

# THE ATHEIST'S BLUFF



By Professor Gerard Casey

# The Atheist's Bluff

Many leading atheists do not believe in free will but hope we will still allow them to talk as if moral responsibility is real and ignore the huge implications for how we view ourselves.

## Introduction

In many ways, atheism is based on the big bluff that you can have your cake and eat it too. A lot of atheists, naïve atheists, we'll call them, are not even aware the bluff exists. But most leading atheists are well aware of it, but mostly choose to ignore it. The bluff is this; they deny the existence of free will but hope we will still allow them to talk and behave as though moral responsibility is real, even though it's not if there is no free will. After all, if we can't choose our actions, then how can we be held morally responsible for them, anymore than a dog is considered wicked because it bites people? We might try to improve the dog's behaviour, but we don't condemn the dog as evil. That would imply it *chooses* to bite people.

Well known atheists such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Yural Harari, Francis Crick and many others are on the record in their denial of such a thing as free will. Their argument seems to go something as follows: everything we do is governed by physical laws, our brains are physical, and therefore they are also controlled by physical laws, just as every other organ in our body is. Our thoughts are the result of physical cause and effect. We might think we control our thoughts, and choose our actions, to some extent anyway, but that is an illusion.

## Why atheists deny free will

Many atheists are also materialists, that is, they believe matter is all there is. All matter is governed by physical laws, and as our brains are physical, like every other organ in our bodies, they are also controlled by physical laws. No part of us is free of physical laws, including our thoughts and desires, which rules out true free will and also real moral accountability.



As Francis Crick, the co-discoverer of the structure of the double helix puts it: "You, your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules. Who you are is nothing but a pack of neurons."

Furthermore, many leading atheists also reject any notion of a moral law that exists independently of us and is binding on us all. Physics can find no such law. Relying on physics alone, we must conclude that morality is an invention that we can discard or use as suits it. It might have utility, but it has no real, binding force.

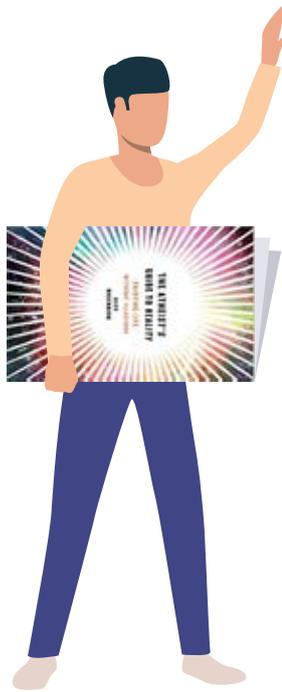
This paper will look, in particular, at the work of one atheist, Professor Alex Rosenberg, and his book *The Atheist's Guide to Reality*, because it sets out with admirable ruthlessness exactly where atheism leads. (Check out his credo below.) But even Rosenberg does not, in practice, quite follow his atheism to its ultimate logical conclusion, because when we live in the real world, the 'life-world', as we must, it's impossible to do so.

# Taking Alex Rosenberg as Our Guide

Let's begin by taking a look at what I'm calling Rosenberg's Credo, which pretty much sums up the substance of his aforementioned book, *The Atheist's Guide to Reality: Enjoying Life without Illusions*.

## Rosenberg's Credo

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1. There is no God.
2. Reality is whatever physics says it is, nothing more.
3. We do not have immortal souls, and as for our having free will—forget about it!
4. Why are we here? Well, why not? It's all just a matter of luck, good or bad, depending on your view of your existence.
5. The universe has no purpose. The answer to the question of the meaning of life, the universe and everything is that there is no answer, not even a number as charming and as intriguing as 42. All that happens when we die is that everything goes on as before.
6. It's not only life that has no meaning; your thoughts have no meaning either!
7. Are you self-conscious? Well, don't be, for consciousness specialises in producing and supporting illusions, perhaps the biggest and most persistent of which is that there is such a thing as a self to be conscious of.
8. There is no significant difference between right and wrong, or between good and bad, and there is no reason whatsoever for you to be moral except that it makes you feel better.<sup>1</sup>

