any act we commit against our fellow humans.

Acts of Disengagement

So far, we've mostly focused on acts of engagement. Eating flesh, spreading ideas we don't know to be true (like anti-vax ideas), indulging in unhealthy habits, etc. are all acts of engagement. But now we turn our attention to acts of disengagement. They are just as much actions based on choices, and they have just as much of an impact; the only difference is that rather than increasing our involvement with a certain person, subject, or thing, they decrease or eliminate our involvement. We might think that by decreasing or eliminating our

involvement with someone, we decrease or eliminate our impact on them. While this is sometimes true, it certainly isn't always true and sometimes just the opposite is true.

The most extreme form of disengagement is suicide. Sometimes people commit suicide because they think they only hurt people and it would be better for them to have no impact whatsoever and think the way to make this happen is suicide. In reality, suicide would likely be the most impactful decision they would ever make. Those who have lost friends or family to this act of ultimate disengagement know that it leaves wounds that last. The point here is not to blame those who have committed suicide, but rather to show that acts of disengagement are truly and fully acts and they have an impact. Acts of disengagement are not part of our passive impact over which we have no control; they are part of our active impact, for they result from our choices and behavior.

If we choose to disengage from a relationship with a family member or friend, we impact them by that disengagement. Those who have been disowned by family members may be daily tormented by the broken bond.

But withdrawing from people isn't the only form of disengagement. Giving up on pursuits is also an act of disengagement that has an impact on the world. One of the hallmarks of science years, decades, even centuries spent toiling away in pursuit of some knowledge or technological innovation. Only by this continual engagement, moving forward despite repeated "failures," does science advance. And look at all the benefit to humanity as a result! If scientists were to disengage rather than persevere in their engagement with the process, the world would certainly be a different place and just as certainly worse. To disengage from a noble pursuit that is for the betterment of humanity may delay bringing an end to some suffering; which means, in effect, that the disengagement might prolong suffering that could have been averted. Such a disengagement is of moral consequence and those who disengage through succumbing to discouragement or weariness are thus morally responsible for the resulting impact.

Perhaps the most overtly immoral act of disengagement is to disengage from the pursuit of truth and moral advancement. Some people at one time care to be moral and to live in harmony with truth, but later disengage from that pursuit for a variety of reasons, whether growing tired of exerting the required effort, or a desire to indulge some immoral appetite. No matter the reason, to disengage from the pursuit of truth and moral advancement is to choose untruth and immorality; it is abandoning goodness and knowledge to gratify some immoral desire, even if it is as simple as loving the ease of not having to think about what is moral and immoral. But evading the consciousness of morality does not evade moral consequence, nor moral responsibility.

The Pervasiveness of Our Moral Obligation

The last part of this lesson deals with the fact that the moral obligations of coexistence are all-encompassing. It is easy to deceive ourselves into thinking that we are justified in doing whatever we want to do so long as we don't hurt others or so we think. In reality, this

means dividing our actions into those we recognize to have an impact on others and those we think won't impact others. Into this latter category, we squeeze all our self-gratification and habits we couldn't otherwise justify. In reality, there is no such category. Everything we do, no matter how public or how private; no matter how big or how small, no matter how open or how secret, has its impact.

The things that we do shape who we are. And by forming our characters, we decide how we will interact with others, what we will think, what we will say, what we will do. When we indulge some private appetite that we tell ourselves impacts no one but us, we pave the way for our own future acts. If we think we are a good person, we will tell ourselves that our actions must not be that bad, or at least must in some sense be excusable. But again, this forms our characters into ones willing to bend moral principle. When we see others commit the same wrongs that we have justified in ourselves, we will justify it in them too, or at least refrain from saying or doing something about it for fear of hypocrisy. The truth is that we are constantly shaping our moral characters by our every action, our every choice, and this, in turn, impacts exactly what influence we will have on others. Immorality breeds more immorality and failing to live up to our moral capacity — living with no known immorality and fulfilling every moral duty within our reach, will render us unable to enlarge our moral sphere. By permitting immorality and by neglecting progressive moral perfection, we choose to be a person of less moral power than we could have been.

Consider yourself at a fork in your path right now with two possible futures before you. The left path is one in which you allow yourself to act contrary to true ideas some of the time; where you are not so concerned to make sure you avoid all immoral indulgences and habits; where you don't actively pursue fulfilling every moral duty and growing to embody greater and greater degrees of your moral potential. On the right path, there is no allowance for immorality; you devote yourself to truth and pure moral goodness, being ever mindful to advance your knowledge and conform your behavior to truth as you learn it. Undeniably, a year from now you will be a better version of yourself if you choose the right path. Your impact on others will be better. If you could see both versions of yourself ten years down the road, would not the less moral version be less capable of influencing others in a moral direction and less capable of helping those in need of help? If you choose the right path, would you not gain knowledge and ability and moral strength to enable you to exert a more powerful influence for good in the world? How could it possibly be morally okay to choose the left path? It simply can't. The only moral option is to choose the right. This is equivalent to saying that we all have a solemn moral obligation to be the most moral self we can possibly be. This means living up to our current moral potential — doing no known wrongs and doing every moral good we know to do while constantly advancing in the knowledge of truth (the knowledge of material reality) and conforming our choices and behavior to every bit of truth as we obtain it.

In light of this realization, our deepest anxiety should be to learn how to be moral, which brings us to our next lesson.

Lesson Six: How To Be Moral

Since moral behavior is acting upon *true* ideas and immoral behavior is acting upon *untrue* ideas, the key to being moral is quite simple: truth! Obviously, there's a lot more that can, and should, be said about this, but the simplicity of the solution should not be missed. Consider malnutrition: if the problem is caused by a lack of nutrients, the solution is obviously to supply the needed nutrients. While there may be a host of factors that led to the unavailability of nutrients in the first place and there may be complicated issues involved in actually getting the nutrients to those who need it, ultimately, anything that counts as a solution must involve nutrients being consumed by those suffering. Providing them with Tylenol just isn't going to do it. Likewise, if a soldier has been wounded and has lost a lot of blood, the solution is to stop the bleeding and to get more blood into their veins. Giving them vitamin C or prescribing a low-carb diet won't help. The solution has to match the problem. Since immorality is acting upon untrue ideas, the solution to immorality has to come down to discarding untrue ideas (no longer believing them) and furnishing the mind with true ideas. No matter what might be involved in the process of unlearning falsehood and learning truth, it ultimately boils down to this simple solution: untruth out, truth in.

In spite of the simplicity of the solution to immorality, it's so very common for people to struggle to give up immoral habits and to implement moral ones. Someone may acknowledge a certain truth and they may know that a certain action is contrary to that truth, and yet they might give in to the temptation to carry out the action. Why is this? And how can one bring an end to such regretful failings? First, it's important to realize that while it's normal to struggle, no one struggles with every immoral deed. Most everybody has a line they won't cross. Sure, they may do x and y, but z is just going too far. To pick an easy example, murder is beyond the moral line most people just won't cross. Likewise, most people won't engage in mugging or grave-robbing or â€¦ well, there are lots of things. You can think of your own list of things you just won't do. To do these things would be to trespass what is for you at this moment an uncrossable moral line. Now, notice that you don't reason about the deeds beyond that line in the same way that you do about the immoral deeds you sometimes choose to do. You know it just won't suffice to say, â€œMan, I really didn't want to mug that old lady, but I just couldn't help it.â€• Such reasoning, you can clearly see, is just not true â€” it's delusional! If someone said such a thing to you, you'd probably think, and maybe say, â€œUmâ€¦ yes, you could have helped it!â€•

The fact that you have an uncrossable line, on the other side of which are immoral deeds that you just won't do, demonstrates that you actually can, and do, reject immoral acts. What needs to happen is that you need to redraw your uncrossable line so that it doesn't allow you to tread at all on the ground of immorality.

Redraw our uncrossable lines? Is that possible? Answer: Yes! â€” it is certainly possible, as is about to be made plain. It's helpful to realize that not all people have drawn their lines in the same place. Imagine growing up in a community where it is an absolute rule that if you

see someone stuck on the side of the road, you stop and help them out. To not help them is regarded as an unforgivable offense. The effect of this would most likely be that leaving someone stranded on the side of the road would be an act beyond your uncrossable moral line. You just wouldn't do it. Yet, within that same community, people might generally disparage the government and justify themselves in cheating on their taxes. So, when you grow old enough to have a job and someone is teaching you how to file your taxes, they teach you to round things in your favor and bend the rules, so you end up cheating and you justify your actions with the thought that everyone in your community does it and they are good people, and besides, the government is cheating everyone anyway! You can't deny that you're being dishonest on the tax forms, but you just do it anyway. But then let's say you move off to college and suddenly you find yourself in a new community with new social and moral norms. People don't stop to help each other on the side of the road - the city has services to take care of that. And, when it comes time for taxes, you brag about a dishonest right-off to your new friends thinking they'll be impressed with your shrewdness, but instead, they are shocked and appalled that you would even think to cheat on your taxes! So, you adapt - you redraw your lines: cheating on taxes is a "no" and it's okay to ignore someone stranded on the side of the road.

Since no one illustration captures the whole principle, I need to mention an additional aspect. The example of cheating on taxes is one in which the community actually justified the crime - perhaps even convincing themselves they were right to do it. But an immoral act this side of the uncrossable line (a "permitted" act) might not be one that is justified in this way. In some families and communities, it's common for men to allow themselves to get in fits of rage and abuse the women around them (verbally and/or physically). In such cases, the act may not be justified (in the sense of portraying it as good) by anyone involved, but it still might be excused. A male growing up in such a house or community may adopt the immoral behavior of abusing females, knowing full well that it's wrong, but following the example of other men and, by doing it once or twice, forming the twisted habit. While some men have been influenced to draw their uncrossable line so far into immoral territory as to allow for such heinous deeds, most men consider acts like these to be morally abhorrent - being well beyond their uncrossable line.

Yet, it is surprising how many are willing to redraw their lines to include more immorality when influenced to do so. The horrific tortures carried out by Nazi soldiers in concentration camps are so far beyond most people's moral lines that it's hard to imagine anyone could do such things. And it wasn't easy to get Nazis to do them either. If Hitler in 1933 were to tell a young German man to torture a Jew, he most likely wouldn't do it, even if threatened with imprisonment or worse. Yet, some who were ordinary young German men in 1933 ended up inflicting just such tortures within the decade. How did this happen? It didn't happen all at once. It started with buying into anti-Semitic ideology, then devolving step by step from there to more and more extreme views of dealing with the so-called "Jewish problem." These views then formed the basis of immoral deeds, which also devolved until the worst of the worst became a reality. The moral transformation from an

ordinary German youth to a Nazi torturer consisted of taking the person up to the edge of their moral boundary, influencing them to redraw their line a little further into immorality, then a little later, redrawing the line again and again, allowing for more and more immorality. The famous Milgram experiments have illustrated this same "redrawing" of moral lines. You've probably heard of these experiments before. An authority figure asks a participant to do something like administering a mild electric shock to another (who they don't realize is an actor). Over time, the participant is asked to administer stronger and stronger shocks, often having to be coerced to go to the next level. A large percentage of participants go along with it, though some refuse from the beginning and others refuse partway through.

Of course, it also happens that people redraw their moral lines to allow for less immorality. A famous example is John Newton — one-time captain of a slave ship who later renounced the slave trade and became an abolitionist.

The main point here is that where someone draws their uncrossable moral line is usually influenced (strongly influenced) by their upbringing, at least initially. Then, it isn't uncommon to redraw this line due to later influences. Another way to express this same reality is that each of us has been educated to think in certain ways when it comes to moral decisions. Some immoral acts are forbidden while others are justified, and others, even though acknowledged to be wrong, might be allowed if enough people (or close-enough people) do it.

When we find out that no immoral deed can be justified and that we have a moral obligation to forsake all immorality and to continually advance in moral goodness, we arrive at this realization having already been educated in contrary principles. Simply being made aware of the straight truth regarding our moral responsibility doesn't amount to undoing our former training. Likewise, acknowledging the truth doesn't amount to having learned it. What we need is a re-education in right moral principles.

Consider the Lessons we've covered so far. You've at this point read them, and you may even acknowledge the principles contained in them as truth, but have you truly learned the lessons? Lessons One and Two teach very broad and far-reaching truths, the implications of which are numerous and apply to a multitude of subjects. If you've lived many years under the influence of immaterialism, how likely is it that you've fully grasped materialism in all its import? Lesson Three counters some of the main theories that undermine our ability to choose to do moral right and refuse moral wrong. While a full understanding of the principles contained in that lesson will doubtless unshackle the will, a single surface read would likely leave many bonds still tied.

Thoughts are processes of the brain and the brain is the hub of the nervous system. Our brain can only process what it receives from the rest of the nervous system. If your ears receive a regular input of sounds that follow a familiar set of patterns, the brain will process those patterns and thus form the habit of operating according to those patterns. This is what takes place in verbal language acquisition, for instance. Each language is characterized by certain sounds arranged in certain ways to form a set of words, which themselves are arranged in certain patterns to form sentences. The sentence structures of one language are not the same

as those of another language, nor is the vocabulary the same, and often, even the basic sounds differ. A child raised in an English-speaking household repeatedly hears the patterns of sound that form part of the English language. Their brains, receiving the stimuli, cannot help but process these patterns. And our brains often repeat patterns initially triggered by sensory stimuli even when such stimuli are absent. This is memory. A brain that regularly processes English language patterns thus forms the habit of thinking in English.

If your brain has been in the habit of thinking immaterialistic thoughts, and incorrect ideas regarding morals such as we've covered in these past Lessons, it is not at all surprising if one reading of these Lessons is insufficient to overcome the habit. Considering materialism and truth-based morality even once is fruitful, but the mind will easily revert to its old habits if not continually kept in check. If you have for years convinced yourself that doing a certain immoral act is excusable because you've thought it only affects you, your brain will be inclined to have that same thought in similar circumstances even though you acknowledge the falsity of that thought. You'll need to actively interrupt that old thought and counter it with truth if you wish to defeat it. Diligence is required in breaking free from our old habits of thought and in establishing new ones.

Now, to understand what re-education means in this context, let's again use the analogy of learning a language. This time, it's learning a second language. You've signed up for classes and you attend the lectures. But let's say that's all you do. The exam comes, you take it, but fail. Is this any surprise? Of course not! If you go to the teacher and say, "I don't understand! I listened to the lectures! I even acknowledge that what you say about Spanish is true!" The teacher will say, "Did you do your homework? Did you study? Did you practice speaking and reading?" In order to learn a new language, one has to engage the brain in it thoroughly. Otherwise, the brain will resort to the habits established when you learned your first language. It is essential to listen to the lectures if you refuse to even listen, your brain won't have the initial stimuli to even begin processing. But this clearly isn't enough. You also have to acknowledge the legitimacy of what you're learning. If you, as a learner, are constantly debating with your teacher regarding her understanding of Spanish, you won't get very far. But again, this also isn't enough. You will likely need to go over the course material multiple times and do exercises, practice speaking, listening, and explaining what you're learning to others.

The same thing is true when learning a new system of ideas regarding the nature of truth and morality as well as new behaviors built on that system. The habits of immaterialistic thinking need to be broken as do the habits of immoral behavior. But these habits can't be broken if we allow our minds to simply follow the same patterns they are accustomed to. Thankfully, just as surely as our brains formed these habits by exposure and processing, just as surely will they break them and form new habits by exposure and processing of thoughts of a different order. If you seriously dive into the truth of materialism and truth-based morality, fully engaging your brain with these truths, it will be unable to avoid processing what you give it.

Again, listening is the first essential step, but only the first. It is necessary, but not sufficient.

Acknowledging the truth is likewise essential; it is necessary, but not sufficient. To be re-educated requires placing yourself as a student with these truths as your subject. You must engage your mind to deeply contemplate them, seeking to fully understand their consequences. You will likely need to read things (including these very Lessons) multiple times, and try to explain what you learn. You will need to apply the principles you learn to every area of practical application as you learn them.

And, of course, every good student seeks to learn from the best teachers. In this case, we're looking for those who teach moral principles based on the foundation of materialism.

The American Materialists and Their Moral Muse

People don't usually associate materialists with morality. In fact, it's more common to associate materialism with atheism and nihilism. Since most people think that morality is rooted in God and that God is fundamentally non-material, they think materialism undermines morality. The reasoning goes something like this: Materialism states that there is nothing beyond matter. God is beyond matter, so materialism must imply that there is no God. Since God is the foundation of morality and ultimate purpose, materialism must also imply that there is no morality and no purpose. All we are left with is mindless matter in mechanical motion.

It should already be plain from our previous lessons that this portrayal of materialism and its implications is far from the truth. In fact, materialism provides the only sound basis for morality. And as for purpose, the materialism-based moral obligations to realize our current moral capacity, and to continually expand its limits to encompass more of our moral potential, provide more purpose than most seem willing to face.

From the popular negative portrayals of materialism, one wouldn't expect to find any materialists who are teachers of moral principle. The popular caricature seems to be an atheist professor whose nihilistic miserableness is tempered only by his air of arrogance and whose life advice boils down to "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!" This characterization of materialists has only survived through ignorance of materialism and its history.

Consider the prominent materialists in the early history of the United States. Were they atheistic nihilists whose influence has been to erode the moral fabric of society? Far from it! It may surprise you to learn just who these materialists were and where they looked for materialistically grounded moral guidance. Let's start with the man who was probably the foremost proponent of materialism of the English-speaking world in his time:

§ Joseph Priestley

Joseph Priestley was an English polymath who is most remembered today for discovering oxygen and inventing carbonated water. Really, he discovered 10 previously unknown gases and chemistry was just one of his areas of scientific research. Beyond being a scientist, he was also a grammarian, political theorist, educator, historian, philosopher, and theologian. In 1777, he published his first major work on materialism: [Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit](#). His arguments for materialism came in a few varieties. First, he argued that recent discoveries concerning the nature of matter showed that matter is capable of producing everything that was popularly attributed to immateriality (including motion and consciousness). He also argued on philosophical grounds that the various theories of immateriality are either inconsistent or unjustifiable, or both. Lastly, and most surprisingly from a contemporary standpoint, he argued that the existence of immateriality is nowhere implied in the Old and New Testaments. On the contrary, Priestley argued that the Jewish and Christian Scriptures are philosophically materialistic.

Priestley knew that Christianity had long promoted immaterialistic views, but he argued that this was a relatively late development resulting from the influence of Platonistic philosophy and not from the teachings of Jesus or the apostles (or the earlier Hebrew prophets for that matter). Priestley argued that immaterialistic views had corrupted Christianity and resulted in a whole host of evils. He chronicled the development of these corruptions in his book [A History of the Corruptions of Christianity](#) (1782) as well as in his other writings dealing with materialism. For Priestley, when the various corruptions have been stripped away, what remains is the teachings of Jesus and the apostles in their original purity, free both of immaterialistic superstitions and of the immoral corruptions that attend them. Jesus's teaching was philosophically materialistic and morally pure. If you were to ask Priestley where you should look for materialistically grounded moral instruction, he would unhesitatingly point you to Jesus. In fact, this is just what he did in his many books defending a rational materialistic Christianity. His works are too voluminous on this point to quote them in a way that gives any idea of the depth and thoroughness with which he handled the subject. Thankfully, all his works are in the public domain and you can read them online at books.google.com and at archive.org.

Priestley first presented his views in his home country of England. Even though he was in some ways greatly respected, his views on religion were so far from orthodoxy that many regarded him as a heretic and even dangerous. Opposition to him (and other supposed heretics) came to a head in 1791 when a mob of religiously motivated rioters attacked and burned his home and the homes of other religious dissenters along with a few Dissenting chapels and other buildings. This series of attacks is now known as "the Priestley Riots." Priestley had to flee and eventually ended up in America where his views were met with less extreme hostility (take that as you may). Emigrating with him to America was a friend and fellow materialist:

§ Thomas Cooper

Thomas Cooper was also an Englishman, and (like Priestley) he was a chemist, political theorist, and author. But he was also a physician, geologist, lawyer, judge, and college president.

Cooper wrote two books on materialism. The first was called [A View of the Metaphysical and Physiological Arguments in Favor of Materialism](#), published in 1781 and the second was [The Scripture Doctrine of Materialism](#) published in 1787. Both of these were republished in America in 1823. As you can tell from the second title, Cooper's materialism was not atheistic and he agreed with Priestley in seeing materialism as the genuine teaching of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. The argument of his second book focused first and foremost on the teachings of Jesus. He showed that Jesus presented the resurrection of the body as the only means of a future life. The doctrine of the natural immortality of an immaterial soul, he argued, was not only absent from Christ's teachings, but hopelessly inconsistent with them. Furthermore, he saw Christ's materialistic doctrine of bodily resurrection as an important part of the moral government of God – a part that only a materialist can appreciate. It's worth quoting him on this point:

The doctrine of a future state, stands on a much firmer basis, on the supposition of the resurrection of the body, and the body only, than on the resurrection of the soul, (if indeed this last be not, as I take it to be, a manifest contradiction in terms.) The being whom it shall please God, through Jesus Christ to raise from the dead – from the grave – will be the object of future rewards and punishments in another life, for its deeds, or misdeeds, transacted in this life. I know of no materialist who denies this, and I believe it a doctrine probable, but not certain, independent of Scripture, from considerations connected with the moral government of the universe: but rendered certain by the Christian Scriptures only. To an immaterialist, the Scripture doctrine of the resurrection is superfluous; for his man is essentially immortal in his immortal soul! To a materialist, it is every thing; for it contains the only sure and certain proof of a resurrection, that is to be found within the compass of human knowledge. • The Scripture Doctrine of Materialism, p. 23

How different this is from what you would probably expect to hear from one of the foremost materialists in the early United States! To Cooper, materialism is essential to Christianity and Christianity (that is, genuine materialistic Christianity) is of unparalleled importance for a materialist, and *only* for a materialist. It should also be noted that Cooper said he doesn't know any materialist who denies Jesus's doctrine of a materialistic resurrection. So far from materialism being atheistic nihilism, for Cooper and all the materialists he knew, it was a central doctrine of Christianity! Indeed, when surveying the materialists in the United States and England at the time, it's hard to find any atheists among them. In fact, I know of none. Before moving on to the next materialist, it's worth noting that Cooper was among the first to argue for the materiality of man on the basis of modern physiology. Even though the

Christian world has been almost entirely unaffected by the arguments for Scriptural materialism, in the world of brain science, the materiality of man has clearly won out.

Â§ Charles Knowlton

Charles Knowlton was an American physician and surgeon who wrote a book in 1829 called [Elements of Modern Materialism](#). While the bulk of the book is focused almost exclusively on physiology (and especially the nervous system) in order to demonstrate the materiality of sensation and mental activity, the first and last parts address some of the philosophical issues. Knowlton expressly rejected atheism, suggesting that materialism doesn't negate the existence of God; it only suggests that any God who exists must be material. He points to scripture on this point, saying,

It is contrary to scripture to say the Deity is unextended; the scriptures nowhere tell us a word about unextended beings; there is nothing in them that favors modern immaterialism. . . . The doctrine that the Deity exists every where, not only virtually but substantially, is of modern origin. There are hundreds of passages in the scripture which speak of the Deity as a Being of determinate dimensions. • Elements of Modern Materialism, pp. 34, 36

Later in the book, he applauds Cooper's book, [The Scripture Doctrine of Materialism](#), and states his own view of the scriptural side of the question as follows:

According to our views, the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead is most important, and an essential doctrine of christianity. Without this resurrection we hold there is no future existence no future rewards and punishments. . . . Now if the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, be essential to christianity, then is immaterialism, or the doctrine of the soul, altogether at variance with christianity. For according to this doctrine, the man never dies; that thinking, feeling being which constitutes the man that being, in the sameness of which the immaterialists place personal identity, never dies. . . . Therefore the many passages in the New Testament which speak of a man dying, and of his resurrection from the dead an exemplification of which we have in the death and resurrection of Jesus are diametrically opposed to immaterialism. • Elements of Modern Materialism, p. 388

Â§ Henry Bradshaw Fearon

So far as I know, Henry Bradshaw Fearon never moved to the United States from England, though he did travel through the states from east to west and so he counts as one of the few

materialists who we know to have been present in the early United States and who has left behind writings on the topic. In 1833, he published a book called [Thoughts on Materialism: and on Religious Festivals, and Sabbaths](#). The first section (on materialism) bore the title *Materialism A Scripture Doctrine*. His treating of the subject covers much of the same ground as Priestley and Cooper, but he is very systematic and clear and doesn't merely repeat their ideas. It is also apparent that he saw Jesus's materialistic teachings as of great moral consequence and he regarded immaterialistic theories as corrupt and corrupting. And like his fellow Christian materialists, he understood that the embrace of immaterialism by mainstream Christianity was one of the main reasons why reasonable people discarded Christianity, mistakenly thinking that immaterialism was an authentic and necessary part of the system.

While there were very likely a number of other Christian materialists of the era, they were certainly a minority and their writings can be difficult to track down. Yet, there is one more Christian materialist we need to consider, and he's one you've certainly heard of before.