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You may not agree with everything, or indeed with anything, asserted in the box above (taken directly from his book). Rosenberg's conclusions obviously present a challenge to theists who stubbornly persist in thinking that there is a God, that our lives have meaning and purpose, and that there is a difference between right and wrong, good and bad, a difference that God's existence has something important to do with. But although it may not be immediately obvious, Rosenberg's conclusions also present a challenge to atheists, the congregation that Rosenberg is preaching to in his book, especially those atheists who reject the common criticism made by theists that without God, atheists have no proper foundation for their ethics. Rosenberg believes that his conclusions are what the intelligent atheist *should* believe, and the point of his book is, he says, 'to sketch out what we atheists really should believe about reality and our place in it.'<sup>2</sup> If you're an atheist and you don't want to be considered unintelligent, your cards have been marked!

According to Rosenberg, atheism is firmly grounded on science, and science has all the answers. 'Science,' he says, 'solves all the great puzzles that people have tried to deal with through faith, philosophy, and alcohol and drugs.'<sup>3</sup> The answers that science has found 'are provided by the very same facts that atheism itself rests on. That's why they are a part—the positive part—of the atheist's worldview.'<sup>4</sup> The intellectual stance that science has all the answers, whether in actuality or in prospect, is usually called *scientism*. One of Rosenberg's ways of making this claim is to say that the physical facts fix all the facts; everything is, or can be, explained ultimately by physics—*everything*. Physics explains chemistry, chemistry explains biology, and so on. But it should immediately be obvious that at least one thing is not explained by physics, and that is the very claim that physics fixes all the

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1 The material in this box is paraphrased from Rosenberg, pp. 2-3.

2 Rosenberg, p. x.

3 Rosenberg, p. viii.

4 Rosenberg, p. ix.

## What leading atheists say about free will...

### PROFESSOR RICHARD DAWKINS

**“I have a materialist view of the world. I think that things are determined in a rational way by antecedent events and that commits me to the view that when I think I have free will, when I think I am exercising free choice I am deluding myself. My brain states are determined by physical events.”**

– Richard Dawkins is a leading biologist. His books include *The God Delusion*.



facts. *That* claim is not itself a claim *within* physics but a claim *about* physics; it is, to use a term that Rosenberg would probably reject, a meta-physical claim. And of course, it is not the only claim that we might make that transcends the physical arena. Pretty much all of our categorical ethical claims, for example, are also metaphysical in character, so that, as we shall see, Rosenberg will take it as one of his tasks to reject the whole idea of any kind of moral realism.

What is most disconcerting about the answers that science gives us, according to Rosenberg, is that it tells us that ‘reality is completely different from what most people think, not just different from what credulous religious believers think. Science reveals that reality is stranger than even many atheists recognize.’<sup>5</sup> Science gives us the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about the nature of reality. Most fundamentally, it tells us that everything in the universe, including your thoughts, your beliefs, your very self, is simply the product of the interaction of fermions and bosons, and happens ‘as a result of pushes and pulls of bits of matter and fields of force...’<sup>6</sup>

Let’s take a closer look at what scientism is and what it entails, so that we may grasp what I believe to be its fundamental incoherence, and the insuperable problems it creates for those atheists who espouse it.

## The Life-world—the world as we experience it

Rosenberg, like many other atheists, believes there is a very big difference between the world as we experience it, as we think it is, and the way things really are. Consider the phenomenon of the rainbow, for example, something most of us have experienced at some time or another. The experience of seeing a rainbow is real, but what it is supposedly an experience of is *not* real, at least not as it spontaneously presents itself to us. It looks as if there is a multi-coloured arc in the sky but, in fact, there isn’t. The experience of seeing a rainbow is simply a product of the combination of a light source, the refraction of that light through droplets of water in the air, and a subject capable of seeing, all located in just the right position relative to one another. Take away any of these factors and the rainbow simply ceases to exist. In the case of a rainbow, seeing is assuredly *not* believing. Our belief that there is a spectacularly coloured arc in the sky is an example of what is sometimes called folk physics, our naive and spontaneous beliefs about the nature of the physical world. Our folk physics is fundamentally eliminable in the light of experimentation and a more complete theoretical knowledge, but its elimination creates no intrinsic problem for us, unless it be the labour involved in learning some elementary science.

5 Rosenberg, p. ix.

6 Rosenberg, p. 25.

In our everyday social world, our life-world, we spontaneously attribute psychological states to ourselves and to others that appear to have content, to be 'about' things, and to be meaningful. We understand ourselves and others and our actions in terms of purposes and intentions. We believe things; we make claims that we think to be true; we praise and blame others for their actions, believing them to be responsible for those actions. Is this a kind of primitive folk psychology, corresponding to a folk physics? If so, is it also, like folk physics, fundamentally eliminable in the light of experimentation and a more complete theoretical knowledge?

Thinkers of a Rosenbergian stripe consider the concepts constitutive of the world of our everyday experience of ourselves and others to be a kind of primitive scientific theory that can, in principle, be replaced by a more adequate theory, just as is the case with our folk physics. But this cannot be so. Certainly, some aspects of our intuitive beliefs about ourselves are eliminable, but the whole structure of folk-psychology (to use this somewhat pejorative term of art) is *not* eliminable. Let me explain why.

If our folk psychology were fundamentally eliminable, this would create an insuperable problem for us, for in order for us to make, accept, or be persuaded of the truth of any account, *including scientific accounts*, we have to be able to reason, to think, and to accept freely the arguments and the evidence presented to us. But if the radically revisionary account of our everyday psychology is correct, there *are* no such things as reasons, evidence, 'aboutness' and so on, just as Rosenberg asserts, and so the radically revisionary accounts themselves becomes meaningless.

Our life-world comes first in time. It is the first world we inhabit, the world we are born into and grow up in, the world in which we learn our mother tongue, acquire our education (including our scientific education), form our friendships and our loves, express our ideas, think, feel, understand, reason, make plans, converse, argue, worry about the economy, judge our neighbours, and love our children.

But might not the priority of the life-world in time be just be an accident of, let's say, evolution? No. Our lived world not only comes first in time; it also comes first in thought, and it cannot be shown to be an illusion by any science in the way that science shows the experience of the rainbow to be an illusion. For science itself is a human (and indeed a social) activity, carried out by us from *within* our life-world, and this life-world is not simply a point of departure. The life-world is our home world, a world we can never entirely leave except in imagination. To attempt to leave this world permanently would be to cease to be human.

Our understanding of who we are and what we do, then, is not merely a starting point to be abandoned when we arrive at a more adequate theory, it is the source and ground of all our theories, including our scientific theories. Just as Sampson, in destroying the temple of the Philistines, brought it down upon himself, so too, if our scientific theories were to destroy the coherence of our life-world, those very scientific theories would be destroyed by the same process.

Professor Rosenberg is not the only writer to hold radically revisionary views on what it is to be human. There is, in fact, something of a cottage industry in this area. In his little book *Free Will*, written to debunk that very notion, Sam Harris, just like Rosenberg, appears to regard our life-world as fundamentally illusory.<sup>7</sup> But Harris himself

<sup>7</sup> See Harris, *passim*. Vox Day's chapter on Sam Harris is a *tour de force*. Interested readers can find it in Chapter VII of his book. Readers who want a mental workout on the ins-and-outs of the topic of free will, can try dipping into Gary Watson's collection of some of the best philosophical work in this area.





is not just a complicated physico-chemico-biological system. He is a human being, and in his book he asserts a definite position—that free will is an illusion—and he argues for it as a meaningful and, indeed a truthful, position. But if all we are is a physico-chemico-biological system, and free will is an illusion, then our claims have no more meaning than the sighing of the wind in the trees or the crashing of the waves upon the shore.