§ Thomas Jefferson

Thomas Jefferson deliberately kept his religious views out of the public sphere, but from his private letters and a key publication we'll get to shortly, we know that he was a Christian materialist. After reading Thomas Cooper's book [The Scripture Doctrine of Materialism](#), he wrote him a letter saying,

That the doctrine of materialism was that of Jesus himself was a new idea to me. Yet it is proved unquestionably. • [Jefferson to Thomas Cooper, Dec. 11, 1823](#)

In another letter, he expressed his Christian materialism even more clearly:

To talk of immaterial existence is to talk of nothings. To say that the human Soul, angels, God, are immaterial, is to say, they are nothings, or that there is no God, no Angels, no Soul. I cannot reason otherwise. But I believe I am supported in my creed of Materialism by the Lockes, the Tracys, the Stewarts. At what age of the Christian Church this heresy of Immaterialism, or masked Atheism crept in, I do not exactly know; but a heresy it certainly is. Jesus taught nothing of it. • [Jefferson to John Adams, Aug. 15, 1820](#)

Jefferson was also a fan of Priestley's works, recommending them to friends and even giving copies away. Like other Christian materialists, Jefferson understood Jesus's teachings to be philosophically materialistic and of incomparable moral value. In an act of his devotion to the teachings of Jesus, he put together a work that was eventually published

as [The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth](#), consisting primarily of extracts from the New Testament gospels focusing on Jesus's life and moral teachings. In some editions of this work, there is included as a part of the introduction a letter Jefferson wrote to Benjamin Rush and an affixed syllabus Jefferson wrote explaining his estimation of Jesus's doctrines compared with those of others. Here are some of the key parts of Jefferson's comments:

Dear Sir: In some of the delightful conversations with you, the Christian religion was sometimes our topic; and I then promised you that one day or the other, I would give you my views of it. They are the result of a life of inquiry and reflection, and very different from that Anti-Christian system imputed to me by those who know nothing of my opinions. To the corruptions of christianity I am indeed opposed; but not to the genuine precepts of Jesus himself. I am a Christian in the only sense in which he wished any one to be; sincerely attached to his doctrines, in preference to all others; ascribing to himself every human excellence, and believing he never claimed any other. • Letter to Benjamin Rush, April 21, 1803

In his syllabus, he says in reference to Jesus's teachings:

They have been still more disfigured by the corruptions of schismatizing followers, who have found an interest in sophisticating and perverting the simple doctrines he taught, by engrafting on them the mysticisms of a Grecian Sophist (Plato), frittering them into subtitles and obscuring them with jargon, until they have caused good men to reject the whole in disgust, and to view Jesus himself as an impostor. Notwithstanding these disadvantages, a system of morals is presented to us which, if filled up in the true style and spirit of the rich fragments he left us, would be the most perfect and sublime that has ever been taught by men.

His moral doctrines, relating to kindred and friends, were more pure and perfect than those of the most correct of the philosophers, and greatly more so than those of the Jews; and they went far beyond both in inculcating universal philanthropy, not only to kindred and friends, to neighbors and countrymen, but to all mankind, gathering all into one family, under the bonds of love, charity, peace, common wants and common aids. A development of this head will evince the peculiar superiority of the system of Jesus over all others.

He taught emphatically the doctrine of a future state, which was either doubted or disbelieved by the Jews; and wielded it with efficacy as an important incentive, supplementary to the other motives to moral conduct.

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I, too, have made a wee-little book from the same materials (The Gospels) which I call the Philosophy of Jesus. It is a paradigm of his doctrines, made by cutting the

texts out of the book and arranging them on the pages of a blank book, in a certain order of time or subject. A more beautiful and precious model of ethics I have never seen. It is a document in proof that I am a REAL CHRISTIAN, that is to say, a disciple of the doctrines of Jesus, very different from the Platonists, who call ME infidel and THEMSELVES Christians and preachers of the Gospel, while they draw all their characteristic dogmas from what its author never said nor saw. They have compounded from the heathen mysteries a system beyond the comprehension of man, of which the great reformer of the vicious ethics and deism of the Jews, were he to return on earth, would not recognize one feature.â• Jeffersonâ•s Syllabus of An Estimate of the Doctrines of Jesus, Compared with Those of Others

From the above review of the materialists in the early United States, it should be clear that they donâ•t fit the derogatory misrepresentation of materialists as nihilistic, atheistic, amoral, arrogant professors. They were certainly an educated bunch, but they were deeply interested in morality and they spent much time and energy studying the life and teachings of Jesus and seeking to emulate him, regarding him to be the greatest moral teacher the world ever knew.

These men (especially Jefferson, Priestley, and Cooper) are universally recognized as brilliant men who contributed genuine knowledge and wisdom to humanityâ•s storehouse of resources. Fields as far-ranging as physics, chemistry, politics, physiology, education, and history still benefit from their insights. With men of such rank, intellect, and undoubted worth pointing to Jesus as the great moral materialist, how could we not seriously investigate the claim? As weâ•ve already thoroughly covered, we have a moral obligation to live perfectly within the sphere of our current moral capacity and to continually extend it by increasing in knowledge. If Jesus truly is the greatest moral teacher the world ever knew and if his moral teachings are indeed based on materialism, we need to know it so we can join Jefferson, Priestley, Cooper, and others, as students of this great teacher, learning from him every moral lesson we possibly can.

Debiasing Our Investigation of Jesusâ•s Teachings

When confronted with the need to investigate the teachings of Jesus and his philosophical predecessors and successors, it is essential at the outset to become aware of the assumptions we are prone to bring to the task. We need to realize that we likely come to this subject with preconceived ideas and these preconceived ideas may not be helpful. We live in a world that has been significantly shaped by Christianity â•s particular brands of Christianity at that. And this shaping has doubtless biased our assumptions not only about who Jesus is and what he taught, but also about what an investigation of his teachings looks like. Specifically, when you imagine the process of learning about Jesus and his teachings, you probably envision â•sBible Studyâ•s and you likely have some idea of just what the Bible is that would be the

object of your study. If you go to any bookstore or hotel, or if you just look up the word "Bible" in an app store or search engine, what you'll most likely find is a collection of 66 books called "The Bible." And the natural assumption would be that this is precisely the material you need to investigate Jesus and his philosophical predecessors and successors. The teachings of Jesus himself are presented in the Gospels of the New Testament, while the teachings of his predecessors are in the Old Testament, and the teachings of his successors are in the remainder of the New Testament. Yet, as we will presently see, the assumptions that 1) this particular collection is "the Bible" and 2) that it houses the default sources for understanding the teachings of Jesus, is itself a product of our particular time and place.

The English-speaking countries of the West have been largely dominated by Protestant Christianity and it is Protestant Christianity, and it alone, whose Bible is this particular 66-book collection. At other times and at other places, the object bearing the name "the Bible" isn't this same collection. For an example that is doubtless familiar to many in the West, the Bible of Roman Catholics consists of 73 books – the 66 books included in the Protestant Bible together with 7 others. On one hand, this might seem like a minor difference; after all, these two collections have more in common than they have differences. Yet, the nature of a "Bible" is that the interpretation of any one book is influenced (sometimes greatly) by the other books in the collection. Because of this, the presence or absence of a single book has the potential to significantly change how one understands the collection as a whole. We'll come back to this point. But it is important to understand that the specific books we include in our investigation will non-trivially impact the results. As an analogy, suppose you want to understand human psychology, but you take as your dataset only western, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic people. This bias in your data will, of course, skew your results (FYI, this is a real bias in psychological research known as the [WEIRD bias](#)). In all sciences, it is critical to obtain the best data and to analyze it carefully. In much the same way, the sources you use to investigate the teachings of Jesus will have important ramifications for the results. How you analyze the sources is equally important, but one thing at a time.

In order to debias our investigation, we need to not take our initial assumptions for granted, and in order to do this, it is helpful to see that our assumptions, while natural to us, are by no means self-evident. They were not shared by people who lived at other times, and they are not even shared by significant numbers of people living in our own time who are from different places and cultures. Let's compare several contemporary Bibles from different religious communities. After this, we'll consider some important lessons before moving to the historical side of the question.

Contemporary Bible Canons

The list of books that constitute "the Bible" of a religious community is known as a "Bible Canon" or "Scripture Canon." Most Christian Bible Canons are composed of

two main sections – the Old Testament and the New Testament. Each of these is, in turn, divided into several subsections. It would be somewhat tedious to list all the books of each bible canon, so we’ll only do that for the Protestant Canon, using it as a reference point since it is likely the most familiar, and then we’ll note how other canons differ from it. All of the information provided below can be easily verified online using the [Wikipedia page for Biblical Canons](#).

The Protestant Canon

Old Testament (39 books)

Pentateuch (5)

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy

Historical Books (12)

Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 2 Kings, 1 Chronicles, 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther

Poetic Books (5)

Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs

Major Prophets (5)

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel

Minor Prophets (12)

Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi

New Testament (27 books)

Gospels (4)

Matthew, Mark, Luke, John

Church History (1)

Acts

Letters of Paul (13)

Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon

General Letters (8)

Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, Jude

Apocalyptic (1)

Revelation

(Note: The Bible Canon of Rabbinic Judaism contains the same books as were later included in the Protestant Old Testament, just in a different order and counted differently. As an example, what Protestants consider as 12 books of “minor prophets,” Rabbinic Jews consider as 1 book called “The Twelve.” Thus, by Rabbinic counting, the Hebrew Bible consists of 24 books.)

The Roman Catholic Canon

The Roman Catholic Bible has subdivisions and an order very much the same as what is found in the Protestant Bible. The major difference, as noted before, is the 7 books it contains that aren't found in the Protestant Bible. They are as follows:

Historical Books

Tobit, Judith, 1 Maccabees, 2 Maccabees

Poetic Books

Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach

Major Prophets

Baruch

It is also worth noting that some ancient writings had multiple versions. For example, the books of Esther and Daniel each had a short version and a long version. In both cases, Protestant Bibles usually contain the short versions while Catholic Bibles usually contain the long versions. This is related to the fact that traditionally, the Catholic Bible has been based on the Latin Vulgate (a translation done by Jerome in the 4th century) while Protestants have traditionally translated from the Hebrew for the Old Testament and the Greek for the New Testament. Lastly, I should mention that the Catholic version of Baruch contains a section that other traditions consider a different book called The Letter of Jeremiah.

The Eastern Orthodox Canon

The Eastern Orthodox churches include in their Bibles all the books included by Protestants and Catholics, but also several others, totalling 77 (at least by some ways of counting).

Historical Books

1 Esdras, 3 Maccabees

Poetic Books

The Prayer of Manasseh (included in their Book of Odes)

Prophetic Books

Letter of Jeremiah

In addition to these books, some Eastern Orthodox Bibles also include certain books as an appendix, such as 4 Maccabees and 4 Ezra. It should also be noted that their book of Psalms contains one more Psalm than Protestant and Catholic Psalm Books. Finally, the Orthodox Old Testament is based on the Greek Septuagint, which, for certain books, means they have a different version. A good example is the book of Jeremiah, which is substantially shorter in the Greek version as compared to the Hebrew.

The Armenian Canon

The Armenian Bible Canon, like the bible canons of other churches within the Oriental Orthodox tradition, is more complex than what we find in Western Christianity and even in Eastern Orthodoxy. For example, Armenian Christians include all of the books in the Eastern Orthodox Canon, but 1 Esdras and 3 Maccabees are considered "extra-canonical" which might imply they have a lower status than in the Eastern Orthodox Canon. Yet, Armenian Christians include 4 Ezra in their Bible as "extra-canonical" which may be a more exalted status than including it in an appendix as done by some Eastern Orthodox Churches. Furthermore, some manuscripts of the Armenian bible include additional works such as The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, Joseph and Asenath, and (in the New Testament) 3 Corinthians. Thus, depending on the Bible, it may contain 80 or so books.

The Syriac Canon

There are several varieties of Syriac Christians, most notably the Syriac Orthodox Church and the Assyrian Church of the East. The circumstance regarding their Bibles is similar to the Armenian Canon in that some manuscripts of their Bibles contain books that other manuscripts lack. This is the case for 1 Esdras, 4 Ezra, 4 Maccabees, 5 Maccabees, and the Psalms of Solomon. Furthermore, the Syriac Orthodox Church includes the Apocalypse of Baruch in their canon, while it is only in some bibles of the Assyrian Church of the east. The same is true of Psalms 152-155 as part of the book of Psalms. The Letter of Baruch, on the other hand, is included by all Syriac Christians (this is not to be confused with the Book of Baruch, though they also include it). Syriac Christians also stand out in that they don't grant clear canonical status to five books that are common to most other modern Christian New Testaments; namely, 2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John, Jude, and Revelation. These books are not included in the Syriac Peshitta (their standard Bible) though there are some manuscripts that include them. Yet, they are excluded from the regular readings of the church.

The Ethiopian and Eritrean Canon

These two denominations in the horn of Africa share a single Bible canon "the largest canon of all modern Christian denominations. While they do not include 1-3 Maccabees, they include several other historical books, such as 1-3 Meqabyan, Josippon, 1 Enoch, and Jubilees. They also include many of the books accepted by the majority of non-Protestant churches such as the Prayer of Manasseh, Tobit, Judith, Sirach, the Wisdom of Solomon, 1 Esdras, and 4 Ezra. Likewise, they have the long versions of Esther and Daniel, Psalm 151, and their book of Lamentations is an unusually long version, containing the Letter of Jeremiah plus another 5 chapters sometimes called 4 Baruch. Furthermore, their New Testament contains an additional 8 books: Ser'ata Seyon, Te'ezaz, Gessew, Abtelis, Book of the Covenant 1, Book of the Covenant 2, Qalementos, and Didesqelya. Depending

on how these books are counted, this canon includes as many as 88 books.

Lessons from Contemporary Canons

There are two main lessons we need to learn from the existence of these diverse bible canons. The first is that while they share a common core, they are actually significantly different from one another. As mentioned earlier, the presence or absence of a single book can change how one understands many others. The reason for this is that it is usually assumed that the books of the Bible must all teach fundamentally the same thing. So, if two books appear quite different on the surface, they must be read in such a way as to accommodate the information found in the others. Let's look at a couple of examples, starting with something quite familiar:

The Story of Jesus's Birth

You all know the story: Joseph and Mary are a betrothed couple from the small town of Nazareth. An angel appears to Mary and tells her that she, though a virgin, will conceive and bear a son, who will be called the Son of God. Joseph was understandably troubled, and yet didn't want to disgrace Mary, so he thought to divorce her secretly. But before he could, an angel appeared to him in a dream and told him that what had been conceived in Mary was from the Holy Spirit. A little later, there was a Roman census and since Joseph was descended from David, he had to return to David's hometown — Bethlehem. Meanwhile, magi from the east had been following a star that led them to Judea. Mary and Joseph arrive in Bethlehem and seek a room at an inn, but all the rooms are taken and they have to spend the night in a humble manger where baby Jesus is born. The magi are led by the star to the very place Jesus lies and they bestow their gifts. Shepherds also came after having the event announced to them by angels. On the eighth day, Jesus was circumcised and named, and on the fortieth day of his life, he was brought to the temple for dedication and purification rights. There, Simeon and Anna bore witness to the divine act that had taken place in this infant. Unfortunately, the arrival of the magi made Herod aware that the time had come for the Messiah to be born, so he ordered the death of all male children under the age of two. Joseph, Mary, and Jesus had to flee to Egypt and were only able to return after Herod's death, at which time they returned to Nazareth.

As familiar as this story is, it is not to be found in any book of the Bible. Instead, it is a product of "harmonizing" two very different stories from two separate books. The story of Jesus's birth as found in the Gospel called Matthew starts with Joseph and Mary in Bethlehem. Only Joseph is told of Mary's conception by an angel. Magi come from the east and Herod slays the infants while Joseph, Mary, and Jesus flee to Egypt for safety. Only after they return to Israel do they decide to relocate to Galilee and find a home in Nazareth. This story in Matthew contains no census, no shepherds, no angel speaking to Mary, and no

dedication of Jesus at the temple. In contrast, the story in Luke tells of an angel appearing to Mary, not to Joseph. Mary conceives in Nazareth and then she and Joseph travel to Bethlehem for the census. Angels joyously announce Jesus's birth to shepherds who come see them in a manger. Jesus is circumcised on the eighth day, dedicated on the 40th, after which the family peacefully returns to Nazareth. In Luke, there are no magi, there's no slaying of the infants, and no flight to Egypt. These are two radically different stories. And yet, by including them both in one Bible canon, readers are influenced to read one in light of the other. The effect of this has been so successful that many read one story or the other, mentally filling in the gaps with details from the story not presently before them, and they don't even notice that neither story is telling them the story they are telling themselves. This is the power of a bible canon (!) and this is why it is so important to be conscious of what texts we include in our investigation as well as how we analyze them.

Let's now briefly consider another example of how placing two texts together in a Bible canon influences how we understand them. Genesis 1 and 2 contain what many describe as two creation accounts. Genesis 1 describes a six-day process in which the world as we know it (or at least how ancient Israelites knew it) came to be. Among the things made on the sixth day was humanity — male and female. Genesis 2 describes something quite different. It describes God shaping man from the dust of the earth and then making him alive. God then makes a garden with plants and animals and brings the animals to the man for him to name them. After he finishes, he realizes that he is alone. God, seeing that it is not good for man to be alone, puts him into a deep sleep and removes a rib, from which he makes a woman.

It isn't immediately obvious how Genesis 1 and 2 are to be related. Many interpretations have been offered over the centuries, including the idea that the woman made in Genesis 1 didn't work out and Eve, the woman of Genesis 2, is actually the man's second wife. Alternatively, many interpret Genesis 2 as a more detailed description of the events of the 6th day, however difficult it is to imagine one man naming all the animals in only hours. Yet another interpretation is found in the book of Jubilees, a book included in the Bible Canon of the Ethiopian and Eritrean churches. In Jubilees chapter 3, it says that the woman only existed in the form of his rib on the 6th day of the first week. Then, during the second week, the man named all the animals, and was put into a deep sleep and had the woman constructed from his rib on the 6th day of the second week. This interprets Genesis 1 and 2 as relating in a relatively straightforward chronological way (albeit with some added details). If you had Jubilees in your Bible, this may be to you, the obvious meaning of Genesis 1 and 2. It might never occur to you that it could even be understood in another way — just as it doesn't occur to many readers of Matthew and Luke that their stories don't say the same thing as each other or as the story constructed to harmonize them with one another.

While including writings in a canon together can influence people to read each writing in a way that obscures its actual content and message, it is also true that reading one writing in connection with another can sometimes be indispensable in understanding its meaning. It isn't possible to understand the book of Revelation without reading it in conjunction with the book of Daniel, since it draws so heavily from Daniel. If one excluded Daniel from their

canon and decided it wasn't worth reading, they would rob themselves of a full understanding of Revelation. Likewise, one cannot fully understand Jude without 1 Enoch since it makes such heavy use of it, even quoting it directly. With the exception of the Ethiopian and Eritrean churches, no Christian denominations include 1 Enoch in their biblical canon. This has resulted in the neglect of 1 Enoch by most Christians and a resulting lack of understanding of the book of Jude. In short, we should be cautious about dismissing something just because it isn't found in the tradition with which we are most familiar. Perhaps there is something of immense value for our task in another tradition that is missing from our own. This is precisely what most Christians think about the books in their canon that aren't in the Syriac canon.

Remember now that the Syriac canon does not give clear canonical status to the book Revelation. This book is the last book of the Bible for many Christians, and so we have expressions like "from Genesis to Revelation." Likewise, many Christians see the creation of the new earth in Revelation as the perfect completion of the story of the Bible; we start with creation and end with new creation. But expressions and canonical narrative motifs such as these are foreign to Syriac Christianity. Again, the inclusion or exclusion of even a single book can change how one sees the whole story of the Bible and how one interprets some or all of the writings within it.

The take-away is that if we are to understand any of these writings in such a way that will enable us to gain knowledge of what Jesus and his predecessors and successors taught, we need to be thoughtful of which writings we include in, and exclude from, our investigation and how we understand them.

The second major lesson we need to learn from the reality of the various contemporary bible canons is the historically contingent nature of the Christian tradition in our own culture. When we look at all the canons of the east and the differences between them, it is somewhat obvious that these differences must have arisen through historical circumstances. It isn't natural to see our own culture so clearly; we are too close -- it is the water in which we swim, so we take it for granted as the normal and inevitable way things are -- the way they should be. But when we see that the tradition that surrounds us is but one of many similar traditions and that all the others arose through their own historical developments, we are brought face to face with the fact that our own cultural traditions, including the Bible canon prevalent around us, is a product of historical developments in our own past.

Each Bible canon and each variety of Christianity is as a lens through which one might view Jesus, his predecessors, his followers, and their teachings. Since each lens is different, they can't all be handing on to us the pure, unchanged teachings of Jesus. And since they can't all be doing this, we can't assume a priori that any of them are. It may feel right to make this assumption for your own tradition, but it feels just as right for anyone to do the same for their tradition. But since all these traditions, including all these Bible canons, are the product of centuries of historical development, we should expect to only gain knowledge of the actual teachings of Jesus by forfeiting the notion that our assumptions must be right --

by recognizing that our world and our assumptions and ideas are not the world, assumptions and ideas of first-century Palestine. We need to be willing to peel back the layers of history, even if doing so necessarily leaves the more recent layers behind in pieces.

Peeling Back the History of Biblical Canonization

It's hard to convey the complexity of the history of "the bible." To start, as we've already seen, "the bible" isn't one thing; it's a label used by many different Jewish and Christian communities – each community using it to refer to their own collection of most-sacred texts. And while the collections overlap in their content, they also differ in their content, sometimes significantly. But all of this is just describing the *present* reality of "the bible," which can serve only as a starting place for understanding its history. In reality, each biblical canon has its own history. Granted, the histories intertwine and influence each other to varying degrees, and some trace back to a common time, place, and people where two or more histories were once one. It is nonetheless true that the history of the Catholic Canon is not the history of the Syriac Canon, and that of the Ethiopian/Eritrean is not that of the Armenian or the Protestant.

The amount of books it would take to exhaustively chronicle the history of all these canons is immense. A lot has already been written on the history of the canon (see, for example, [the works of the leading specialist: Lee McDonald](#)), yet this is but a drop in the bucket of what might be written.

Given the magnitude and complexity of the history of biblical canons, it's inescapable that we'll achieve only a partial view. Yet, even with a partial view, it *is* possible to obtain a meaningful understanding of how what we assume to be "the bible" today was not "the bible" yesterday; moreover, the day before yesterday, "the bible" was hardly even a bible, and the day before that, there was no bible at all.

In what follows, we'll review the history of the bible starting from the present day in the western world and tracing back through discernible stages of its development. These stages are general periods of time, the edges of which are fuzzy. In other words, the transition from one stage to the next wasn't instantaneous. Still, there were significant historical developments that enable us to demarcate one period from the next. In each period, the reality of "the bible" was not the same as it was in the other periods. For each period, we'll consider both 1) lists of books set forth by individuals or churches to designate which writings they considered to constitute their biblical canon and 2) the actual instantiations of scripture in various physical formats.

"Today" (the 2020s spanning back to the 1820s)

What has been your primary experience of “the bible”? Most likely, you’ve experienced it as an object in your home and/or in church, or in book stores and even hotel rooms. This will sound rather obvious, but bear with me — there’s a reason this needs to be stated. The bible you’ve probably most experienced, when considered as an object, is a book much like other books — it contains pages with printed text on both sides and these pages are bound together on one side of the book. The biggest difference between the bible and other books, in terms of its material composition, is its characteristically thin pages (for most bibles) and, if it’s leather-bound, its cover (though many bibles are now printed in paperback or hardcover). You probably had a bible matching this basic description in your home growing up as did your parents and their parents before them.

Your experience of the bible as an object is not without consequence. If your primary sensory experience of the bible is as a book, you naturally tend to think of it as a book. Thus, you might conceive of the bible as having a unified narrative — a storyline. You might think it all espouses the same perspective and that one part intentionally informs the meaning of another part. You may even think of each writing contained within it primarily as “a book of the bible” rather than as a stand-alone writing composed by a particular historical person in particular historical circumstances. You might also think of its contents as essentially fixed. You can look at the table of contents and list the books of the bible. The books listed there are part of the bible; other books aren’t. All of this seems natural given the instantiation of the bible as a printed book and your experience of that book. The particularities of one’s phenomenal bible (the bible as experienced through the senses) create the assumptions that form one’s quintessential bible (what one imagines to be the “The Bible” as an archetypal entity — the perfect and characteristic model of what “The Bible” is and perhaps *should* be).

For most in the English-speaking West, the bible as a book (even a book containing a particular set of 66 writings) is simply the reality of what the bible is. But, as we will see, this is a relatively recent reality, and it is a fast fading one too.

For a number of years, the American Bible Society has published an annual research document called [State of the Bible](#). According to [State of the Bible 2019](#), 83% of all American Bible Users preferred printed bibles as opposed to other formats (like digital and audio) in 2012. That number had dropped to 72% by 2019. And, according to [State of the Bible 2021](#), it dropped to 59% by 2021! Clearly, we are in the midst of a significant shift in how people experience the bible! This becomes even more clear when we consider the statistics by generation. The below numbers are taken from State of the Bible for the years 2019 and 2021. (The percentages don’t add up to 100% since I’m not including audio and other formats — just print and digital, the latter being combined from apps and online bibles.) The numbers represent the percentage of people who preferred the listed format over alternatives.

Generations

2019

2021

Elders	Print 91% Digital 3%	Print 84% Digital 12%
Boomers	Print 80% Digital 14%	Print 72% Digital 22%
Gen X	Print 64% Digital 30%	Print 56% Digital 34%
Millennials	Print 63% Digital 29%	Print 47% Digital 44%
Gen Z	N/A	Print 44% Digital 49%

Note that *within* each generation across time there is a decrease in preference for printed bibles and an increase in preference for digital bibles. Likewise, *between* generations, there is a decrease in preference for printed bibles with a corresponding increase in preference for digital bibles heading in the direction of the younger generations. And it shouldn't be missed that in Gen Z we have, for the first time, a higher percentage of people preferring digital bibles to printed bibles. If this trend continues (and there's no reason to think it won't) we'll most likely see digital bibles become the most prevalent, and most used, format of bible within the 2020s.

This means that most people's primary sensory experience of the bible will be very different from what it has been for the past several generations. And this will have consequences for the dominantly imagined quintessential bible as well. Soon, most won't primarily think of the bible as a stand-alone object a book. They may instead think of an app or website. And the experience of the bible in these formats is very different from the experience of the bible as a book. For instance, most book-bibles contain only one translation, while bible apps and websites often contain many translations that one can easily transition between. When there were fewer translations and most experienced the bible as a book, it was easy to view a particular translation (like the King James Version) as The Bible. While this may be a natural assumption when one's only experience of the bible is as a book containing that one translation, it certainly isn't natural when using digital bible software that enables easy switching between translations as well as visual comparison between translations. Furthermore, many digital bibles have built-in tools that enable users to access the original languages. This helps readers to view translations as just that translations. It also makes more prominent the fact that the bible is a collection of ancient

texts that aren't all the same — they weren't even all written in the same language; most Old Testament books were written in Hebrew while most (if not all) New Testament books were written in Greek. Furthermore, within the same bible app, one can have multiple bibles that contain books from different biblical canons, and with bible software like [Logos](#) and [Accordance](#), one can even have many writings that were excluded from the biblical canons right there in the same software side-by-side with so-called "biblical" texts. The phenomenal differences between book-bibles and digital-bibles are dramatic and the effects of the transition from one format to the other upon the common imagination of what exactly "the bible" is will likewise be dramatic — and for some it already is.