The intellectual history of mankind bears eloquent testimony to the struggle to expel explanations in terms of purpose and desire from the non-human world to make room for physically causal explanations, and that is entirely appropriate. Apples do not fall to the ground because they desire to be close to the centre of the earth, although the ultimate nature of gravity is somewhat less than perspicuous. But more recently, the intellectual history of mankind bears witness to a movement to expel explanations in terms of purpose and desire even from the world of human affairs, and to substitute physicalist explanations, and only such explanations, for all phenomena. This is something called ‘reductionism’. Just like Rosenberg and Harris, and quite a few years before they wrote, Susan Blackmore told us that ‘It is possible to live happily and morally without believing in free will.’<sup>8</sup> According to her, once we learn to let go of the illusory feeling that we act with free will ‘decisions just happen with no sense of anyone making them.’<sup>9</sup> She admits that giving up a sense of self is much more difficult, remarking, ‘I just keep on seeming to exist. But though I cannot prove it, I think it is true that I don’t.’<sup>10</sup> If it is true that Blackmore doesn’t exist as a freely acting, freely choosing person, as distinct from a ‘meat machine’, who, I wonder, is it that is thinking she doesn’t exist but is unable to prove it?

In a somewhat similar vein, Nicholas Humphrey believes that ‘human consciousness is a conjuring trick, designed to fool us into thinking we are in the presence of an inexplicable mystery.’<sup>11</sup> He is of the opinion that those, such as Colin McGinn,<sup>12</sup> who think that it is impossible to explain how consciousness can arise from the material operations of the central nervous system, are apparently the butts of a practical joke played by Natural Selection which has, for its own inscrutable reasons, ‘succeeded in putting consciousness beyond the reach of rational explanation’ and by so doing, has “undermined the very possibility of *showing* that this is what it has done.”<sup>13</sup> It is interesting to note that while Blackmore denies the reality of the human agent, she is unable to avoid substituting another agent in its place, ‘this body and its genes and memes and the whole universe’; and while Humphrey rejects the reality of human consciousness, he happily posits a quasi-anthropomorphic Natural Selection, which can intend things and act in a manner disturbingly similar to a human agent. Agency and consciousness, when expelled by our radical revisionists from the house of our lived experience through the front door, somehow always manage to return to the house by means of the back door.

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8 in Brockman, p. 41.

9 in Brockman, p. 41.

10 in Brockman, p. 42.

11 in Brockman, p. 113.

12 McGinn, *passim*.

13 in Brockman, p. 114.

While explanations in terms of reasons and purposes have no place in the physical sciences, they are entirely appropriate in their own sphere. Take, for example, the sport of rugby. At one level, it can be explained in terms of movements of objects both human and non-human in terms of physical cause and effect. But this completely misses the significance of all that movement. Someone ignorant of rugby who wants to know what is going on will say, 'Yes, yes, I get all the physical stuff, of course, but what I want to know is what's the *point* of it all?' When the mysteries of the scrum, maul, ruck, lineout, knock on, try, conversion, and penalty are explained and grasped, what at first looked like licensed mayhem, finally becomes comprehensible. (But to be brutally honest, no one, not even God, understands the mystery that is the scrum!) The physical explanation of what happens on the rugby pitch is indeed explanation at one level, but not at the most significant level. The meaningfulness of rugby, while it is not reducible to a mere concatenation of cause and effect, doesn't reject or deny the efficient causality on which the meaningful activity relies; it's just that explanations in such terms are completely beside the point.

One has to wonder why Harris and Rosenberg and their confreres display such evangelical zeal to persuade us that free will is an illusion, and that purpose and meaning are totally unreal. What is the point of such zeal? Why are they trying to persuade readers to believe what they say, given that if what they say is true, there can be no readers to persuade, nor any *truth* to persuade them of, because there is no truth in any metaphysical sense, and we don't choose our thoughts! After all, whatever truth may be, one thing it certainly is not is a physical entity or any modification of a physical entity. You'll find it difficult to collect truth from the fields, like daisies, or order it in a greengrocer's, or have it delivered from that store of every good thing, Amazon. Try as you might, as a card-carrying materialist you won't find truth as a material entity in the universe. You can't put it in a box, measure it with a ruler or see it register on a piece of scientific equipment. It is hard to disagree with Lynne Rudder Baker when she says, 'To deny the common-sense conception of the mental is to abandon all our familiar resources for making sense of any claim, including the denial of the common-sense conception.' She continues, 'If the thesis denying the common-sense conception is true, then the concepts of rational acceptability, of assertion, of cognitive error, even of truth and falsity are called into question.'<sup>14</sup>

Given the obvious self-stultifying nature of all attempts to reject the notion of free will, why are so many atheists keen to reject the idea that there is such a thing? One can only speculate, of course, but it may not be unreasonable to suspect that free will, if it exists, opens a non-determined space in a deterministic world, whereas a world that is fully and completely deterministic leaves no room for God, at least not the God of orthodox Christianity. If that is so, then one can understand the discomfort that the acceptance of the existence of free will would produce in a pious atheist.

Rosenberg's resolute rejection of free will, intentionality, purpose and meaning has a kind of admirable, if lunatical, consistency, a consistency we could respect if Rosenberg really were willing to pay the cost of living in a world devoid of such things. He may claim to think of himself and others as if they were mere masses of cells without meaning, purpose or significance, but this is just pretence. No non-pathologically disturbed person really thinks this about others or, indeed (and perhaps especially), about himself. When it comes down to it, we don't judge people so much by what they say as by what they do, and Rosenberg, Harris and company do exactly what the rest of us do, which is to live in the life-world, a world they share with the great unwashed.

## What leading atheists say about free will...

**SAM HARRIS**

**"Free will is an illusion. Our wills are simply not of our own making. Thoughts and intentions emerge from background causes of which we are unaware and over which we exert no conscious control. We do not have the freedom we think we have."**

– Sam Harris a leading atheist writer.  
His books include *Free Will*.

<sup>14</sup> Baker, p. 134.



### What leading atheists say about free will...

#### FRANCIS CRICK

**“You, your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules. Who you are is nothing but a pack of neurons.”**

– Francis Crick is the Noble-prize winning co-discoverer of the double-helix structure of DNA and author of *The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul*.

## Theists and atheists on morality

To his credit, Rosenberg recognises clearly the embarrassment that atheists commonly experience when faced with the accusation that their atheism undermines any claim they might make to have a morality capable of being justified. And they should be embarrassed! A 2017 study of more than 3,000 people in thirteen countries revealed that most of the world, it seems, still believes that atheists are immoral, and in the unkindest cut of all, this negative perception of atheists was shared by atheists themselves!<sup>15</sup> According to the authors of the study, published in the journal *Nature Human Behaviour*, ‘our findings reveal widespread suspicion that morality requires belief in a god’ and that ‘For many people, including many atheists, the answer to Dostoevsky’s question “Without God ... It means everything is permitted now, one can do anything?” is “Yes”, inasmuch as “everything” refers to acts of extreme immorality.’<sup>16</sup> The paper’s abstract concludes: ‘Entrenched moral suspicion of atheists suggests that religion’s powerful influence on moral judgements persists, even among non-believers in secular societies.’<sup>17</sup> As Rosenberg concedes, ‘the trouble most people have with atheism is that if they really thought there were no God, human life would no longer have any value, they wouldn’t have much reason to go on living, and even less reason to be decent people.’ He adds, ‘In a world where physics fixes all the facts, it’s hard to see how there could be room for moral facts .... Why bother to be good?’<sup>18</sup> Good questions, Professor Rosenberg; do you have some good answers?

Ethics may be understood from three different perspectives: descriptively, prescriptively (or normatively), and foundationally (or meta-ethically). Descriptive ethics tells us how we *actually* behave; prescriptive ethics tells us how we *should* behave; and meta-ethics attempts to provide an *explanation* or *justification* of our prescriptive ethics.

From the perspective of descriptive ethics, atheists and theists can be moral or immoral by any standard of morality. No individual theist or atheist necessarily wins the contest to be the best. So much should be obvious from our everyday experience, aided by a little charitable reflection, and it is not an issue about which there can be any serious contention, although theists and atheists are quite happy to squabble about it, sometimes in an unseemly manner. So too, from a prescriptive perspective, both atheists and theists can be moral or immoral, although here, matters are somewhat more

<sup>15</sup> see Vesey-Byrne, *passim*.

<sup>16</sup> quoted in Vesey-Byrne.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-017-0151>.

<sup>18</sup> Rosenberg, pp. 94-5.