The fact that we are currently undergoing a transformation in how the bible is experienced and conceived should make us aware of the fact that our experience and conception of "the bible" is not immutable. It is changing now and it has changed before. "The bible" as we know it today and as we knew it growing up was not "the original bible." Digital bibles are currently the new kid on the block, but it wasn't long ago that the bible as you have known it since childhood was the new kid on the block. In reality, "the bible" of today only became what it is starting in the 1820s. That's right, the book-bible containing the 66 writings accepted by Protestants (no more no less) has only dominated the English-speaking world for about 200 years. And even this needs a few important qualifications.

So, what happened in the 1820s? Answer: ["The Apocrypha Controversy."](#) As we'll see more later, prior to the 1820s, most bibles even among Protestants included "the Apocrypha." In fact, in one sense, Protestants were the only ones to include "the Apocrypha" since only Protestants had a separate section in their Bibles by that heading (typically placed between the Old Testament and the New Testament) and since only they refer to the so-called "Apocrypha" by that name. The books that Protestants call "Apocrypha" actually do not form a fixed collection but generally consist of the books included in Catholic and Orthodox Old Testaments but which Protestants have never unitedly agreed upon. While many Protestants didn't view these books as canonical, they were still generally regarded as important and some Protestants considered some or all of them to be Scripture. On this point, I recommend reading [The Protestant Reception of the Apocrypha](#) by Matthew J. Korpman (also published in [The Oxford Handbook of the Apocrypha](#), pp. 74ff). and so it was common practice to include them in printed bibles; that is, up until the controversy of the 1820s. Here's how it started:

"The Apocrypha Controversy" arose in the early 1820s due to the decision of the British and Foreign Bible Society to privately approve, in certain European countries, the circulation of the Apocrypha interspersed (without separation and distinction) among the rest of the canonical Old Testament. When this became public knowledge, it prompted the rise of what popularly became known as the "anti-Apocrypha party." This group, formed primarily of Calvinists, was made up of a number of individuals from the Society who were decidedly against

not only the interspersing of the works among the canonical, but who were also against the inclusion of the Apocrypha in any editions of the Bibles printed by that society for mission work.â••â•• The Protestant Reception of the Apocrypha by Matthew J. Korpman, p. 18 (also published in The Oxford Handbook of the Apocrypha, pp. 74ff)

Itâ••s important to note that the mere presence of the Apocrypha in English bibles isnâ••t what started the controversy â•• that was actually the accepted norm; it was the interspersing of â••apocryphalâ•• books among the â••canonicalâ•• books that was met with opposition. But, as is so often the case with controversies, the opposition didnâ••t want to merely restore the former order; they wanted to establish a new one more aligned with their vision. And they succeeded. As should be obvious, the impact of their decision didnâ••t remain in Britain. Here is some more detail as to how the controversy unfolded:

â••The controversy in question concerned whether or not the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS), which had been founded in London in 1804 as a charitable Protestant organization, should circulate Bibles containing the Apocrypha among persons desiring the addition of these books to the Old Testament. Beginning in 1821, the protests against this practice became significant enough to force the BFBS to attempt to formulate a policy towards apocryphal circulation which would be satisfactory to as many of the Societyâ••s constituents as possible. Finally, in 1826 and 1827, the Society approved four regulations which in effect ruled out its printing and circulating of Bibles containing the Apocrypha. But the anti-apocryphal forces, mainly Scots, believed that these regulations were â••too little and too late,â•• and in 1826 the Bible Societies of Edinburgh and Glasgow separated from the BFBS. The American Bible Society, founded in 1816 in New York, discontinued circulating Bibles containing the Apocrypha in 1828. It was not until the 1960s and 1970s that the British and American societies would change this policy.â••â•• [The Nineteenth Century British Apocrypha Controversy](#) (Dissertation) by Richard Cox, pp. iii-iv

So it is that a relatively small, predominantly Scottish-Calvinist, anti-Apocrypha party in the 1820s changed the bible for Protestants of all persuasions for nearly 200 years. Matthew Korpman summed it up nicely:

â••In 1826, something happened that would fundamentally change the way later Protestants viewed their Bibles. The British and Foreign Bible Society announced officially that they would no longer be funding the production of Bibles that included the Apocrypha. No money, they made clear, would in any way whatsoever be given to such a task. Likewise, the Society would bind their Bibles so that nothing could be added to them by others. Essentially, they had signed a

death warrant for the books. The decision's effect was slow and gradual, as other Bible Societies followed suit. As the decades marched on and new editions of Bibles, such as the King James Version, had the Apocrypha removed, the public memory of these works waned with new generations who didn't so much reject these books, as merely forgot that they had once been included. • [The Protestant Reception of the Apocrypha](#) by Matthew J. Korpman, p. 20

The gradual nature of the change is important. Bibles containing the Apocrypha didn't suddenly vanish. Undoubtedly, they continued to be the primary family bible in many homes for decades. It's also important to realize that there has been somewhat of a revival of interest in the Apocrypha since the 1950s. [In 1957, the Revised Standard Version reintroduced the Apocrypha](#). And, as we've already seen, Bible Societies started to lift their Apocrypha-bans in the 1960s and 70s. So, it was really for only about 100 years that the exclusively 66-book bible almost totally obscured the apocryphal texts in the English-speaking Protestant world.

Currently, the 66-book Bible is still dominant, but it isn't at all hard to find bibles that include Apocryphal texts. There's *The New Revised Standard Version*, *The Common English Bible*, *The World English Bible*, and *The New American Bible*, to name a few.

There's one more aspect of the current reality of the bible within contemporary Protestantism that needs to be addressed. Unlike the Roman Catholic Church, Protestantism has never had a central authority with the power to decide doctrine for all Protestants. As such, while most Protestants operate under the assumption that the biblical canon consists of a certain collection of 66 books, many Protestant denominations actually have no official statement endorsing that particular collection (or any other) as their biblical canon. Below is a list of Protestant Christian Traditions along with the results of my search for an official list of books endorsed as their canon. I've linked sources for the list where one was found and where no list was found, I've provided a link to a statement of faith where one might expect to find such a canon list if one existed.

Anglican [Found](#) (though NT books aren't specified)

Baptist [Found](#)

Disciples of Christ [Not Found](#)

Lutheran [Not Found](#)

Mennonite [Not Found](#)

Methodist [Found](#) (though NT books aren't specified)

Pentecostal [Not Found](#)

Presbyterian [Found](#)

Seventh-day Adventist [Not Found](#)

Interestingly, all of the Protestant denominations for which I was able to find official lists of specific books they accepted as canonical are part of the broader Reformed (aka Calvinist) tradition. The Methodist⁷ While John Wesley wasn't a Calvinist, another founder of

Methodism, [George Whitefield, was](#). and Anglican churches were influenced by Calvinism, though to a lesser degree.⁸ One can't help but wonder if the fact that these denominations list the books they consider canonical, yet leave some of the books unspecified, is a reflection of the only-partial influence of Calvinism. While the Protestant churches with no official list aren't Reformed/Calvinist. This is noteworthy given that the "anti-Apocrypha party" of the 1820s was mostly Calvinist. All considered, it seems that the 66-book "Protestant" Canon is really more accurately the 66-book "Calvinist" canon and most other Protestants have simply gone along with it. Indeed, as we'll soon see, the 66-book canon is ultimately traceable to John Calvin and his early followers. But to learn about that, we'll have to step back from the present "day" into the time before the 1820s Apocrypha Controversy.

"Yesterday" (the 1820s spanning back to the 1450s)

We've seen that from the 1820s to the 2020s, the 66-book Bible has reigned supreme in the Protestant-dominated West. In the period between the 1820s Apocrypha Controversy and the current digitalization of the Bible, the Bible changed very little. And this relatively static state has created the impression that the Bible has always been what we've experienced it to be at least in terms of its contents. As we enter the world of "Yesterday" the world of the 1820s spanning back to the 1450s this impression will quickly shatter. "Yesterday" not only had a different Bible, but perhaps even more importantly, its Bible was a different kind of thing. It was less fixed, more flexible more experimental. The further back in time we go, the less familiar, and even less identifiable, the Bible becomes. But for now, let's only go back as far as the preceding major transformation:

Gutenberg

Prior to the 1450s, all bibles had to be copied by hand, one letter at a time. This was an incredibly laborious and expensive task. Few had the skills and resources necessary to create a bible, and few could afford to have one made. Naturally then, there were very few bibles and the majority of even those few weren't even "bibles"; they were mostly collections of *some* scriptural books like just the letters of Paul or one gospel together with the book of Acts. Furthermore, every single copy of every scriptural book was different from every other copy of that book. In the next section, we'll cover much more of what "the bible" was like before the printing press. For now, it's only necessary to understand that when Johannes Gutenberg first printed the Bible in the 1450s, it completely changed what was possible for the Bible.

This was the first time in the history of the world that a whole pile of bibles could be produced at once and they were all practically identical. Gutenberg gave us the Bible as a printed book and opened the doors for its mass production. The mass production of the Bible

(along with other books) was one of the necessary conditions for enabling the [increase of literacy](#) in modern times. This, in turn, has shaped our world through education, technological innovation, science, etc. The world today would be unimaginably different were it not for Gutenberg's movable type. But, of course, our focus here is on the Bible. With widespread literacy and bibles everywhere, reading the bible has become something everyone can do, not just in public, but in private study. Without the Gutenberg revolution, this would be impossible. Before printing, most people couldn't read and thus could never experience personal study of the bible. The way they interacted with the Bible was in public worship where they would hear the Bible read or chanted. Even then, in the West, church services were held in Latin, and through the latter half of the middle ages, most couldn't understand Latin. So, they were really only given an opportunity to understand their priest's *interpretations* of the bible rather than the bible itself, even in translation. This all changed with printing, literacy, and of course, the translation of the bible into common languages.

Given how dramatically the Gutenberg revolution changed the world, it can be easy to retroject the later developments of that revolution onto its beginnings. In reality, the journey from the Gutenberg bible to the bibles you use, or even the bibles of the 1820s, was long and full of historical contingencies.

Here are some ways in which the Gutenberg Bible was unlike bibles from the 1820s to the 2020s:⁹You can confirm the following information using [the Gutenberg Bible Wikipedia page](#). First of all, there were only 158 or 180 copies printed. And while they were all printed using the same characters in the same order so that all the black text was the same, they were different in other respects. For example, most copies were printed on paper, but some were printed on vellum. Furthermore, the copies were printed with the thought that buyers could hire an artist to decorate the pages by hand. This, of course, would result in each copy being unique, though some were never decorated. Another (more significant) difference is that the Gutenberg bibles were not printed as a single volume, most were two volumes, though some were three and some even four. Thus, each Gutenberg bible was not a single object — a single book — like modern bibles. And remember, the particularities of one's phenomenal bible create the assumptions that form one's quintessential bible. And, of course, the historical circumstances contribute to people's impression of the objects around them. Anyone purchasing a Bible in the 1950s would know that there were thousands of other bibles just like the one they bought, and they knew that their new bible, while perhaps having a novel cover, was the same in its contents as the bible of their parents and grandparents. In the 1450s, on the other hand, anyone who bought a Gutenberg Bible knew they were obtaining something new — something that was the first of its kind.

Another very important way the Gutenberg Bible was unlike post-1820s bibles was its contents. Being an edition of the Vulgate, its language was Latin and it contained books that were eventually left out of Protestant Bibles. Here are the books of the [Gutenberg Bible](#) in

the order in which they appear:

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 Kings, 2 Kings, 3 Kings, 4 Kings,¹⁰ Some books here are the same as the books in modern bibles, just using different names. For example, 1-2 Kings here are the same as 1-2 Samuel and 3-4 Kings are the same as 1-2 Kings. 1 Chronicles, 2 Chronicles, Prayer of Manasses, 1 Ezra, 2 Ezra, 3 Ezra, 4 Ezra, Tobit, Judith, Esther, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, Prayer of Iesus Sirach, Prayer of Solomon, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Prayer of Jeremiah, Baruch, Ezekiel, Daniel, Minor Prophets, 1 Maccabees, 2 Maccabees, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, Acts, James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, Jude, Revelation.

In total, there are 68 books here, though counting each of the minor prophets individually would bring us to 79. And it is worth noting that the books Protestants call "Apocrypha" are interspersed with the other books, though this observation is only possible retrospectively. When the Gutenberg bibles were printed, the Protestant reformation hadn't yet begun. There was no Protestant Canon and not even the Roman Catholic canon had yet been finalized. At the time of this first printing of the bible, there was no fixed list of books that must comprise every bible, nor was there a fixed order of books.

The history of the bible from the 1450s to the 1820s is far more complex than from the 1820s to the 2020s. While the latter period saw the triumph of the 66-book Bible, the former period saw its birth. While the latter period had fixed canons within each tradition (Catholic and Protestant), the former period had inner-tradition variation, especially among Protestants. And while in the latter period, the precise books to be included in the Bible became quickly assumed, in the former period, they were debated.

Vernacular Bibles After Gutenberg

As already mentioned, the Gutenberg bible was in Latin and with less than 200 copies it didn't really bring the bible to the people. For that, the bible had to be translated into the commonly spoken languages. People had been translating various scriptural books into vernacular languages for centuries, but the first vernacular bible to be *printed* was the 1466 German bible of [Johannes Mentelin](#). Being based on the Vulgate, it contained many of the same books as the Gutenberg Bible, though not precisely the same since [the Vulgate itself didn't have entirely fixed contents](#). For example, the Mentelin Bible, along with all other German Bibles until Luther's Bible contained [The Epistle of Paul to the Laodiceans](#).

The Epistle to the Laodiceans is included in all eighteen German Bibles printed prior to Luther's translation, beginning with the first German Bible, issued by

Johann Mental at Strassburg in 1488.¹¹The correct date is 1466. For more information see [The Mentelin Bible](#). Perhaps Metzger mistakenly wrote “1488” in anticipation of that date later in the paragraph. In these the Pauline Epistles, with the Epistle to the Hebrews, immediately follow the Gospels, with Laodiceans standing between Galatians and Ephesians. In the first Czech (Bohemian) Bible, published at Prague in 1488 and reprinted several times in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Laodiceans follows Colossians and precedes 1 Thessalonians. [The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance](#), by Bruce Metzger, p. 239

An overview of the earliest printed bibles in vernacular tongues in the [15th](#) and [16th](#) centuries reveals that the precise books to be included was not fixed and many were translations of smaller collections of scripture, like just the Psalms, or just the new Testament. As another example of the unfamiliar character of these early printed bibles, the Dutch [Delf Bible](#) (1477) didn’t include the book of Psalms or the New Testament, but it did include books like Tobit, the Wisdom of Solomon, and 1 & 2 Maccabees. Furthermore, its order was quite different from modern Bibles. From Genesis through 2 Kings (which it calls “4 Kings”), the order is familiar, but following immediately after 2 Kings are the 12 minor prophets and then 1 & 2 Maccabees, Daniel, 1 & 2 Chronicles, the Prayer of Manasseh, and then some more historical and wisdom books (including books later excluded by Protestants) and finally Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Baruch, and lastly Ezekiel.

Clearly, early printed bibles had a far greater variety of books and arrangements of books than post-1820s bibles. The variation reflects not a deviation from a standard, but rather a lack of a standard.

Reformers Questioning Canon

Those who were most willing to question which books should be considered “biblical” were the Protestant Reformers.

Among the Reformers we find a certain openness in discussing the canon and reassessing the qualifications of the disputed books (antilegomena). Andreas Bodenstein of Karlstadt (1480-1541). . . . [w]hile he was still working with Luther as Archdeacon of Wittenber, in 1520 he published a brief treatise on the question of the canon, *De canonicis libris libellus*,¹²Also called *De canonicis scripturis libellus* (in English, On the Canon of Scripture). which he followed next year with a popularization in German (*Welche Bucher heilig and biblisch seind*,¹³In English, Which Books are Holy and Biblical?. Wittenberg, 1521). Repudiating conciliar pronouncements, he asserted the independent authority of holy Scripture. He divided the New Testament documents into three ranks of differing dignity, but all these are superior to any others. The first class contains the Gospels and Acts; the

second, the undoubted Epistles of Paul, along with 1 Peter and 1 John; the third, the seven disputed books: James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, Hebrews, and the Apocalypse. In his discussion of the disputed books Karlstadt declares that the authorship of James is not quite certain, that 2 and 3 John are not by the Evangelist, but by another John, the Presbyter; that Hebrews is not by Paul; and that there is really very little reason why the Apocalypse should be included in the Canon. [The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance](#), by Bruce Metzger, p. 241

Karlstadt wasn't the only Reformer to question these 7 disputed books that eventually became unquestioned in Protestant Bibles. Martin Chemnitz also divided the New testament into these 20 undisputed and 7 disputed books. The 7, he regarded as good but he said that they shouldn't be used for proving doctrine, which was the typical way early Reformers treated apocryphal books. In fact, another Reformer, Johann Brenz, actually called them apocryphal.¹⁴The information in this paragraph can be found in *Luther And The New Testament Apocrypha* by Allen Wikgren published in [A Tribute to Arthur Vööbus: Studies in Early Christian Literature and Its Environment, Primarily in the Syrian East](#) (1977).

While questioning all 7 of these books was apparently a minority position, it was actually quite popular to question 4 of these 7: Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation. Most influentially, Martin Luther had some quite shocking things to say about these books in his 1522 translation of the New Testament into German. At the end of his preface to the New Testament he summarized which books he regarded most highly and took the opportunity to offer his first criticism of the Epistle of James.¹⁵All of Luther's Prefaces to biblical books can be read in full [here](#).

In a word, St. John's Gospel and his first Epistle, St. Paul's Epistles, especially Romans, Galatians and Ephesians, and St. Peter's first Epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that it is necessary and good for you to know, even though you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine. Therefore, St. James's Epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to them; for it has nothing of the nature of the Gospel about it. But more of this in other prefaces.

And indeed, he does return to make some comments on James in his Preface to it (together with Jude). First, however, it is worth noting that Luther placed Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation at the very end of his New Testament. And, in his preface to Hebrews, he starts by distinguishing between these books and the previous books of the New Testament before commenting specifically on Hebrews. Here is what he said,

Hitherto we have had the right certain chief books of the New Testament.

The four following had, in ancient times, a different reputation. In the first place, that this Epistle is not St. Paul's, nor any other apostles, is proved by the fact that it says, in Hebrews 2:3, that this doctrine has come to us and remains among us through those who themselves heard it from the Lord. Thus it is clear that he speaks of the apostles as a disciple to whom this doctrine has come from the apostles, perhaps long after them.

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Again, there is a hard knot in the fact that in chapters 6 and 10 it flatly denies and forbids to sinners repentance after baptism, and in Hebrews 12:17, it says that Esau sought repentance and did not find it. This seems, as it stands, to be against all the Gospels and St. Paul's epistlesâ?!

â?!he does not lay the foundation of faith, which is the work of an apostle, nevertheless he does build finely thereon gold, silver, precious stones, as St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3:13. Therefore we should not be hindered, even though wood, straw, or hay be mixed in with them, but accept this fine teaching with all honor; though to be sure, we cannot put it on the same level with the apostolic epistles.

It's important to realize that he not only regarded Hebrews as not written by Paul, but he regarded it as, at least in some ways, contrary to Paul and to the Gospels. While he acknowledged that it has some precious stones, he thought it also contained some wood, straw, or hay. Luther, the great Protestant, clearly didn't regard all the books of the Protestant Canon as most Protestants do today. Remember, the so-called Protestant Canon is really just the Calvinist Canon, and it actually didn't come into existence until after Luther's time, as we'll see. But now, let's see what Luther had to say about James:

Though this Epistle of St. James was rejected by the ancients, I praise it and hold it a good book,¹⁶ While Luther concedes that James is a good book, it's clear that he means this only in comparison to common books that espouse the doctrines of men. Yet, those who consider James to be authentic Scripture will find it difficult to consider what Luther says in the rest of his preface as "praise" because it sets up no doctrine of men and lays great stress upon God's law. But to state my own opinion about it, though without injury to anyone, I consider that it is not the writing of any apostle.

My reasons are as follows:

First: Flatly against St. Paul and all the rest of Scripture, it ascribes righteousness to works, and says that Abraham was justified by his works, in that he offered his son Isaac, though St. Paul, on the contrary, teaches, in Romans 4:2, that Abraham

was justified without works, by faith alone, before he offered his son, and proves it by Moses in Genesis 15:6. This fault, therefore, leads to the conclusion that it is not the work of any apostle.

Second: Its purpose is to teach Christians, and in all this long teaching it does not once mention the Passion, the Resurrection, or the Spirit of Christ. He names Christ several times, but he teaches nothing about Him, and only speaks of common faith in God. For it is the duty of a true apostle to preach of the Passion and Resurrection and work of Christ, and thus lay the foundation of faith, as He Himself says, in John 15:17, "Ye shall bear witness of men." All the genuine sacred books agree in this, that all of them preach Christ and deal with Him. That is the true test, by which to judge all books, when we see whether they deal with Christ or not, since all the Scriptures show us Christ (Romans 3:21), and St. Paul will know nothing but Christ (1 Corinthians 15:2).

But this James does nothing more than drive to the law and its works; and he mixes the two up in such disorderly fashion that it seems to me he must have some good, pious man, who took some sayings of the apostles' disciples and threw them thus on paper; or perhaps they were written down by someone else from his preaching.

Therefore, I cannot put him among the chief books, though I would not thereby prevent anyone from putting him where he pleases and estimating him as he pleases; for there are many good sayings in him.

As astonishing, and even scandalous, as Luther's words may seem to those who hold dear the modern 66-book Bible (or even just the 27-book New Testament), his most striking words were preserved for Revelation. Let's read:

About this book of the Revelation of John, I leave everyone free to hold his own ideas, and would bind no man to my opinion or judgment; I say what I feel. I miss more than one thing in this book, and this makes me hold it to be neither apostolic nor prophetic. First and foremost, the Apostles do not deal with visions, but prophesy in clear, plain words, as do Peter and Paul, and Christ in the gospel. For it befits the apostolic office to speak of Christ and His deeds without figures and visions; but there is no prophet in the Old Testament, to say nothing of the New, who deals so out and out with visions and figures. And so I think of it almost as I do of the Fourth Book of Esdras, and can nohow detect that the Holy Spirit produced it.

Moreover, he seems to me to be going much too far when he commends his own book so highly, more than any of the other sacred books do, though they are much more important, and threatens that if anyone takes away anything from it, God will deal likewise with him. Again, they are to be blessed who keep what is written therein; and yet no one knows what that is, to say nothing of keeping it. It

is just the same as if we had it not, and there are many far better books for us to keep. Many of the fathers, too, rejected this book of old, though St. Jerome, to be sure, praises it highly and says that it is above all praise and that there are as many mysteries in it as words; though he cannot prove this at all, and his praise is, at many points, too mild.

Finally, let everyone think of it as his own spirit gives him to think. My spirit cannot fit itself into this book. There is one sufficient reason for me not to think highly of it, â?? Christ is not taught or known in it; but to teach Christ is the thing which an apostle is bound, above all else, to do, as He says in Acts 1:8, â??Ye shall be my witnesses,â?• Therefore I stick to the books which gave me Christ, clearly and purely.

Imagine having these words in your bible! This was, in fact, the reality for many Protestants, and for a long time. Lutherâ??s Bible itself was popular, but other bibles besides his used his prefaces and book order. Among these were Simon Corverâ??s bible published in Hamburg in 1523. Also in 1523, the earliest New Testament published in Holland included Lutherâ??s prefaces. A 1526 Swedish New Testament also included them. Danish Bibles also used (and still use) Lutherâ??s order and at least a couple of them contained his prefaces (the bibles of 1524 and 1558).¹⁷ See again *Luther And â??The New Testament Apocryphaâ?•* by Allen Wikgren published in [*A Tribute to Arthur Vööbus: Studies in Early Christian Literature and Its Environment, Primarily in the Syrian East*](#) (1977).

Other Protestant bibles reflected a lower view of these four books through their formatting. For example, in 1541, the Gustav Vasa Bible numbered the books of the Bible, but didnâ??t assign numbers to Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation. Then, in 1596, two Bibles took this a step further: the Dutch Polyglot Bible labelled these four books â??Non-Canonicalâ?• and a bible published by Jacob Lucius gave them the title â??Apocryphaâ?• and added an explanatory note that read â??That is, books that are not held equal to the other holy Scripture.â?• This same title and note appeared again in another Bible published in 1614 by Johann Vogt. Lastly, the Swedish Gustav Adolphus Bible of 1618 divided its New Testament into three sections: 1) â??Gospels and Acts,â?• 2) â??Epistles and Holy Apostles,â?• and 3) â??Apocryphal New Testamentâ?• â?? this latter category housing Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation. And this Bible continued to be printed with these divisions for nearly a century.¹⁸ See again [*The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance*](#), by Bruce Metzger, p. 245 and also Wikgrenâ??s article cited above.

The relegation of Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation to the end of the New Testament was initiated by Luther as a way of indicating their secondary status, and as weâ??ve seen, this was followed by many Protestants beyond Luther. Even the first printed English bibles followed Lutherâ??s order and placement of these books. This was true of [*Tyndaleâ??s New Testament*](#) (1525),¹⁹ The link here is to the 1526 edition since [only a fragment of one copy of the 1525 edition survives](#). [*the Coverdale Bible*](#) (1535), [*the Matthew Bible*](#) (1537), and [*the*](#)

[Taverner Bible](#) (1539) followed all the printed English Bibles until [the Great Bible](#) (1539) which followed the order that eventually became most prevalent other than it placed Jude after 2 Peter. But Luther's order continued on in new editions of the earlier Bibles and is even followed much later in the Weimar Bible of 1644, a Greek New Testament of 1740, and the first German bible published in America in 1743.²⁰ See *The Canon of the Bible Among the Later Reformers* by H. Howarth published in the [Journal of Theological Studies, Vol. 10](#), p. 202

Another important fact about all of these bibles (other than the exclusive New Testaments) is that they contained Old Testament Apocryphas. This is true not only of these bibles, but of [Luther's complete bible](#) (1534), [the Geneva Bible](#) (1560), [the Bishops' Bible](#) (1568), and of course [the King James Bible](#) (1611).

People today often assume that early Protestants universally rejected the Old Testament Apocrypha. This simply isn't the case. The way early Protestants handled the disputed books of the Old Testament was very similar to how they handled the disputed books of the New Testament, which shouldn't be surprising given that their manner of handling both sprung from the same overall approach to the Bible. And what was it that characterized the early Protestant approach to the contents of the Bible? It was not, as you might assume, a rejection of the Apocrypha and a promotion of a 66-book canon. No! That didn't come along until later. Really, what characterized their approach was the freedom to question the status of each book.

As we've already seen, 7 books of the New Testament were sometimes disputed by Protestants and 4 of these 7 were quite widely disputed. The disputed nature of these books was manifested in a variety of ways in their presentation in Protestant Bibles. In some Bibles, they were mixed with all the other books with no hint of them being disputed. In others, they were placed at the end of the New Testament or labeled "Apocryphal" or "Non-Canonical," or they were spoken against in prefaces. And just as individual Reformers differed in their evaluation of disputed New Testament books, they also differed in their evaluation of disputed Old Testament books. What this means is that the status of a book like James and a book like the Wisdom of Solomon were not all that different in early Protestantism. For Protestants, it wasn't totally clear that a book like James should be included, and it wasn't totally clear that a book like the Wisdom of Solomon should be excluded.

In fact, there are a number of early Protestant Bibles that make no distinction between so-called Apocryphal books and other books of the Old Testament. In these Bibles, the Wisdom of Solomon is typically placed right alongside books like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes while the books of the Maccabees are placed with the other historical books of the Old Testament. In other words, the books that were eventually excluded from Protestant Bibles altogether (after the 1820s) were at one time simply a part of the Old Testament in many Protestant Bibles.

This was the case for Bibles such as [the Vorsterman Bible](#) (1528), [the Brucioli Bible](#) (1530), [the Zurich Bible](#) (1530), [the Liesvelt Bible](#) (1542), [the Castellion Bible](#) (1551 in Latin, 1555 in French), and [the Bear Bible](#) (1569). Interestingly, the Castellion Bible even included selections from Josephus as the last book of the Old Testament, and its translator (Sebastien Castellion) disputed the canonicity of Song of Songs (even though he included it in his bible) while he endorsed such books as 4 Ezra and the Sibylline Oracles.²¹ This is discussed in [The Apocryphal Apocalypse: The Reception of the Second Book of Esdras \(4 Ezra\) from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment](#), by Alastair Hamilton pp. 151-152. Another book worth mentioning in connection with these Bibles that don't distinguish between so-called "Apocryphal" books and other Old Testament books is a book published in 1546 called [The Books of Solomon](#). This book contained Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, the Wisdom of Solomon, and Ecclesiasticus all together, using the Great Bible translation.

From everything we've covered so far, it should be clear that among early Protestants, including a book in a Bible (even simply as part of the Old Testament or New Testament) was no guarantee that the translators or readers regarded that book as Canonical or even Scriptural or true. Likewise, even those protestant Bibles that placed some books in a separate section called "Apocrypha" shouldn't be interpreted as indicating that all the translators or readers rejected the Scriptural or Canonical status of all the books in that section. In an [article](#) we quoted earlier, Matthew Korpman argued that many early Protestants held the Apocrypha in high esteem, even regarding some or all of it as Scriptural. Furthermore, he argued that Martin Luther used the category "Apocrypha" as a sort of temporary bin for books he and others weren't sure what to do with. Yet, from Luther's writings, Korpman argues, it is possible to get a fuller idea of his view of individual "apocryphal" books. Namely, he regarded 1 Maccabees as canonical; Judith, Tobit, and the portions of Daniel only found in the Greek version as potentially canonical (though he struggled with them); Sirach, Wisdom of Solomon, and Baruch as good books but not canonical; and 2 Maccabees he simply rejected. It's also worth noting that he also rejected Esther, even though he included it in the Old Testament of his Bible. On this point he said,

I am so great an enemy to the second book of the Maccabees, and to Esther, that I wish they had not come to us at all, for they have too many heathen unnaturalities.
Martin Luther, [Table Talk: Of God's Word, XXIV](#)

In this interesting section of *Table Talk*, Luther also expressed his opinion that Proverbs was not written by Solomon and he seems to put it on par with the "apocryphal" Ecclesiasticus. Of Kings and Chronicles he said,

The book of Kings is excellent a hundred times better than the Chronicles, which constantly pass over the most important facts, without any details whatever.
Martin Luther, [Table Talk: Of God's Word, XXV](#)

What's most interesting here is that Luther, like other reformers, was evaluating each book individually rather than starting with a collection and assuming that it is beyond question as most do with their bible canons today. In this sense, the Protestant reformers were remarkably uncanonical in their thinking about scriptural books. It was largely in response to this free questioning of which books should be considered scriptural that the Roman Catholic church finally fixed its canon during the fourth session of the Council of Trent in 1546. In addition to listing which books are regarded as canonical, the *Decree Concerning the Canonical Scriptures* also made it a point to state that the Council "receives and venerates with equal affection of piety, and reverence, all the books both of the Old and of the New Testament." This is clearly at odds with the tendency among the reformers to evaluate each book individually and to place higher value on some books as compared to others. Finally, after listing the books, the decree states:

"if any one receive not, as sacred and canonical, the said books entire with all their parts, as they have been used to be read in the Catholic Church, and as they are contained in the old Latin vulgate edition; and knowingly and deliberately contemn the traditions aforesaid; let him be anathema." [*Decree Concerning the Canonical Scriptures, Fourth Session of the Council of Trent*](#)

In 1546, there was no debate between a Catholic and a Protestant Canon. After all, there was no Protestant Canon. The debate was more like this: On the Catholic side, it was asserted that there is a fixed collection of books that all must adhere to. All the books were to be regarded as equal and were of unquestionable authority. There was even a particular edition of the text that was the one authoritative version – the Latin Vulgate. On the Protestant side, there was no fixed collection of books – reformers differed regarding which books they considered scriptural and they felt free to judge each book on its own merits, even rejecting some that most Christians then (and now) accepted as canonical. And they granted each other the freedom to disagree over the scriptural status of individual books. Due to considering each book individually, Protestants didn't regard every book as equal, but they considered them to vary in their value and usefulness. Further, they had no one authoritative text. They translated from Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, but had a strong preference for the original languages and sought the best manuscripts available.

Given the early Protestant flexibility and variability when it came to the canon, one can rightly ask how it is that the modern Protestant canon came about at all! As we observed earlier, it isn't quite right to think of a "Protestant canon" even today since many Protestant denominations (even major ones) have no official statement regarding which books should be considered canonical. It's really only Calvinist churches (and Calvinist-influenced churches) that have official canons. But what is the origin of this canon?

The Birth of the 66-Book Bible

Calvin plainly refers to him as a prophet. He also regarded the Greek text of Baruch as a translation (presumably from an original Hebrew) and he argues that Paul made use of Baruch in 1 Corinthians 10:20. and his pupil De Chandieu. The following year, 1560, is when Calvin and his associates published the Geneva Bible, which had been years in the making. Since both the French Confession of Faith and the Geneva Bible were produced at the same time by the same people, we have every reason to believe they were intended to promote the same biblical canon. And indeed, though the Geneva Bible contains the Apocrypha, it opens the Apocrypha section with the following words:

These books that follow in order after the Prophets unto the New Testament, are called Apocrypha, that is books, which were not received by a common consent to be read and expounded publicly in the Church, neither yet served to prove any point of Christian religion, save inasmuch as they had the consent of the other Scriptures called Canonical to confirm the same, or rather whereon they were groundedâ! â [Geneva Bible, Introduction to Apocrypha](#)

So it is that while the Geneva Bible speaks well of the âapocryphalâ books, even calling them âScripture,â it also clearly distinguishes them from the âCanonicalâ books. And since all the books in the Geneva Bible beyond the Apocrypha section (that is, those in the Old Testament and New Testament) are the same as those listed in the French Confession of Faith, itâs safe to say they promote the same books as âCanonical.â

Here is where things get interesting. Much earlier than the Apocrypha section in the Geneva Bible is 2 Chronicles, at the end of which is a writing known as the Prayer of Manasseh ([see it for yourself here](#)) â a short, one-chapter book that is excluded from modern Protestant Bibles and is usually now classed as part of the Apocrypha. But in the Geneva Bible, it isnât part of the Apocrypha â itâs part of the Old Testament Canon. Even as late as 1640, when a Geneva Bible was first printed without the Apocrypha, the Prayer of Manasseh was retained at the end of 2 Chronicles as part of the Old Testament.²³ See [The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in Early Modern England, c. 1530-1700](#), p. 144 In light of this, the French Confession of Faith most likely includes the Prayer of Manasseh as part of 2 Chronicles implicitly, in which case, the canon it promotes is very close, but not exactly the same as the 66-book canon used by modern Protestants. If we want to find the first instance of a 66-book Biblical Canon that precisely matches the modern canon â no more, no less â we evidently need to keep looking.

The next place one might look for the 66-book bible is the 1561 Belgic Confession of Faith. If you look for [this confession online](#) and read it, youâll find that it lists the books of the canon as we now have it in Protestant bibles and it specifies apocryphal books that it excludes â making specific mention of the Prayer of Manasseh among the excluded books. However, these popular versions of the Belgic Confession are actually based on a 1619

Revision rather than on the original 1561 version. And both versions actually fail to mention the book of Lamentations, though it is arguably included in Jeremiah, but this would need to be inferred. In any case, the original 1561 version is ambiguous on a number of points and the fact that it shows clear influence from the French Confession of Faith and the Geneva Bible indicates that 2 Chronicles probably includes the Prayer of Manasseh. At a minimum, the confession doesn't exclude it. Here is the relevant section of [the original 1561 Belgic Confession](#), translated from the French:²⁴A detailed discussion of the development of the Belgic Confession and its dependence on the 1559 French Confession can be found in [The Belgic Confession: Its History and Sources](#) by Nicolaas H. Gootjes.

III.

We understand the Holy Scriptures from the two volumes of the Old and New Testaments, which are canonical books, against which nothing can be alleged. The number is such, the five books of Moses, the book of Joshua, Judges, Ruth, the four books of Kings, the two books of the Chronicles called Paralypomenon, the first of Esdras, Nehemiah, Esther, Job, the Psalms of David, the three books of Solomon, including Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song: the four great Prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel: then other 12 lesser Prophets. The New Testament: the four Evangelists, Saint Matthew, Saint Mark, Saint Luke, Saint John, the Acts of the Apostles, the Fourteen Epistles of Saint Paul, and the seven Epistles of the other Apostles. The Apocalypse of saint John the Apostle.

V.

We receive all these books only as holy and canonical, to regulate and establish our faith: and undoubtedly believe all the things which are contained therein. Not so much because the Church receives and approves them as such: but mainly because the Holy Spirit bears witness in our hearts that they are of God, and also that they are approved as such by themselves when they say something, and so it happens.

VI.

We separate these holy books from the apocryphal and other ecclesiastical books, which the Church may well read and take instruction in matters according to the Canonical books: but she cannot cite testimony from them to prove anything of the Law or Christian religion.

If Lamentations is assumed to be included in Jeremiah and the Prayer of Manasseh is assumed to be excluded from 2 Chronicles, then this would be the first canon list that perfectly matches the modern Protestant Canon. But again, the exclusion of the Prayer of Manasseh is by no means certain and the evidence weighs more heavily in favor of its inclusion since the Belgic Confession is just following the French Confession here and the

French Confession implicitly includes the Prayer of Manasseh with 2 Chronicles.

To find the next candidate for the first instance of the 66-book Bible, we need to only look ahead to the next year, 1562. In that year, the Church of England adopted [The 39 Articles of Faith](#).²⁵ This link includes all the versions of the 39 Articles that we'll discuss, originally in Latin. These articles were later translated into English and revised, but the original 1562 version has some of the same ambiguities as the Belgic Confession. It specifies some Apocryphal books but fails to mention the Prayer of Manasseh among them. In England at the time, the two most popular Bibles were The Great Bible and the Geneva Bible. The Great Bible counted the Prayer of Manasseh among the Apocrypha while the Geneva Bible had it as part of the Old Testament at the end of 2 Chronicles. While the 1562 Articles could be interpreted as advocating the modern 66-book collection, it is certainly not clear that it does so. While it doesn't specifically include the Prayer of Manasseh, it doesn't exclude it either. Furthermore, its lack of specificity extends to other parts of the Canon list as well. Instead of listing the prophetic books it just says, "Major prophets. Minor Prophets." It also fails to specify the New Testament books, simply saying, "We receive all the Books of the New Testament (as they are generally received) and account them Canonical." As we mentioned earlier, Calvinist churches have tended to specify biblical canons while other Protestant churches have generally not. The Church of England has always had a mix of influences — Calvinist, Catholic, Lutheran, among others. This mix of influences might explain their production of a canon (like Calvinists and Catholics) but also their lack of specificity (like other Protestants).

The first English version of the 39 Articles was produced in 1571. The lack of specifying the books of the New Testament was retained, while the specification of the prophets was only slightly improved to "4 Prophets the greater. 12 Prophets the less." The four greater prophets are, in all likelihood Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. Lamentations is likely assumed to be included with Jeremiah since it was in all the English Bibles at the time, but again, this isn't specified. At the same time, this version is the first that specifies the Prayer of Manasseh among the apocryphal books, making it the first list that is actually more likely than not to perfectly match the modern 66-book identification of non-apocryphal books. I should be quick to point out, however, that there is yet another area of ambiguity in the 39 Articles — the exact status of these apocryphal books. Before listing the books of the Canon, it says,

In the name of the holy Scripture we do understand those Canonical books of the old and new Testament, of whose authority was never any doubt in the Church.

Then, after listing Genesis through "12 Prophets the less" it says,

And the other books (as Jerome saith) the Church doth read for example of life and instruction of manners: but yet doth it not apply them to establish any doctrine. Such are these following.

And then it lists the books of the Old Testament Apocrypha and makes its comment about the New Testament. Notice how both of these statements are descriptive rather than prescriptive. And when it refers to the non-apocryphal books as "those Canonical books of the old and new Testament, of whose authority was never any doubt in the Church" is it saying that they alone are canonical and their authority was never doubted, or is it saying that they alone are of undoubted authority among the Canonical books of the old and new Testament? It simply isn't clear. A modern Protestant canonical bias may incline one to read it as excluding the apocryphal books from the canon, but the wording itself could be just as easily read as simply noting their more disputed status and describing their role as instructive rather than dogmatic. And there is an important historical fact that lends weight to this interpretation of the articles. Just a few years before the English version of the Articles, the Church of England published a new Bible, the Bishops' Bible (1568). Interestingly, [the table of contents](#) divides the Bishops' Bible into two main sections, the Old Testament and the New Testament, each of which is preceded by a distinct line crossing the entire page horizontally. And these are further subdivided into "parts" 4 of the Old Testament and 1 of the New Testament. It labels each part as follows:

The first part. (containing Genesis Deuteronomy)

The second part. (containing Joshua Job)

The third part of the Bible. (containing Psalms Malachi)

The fourth part of the Bible called Apocrypha. (containing 3 Esdras 2 Maccabees)

The fifth part. (containing Matthew Revelation)

Clearly, this includes the Apocrypha as a part of the Bible rather than being a supplement to the Bible. Again, it doesn't have 3 sections Old Testament, Apocrypha, and New Testament the first and last being the Bible and the middle only being an addition. No! The 1568 Bishops' Bible placed the Apocrypha as "part" of the Old Testament akin to the other 3 "parts" of the Old Testament. Later, on [the title page for the Apocrypha](#), it simply says, "The Volume of the books called Apocrypha, containing these following books." There is no word against these books and nothing indicating that they are of a secondary status as there was in the Geneva Bible.

Since both the Bishops' Bible and the 39 Articles were produced by the Church of England at the same time and both by official endorsement, we have every reason to think they promoted the same biblical canon. Thus, it makes far more sense to understand the 39 Articles as including the Apocrypha *as part of the Bible* while simply acknowledging that

there has been some doubt about them and that the Church reads them for instruction rather than to establish doctrine. So, even here, we don't have the 66-book bible canon used by Protestants today with nothing more and nothing less as part of the bible.

Our search brings us into the 17th century and the next official Bible of the Church of England – the King James Bible (1611). This King James Bible doesn't say anything that excludes the Apocrypha from the Canon. Yet, it does make one change that makes the Apocrypha more easily separable. That is, it followed Luther in moving the Apocryphal books to a separate section between the Old and New Testaments rather than as part of the Old Testament.²⁶ You can see the Table of Contents [here](#).

It isn't until 1615 (so far as I have been able to find) that one finds a biblical canon list that perfectly matches the modern 66-book collection and clearly excludes the Apocrypha (with the Prayer of Manasseh specified). And, nicely, it makes sure to specify Lamentations. This is found in [The Irish Articles of Religion](#) written by James Ussher, the Calvinist Theologian famous for his biblical chronology. The Irish Articles introduce the list of Canonical books by these words:

1. The ground of our religion and the rule of faith and all saving truth is the Word of God, contained in the holy Scriptures. 2. By the name of holy Scripture we understand all the Canonical Books of, the Old and New Testament, viz.:

Following this is the list of Old Testament books precisely as found in modern Protestant bibles immediately followed by a list of the books of the New Testament, again precisely as found in modern Protestant Bibles. Then come the words, "All which we acknowledge to be given by the inspiration of God, and in that regard to be of most certain credit and highest authority." Only after this are the Apocryphal books addressed as follows:

3. The other Books, commonly called Apocryphal, did not proceed from such inspiration, and therefore are not of sufficient authority to establish any point of doctrine; but the Church doth read them as Books containing many worthy things for example of life and instruction of manners. Such are these following:

Then are listed the 14 apocryphal books as they are in the 1611 King James Bible.

Let's summarize what we've found here. 1559 is the first time on record when someone suggested that the Bible consist of a list of books that almost exactly matches the modern 66-book bible. Even then, however, the bible it promoted wasn't exactly the same as the modern 66-book bible due to the inclusion of the Prayer of Manasseh with 2 Chronicles. Over the next dozen or so years, there were several bibles and canon lists that come very close to the modern 66-book canon but fell short of matching it exactly, either by implicitly

including the Prayer of Manasseh or by still including the Apocrypha as part of the bible. It wasn't until 1615 that we find a canon list that clearly and precisely matches the modern 66-book bible and excludes the Apocrypha from the canon. It must be remembered, however, that 1615 is not the date when the 66-book bible became "the Protestant Bible." It is merely the first date we can find when someone promoted that this is what the bible should be. But this clearly wasn't adopted by all protestants at once. The Irish Confession represented the views of just *some* Calvinists.²⁷ And even then, we have reason to be cautious not to view their 1615 list as intending to be definitive and final. This is because James Ussher himself, in his 1622 *Discourse on the Religion Anciently Professed by the Irish*, p. 11, says, "Now respecting those books annexed to the Old Testament, which St. Heirom [Jerome] calls Apocryphal, and others Ecclesiastical: true it is our Irish and British writers consider some of these writings prophetic; those especially that commonly bear the name of Solomon. But so also is the fourth book of Esdras cited by Gildas, in the name of *blessed* Esdras the *prophet*; which yet our Romanists will not admit to be canonical!" This striking statement shows that even those who put forward the 1615 list didn't think that prophetic writings were limited to that list. Among the standard Apocrypha, only *The Wisdom of Solomon* bears the name of Solomon, which makes one wonder what other Solomon-related books the Irish and British writers considered "prophetic." It's also significant that Ussher pointed to 4th Esdras (also known as 4 Ezra) as another writing considered to be prophetic by at least one major writer in the British church since that work has a section that speaks of 70 hidden books of scripture to be given only to the wise (4 Ezra 14:37-48). But remember, other Calvinists still included the Prayer of Manasseh as part of the bible as late as 1640. Meanwhile, some Lutherans still had Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation as a distinct section of the Bible called "Apocryphal New Testament" as late as the 18th century! The 66-book bible really only became "the Protestant Bible" after the 1820s Apocrypha controversy, and only unofficially for non-Calvinist denominations. And actually, some Protestant groups continued to study and regard as Scripture at least some books of the Apocrypha well into the 19th century.²⁸ This was true of the Millerites and early Seventh-day Adventists as explained in [Matthew Korpman's article](#).

In short, how and when we got the biblical canons of today is far less straightforward and far more recent than most people assume. But if you've been surprised by how widely diverse bibles have been since the printing press, just wait till you see what things were like

"The Day Before Yesterday" (the 1450s spanning back to the 300s)

(Note: This article is not yet complete. More to come soon!)

- 1
This first lesson is available as a podcast [here](#) and as a video [here](#).
- 2

This section is available as two podcast episodes ([1](#) and [2](#)) and also as two videos ([1](#) and [2](#)).

• 3

[COVID-19 mortality preventable by vaccines â?? Peterson-KFF Health System Tracker](#)

• 4

[Unvaccinated COVID-19 hospitalizations cost billions of dollars â?? Peterson-KFF Health System Tracker](#)

• 5

[Ten threats to global health in 2019 \(archive.org\)](#)

• 6

On this point, I recommend reading [The Protestant Reception of the Apocrypha](#) by Matthew J. Korpman (also published in [The Oxford Handbook of the Apocrypha](#), pp. 74ff).

• 7

While John Wesley wasnâ??t a Calvinist, another founder of Methodism, [George Whitefield, was.](#)

• 8

One canâ??t help but wonder if the fact that these denominations list the books they consider canonical, yet leave some of the books unspecified, is a reflection of the only-partial influence of Calvinism.

• 9

You can confirm the following information using [the Gutenberg Bible Wikipedia page](#).

• 10

Some books here are the same as the books in modern bibles, just using different names. For example, 1-2 Kings here are the same as 1-2 Samuel and 3-4 Kings are the same as 1-2 Kings.

• 11

The correct date is 1466. For more information see [The Mentelin Bible](#). Perhaps Metzger mistakenly wrote â??1488â?• in anticipation of that date later in the paragraph.

• 12

Also called *De canonicis scripturis libellus* (in English, On the Canon of Scripture).

• 13

In English, Which Books are Holy and Biblical?.

• 14

The information in this paragraph can be found in *Luther And â??The New Testament Apocryphaâ?•* by Allen Wikgren published in [A Tribute to Arthur Vööbus: Studies in Early Christian Literature and Its Environment, Primarily in the Syrian East](#) (1977).

• 15

All of Lutherâ??s Prefaces to biblical books can be read in full [here](#).

• 16

While Luther concedes that James is a good book, its clear that he means this only in comparison to common books that espouse the doctrines of men. Yet, those who consider James to be authentic Scripture will find it difficult to consider what Luther says in the rest of his preface as â??praise.â?•

• 17

See again *Luther And â??The New Testament Apocryphaâ?•* by Allen Wikgren published in [A Tribute to Arthur Vööbus: Studies in Early Christian Literature and Its Environment, Primarily in the Syrian East](#) (1977).

• 18

See again [The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance](#), by Bruce Metzger, p. 245 and also Wikgren's article cited above.

• 19

The link here is to the 1526 edition since [only a fragment of one copy of the 1525 edition survives](#).

• 20

See *The Canon of the Bible Among the Later Reformers* by H. Howarth published in the [Journal of Theological Studies, Vol. 10](#), p. 202

• 21

This is discussed in [The Apocryphal Apocalypse: The Reception of the Second Book of Esdras \(4 Ezra\) from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment](#), by Alastair Hamilton pp. 151-152.

• 22

It's worth noting that in 1546, John Calvin quoted the book of Baruch as the words of a prophet. Here's his statement,

It is certain from the Prophet Baruch, (4:7,) that *those things that are sacrificed to idols are sacrificed to devils*. (Deut. 32:17; Ps. 96:5.) In that passage in the writings of the Prophet, the Greek translation, which was at that time in common use, has *demons*, and this is its common use in Scripture. How much more likely is it then, that Paul borrowed what he says from the Prophet? • John Calvin, Commentary on 1 Corinthians, p. 339 Here, Calvin quotes from the apocryphal book of Baruch as an authentic writing Baruch, and Calvin plainly refers to him as a prophet. He also regarded the Greek text of Baruch as a translation (presumably from an original Hebrew) and he argues that Paul made use of Baruch in 1 Corinthians 10:20.

• 23

See [The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in Early Modern England, c. 1530-1700](#), p. 144

• 24

A detailed discussion of the development of the Belgic Confession and its dependence on the 1559 French Confession can be found in [The Belgic Confession: Its History and Sources](#) by Nicolaas H. Gootjes.

• 25

This link includes all the versions of the 39 Articles that we'll discuss.

• 26

You can see the Table of Contents [here](#).

• 27

And even then, we have reason to be cautious not to view their 1615 list as intending to be definitive and final. This is because James Ussher himself, in his 1622 *Discourse on the Religion Anciently Professed by the Irish*, p. 11, says, "Now respecting those books annexed to the Old Testament, which St. Hierom [Jerome] calls Apocryphal, and others Ecclesiastical: true it is our Irish and British writers consider some of these writings prophetic; those especially that commonly bear the name of Solomon. But so also is the fourth book of Esdras cited by Gildas, in the name of *blessed Esdras the prophet*; which yet our Romanists will not admit to be canonical? • This striking statement shows that even those who put forward the 1615 list didn't think that prophetic writings were limited to that list. Among the standard Apocrypha, only *The Wisdom of Solomon* bears the name of Solomon, which makes one wonder what other Solomon-related books the Irish and British writers considered prophetic. • It's also significant that Ussher pointed to 4th

Esdras (also known as 4 Ezra) as another writing considered to be prophetic by at least one major writer in the British church since that work has a section that speaks of 70 hidden books of scripture to be given only to the wise (4 Ezra 14:37-48).

- 28

This was true of the Millerites and early Seventh-day Adventists as explained in [Matthew Korpman's article](#).