**YUVAL NOAH HARARI**

**“Unfortunately, ‘free will’  
isn’t a scientific reality. It  
is a myth inherited from  
Christian theology.”**

– Yuval Noah Harari is the best-selling  
author of *Sapiens*.

complex. There tend to be more or less systematic differences in the kind of prescriptive ethics that attract theists and atheists, with theists more often than not adopting some form of deontological ethics, maintaining that some acts are absolutely right or wrong, regardless of circumstances or outcomes, and atheists adopting some form of consequentialism, holding that, by and large, acts are to be evaluated as good or bad by virtue of the results they actually or typically produce. There may, of course, be atheists who are not pure consequentialists—I suspect that, in practice, many of them would wish to compromise their consequentialism, at least with respect of the morality of some actions, such as the gratuitous torture of children—but it is difficult to see how a consistent atheist can justify lapsing into any absolute form of ethics. In any event, while this typical difference between theists and atheists is important, it is not the most important issue. That comes from the meta-ethical perspective, which attempts to provide the answer to the question; what justifies our prescriptive standards?

In response to this question, theists tend to say that the meta-ethical foundation of ethics can only be God. On what basis, the theist will ask, can an atheist say that some act is absolutely right or wrong? Doesn't atheism imply moral arbitrariness or, even in the extreme, moral nihilism? Rosenberg asks, 'Where do we scientific [i.e. atheistic] types get off condemning purdah and suttee, female genital mutilation and honor killing, the Hindu cast system, the Samurai Code of Bushido, the stoning of women who have committed adultery, or the cutting off of thieves' right hands?'<sup>19</sup> On this level, the arguments between theist and atheist usually take the form of theists suggesting that no morality, or, at least, no substantive or defensible morality, can be had without a theological backing. The natural response of atheists to the charges of arbitrariness or nihilism by the theist is to reject the supposedly nihilistic implications of their views, and to make a case for morality on the basis of custom, human rights, the balance of happiness, human nature, or evolution, such morality, in their view, being sufficiently grounded without the need for the arbitrary intervention of a capricious God. And so the matter stands.

Enter Professor Rosenberg. When it comes to meta-ethics, Rosenberg invokes a plague on both the houses of theists and atheists, telling us that not only do theists have no defensible morality, but neither do his fellow atheists. With friends like these, what atheist needs an enemy! As an adherent of scientism, Rosenberg accepts that nihilism is true. For Rosenberg, there are no correct answers to moral disputes. It's not just that there are many, equally good moral codes related to particular ethnic groups, cultures, and historical periods, nor is it just that we can't know which of our competing moral systems is correct, it is, rather that all our moral judgements are wrong! As he puts it, 'it [moral nihilism] claims they [moral judgements] are all based on false, groundless presuppositions.'<sup>20</sup> According to Rosenberg, atheists, or, at least, *intelligent* atheists, should be moral nihilists!

Moral nihilism, as Rosenberg correctly notes, doesn't have a particularly savoury reputation, and it is open to a number of objections. First, it seems to make it impossible to condemn those whom we regard as moral monsters—the Hitlers, Stalins, Maos, and Amins. Second, admitting to being a moral nihilist would seem to be tantamount to social suicide—who would trust such people or want to associate with them? And third, if nihilism were to be widely accepted, the creation and maintenance of a coherent society would seem to become impossible. To many people, these objections might seem like plausible reasons to ditch nihilism, but, for Rosenberg, moral nihilism is a direct outcome of scientism and so cannot (or at least, should not) be rejected by atheists. However, Rosenberg thinks, all is not lost, for despite all the obvious shortcomings of nihilism, it turns out that, even with all our differences, almost everyone is committed to a basic, or core, morality. What kinds of principles or maxims make up this core morality?

19 Rosenberg, p. 143.

20 Rosenberg, p. 97.

# Rosenberg's Maxims of Core Morality

## Rosenberg's 10 Commandments

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1. Don't cause gratuitous pain to a newborn baby, especially your own.
2. Protect your children.
3. If someone does something nice to you, then, other things being equal, you should return the favour if you can.
4. Other things being equal, people should be treated the same way.
5. On the whole, people's being better off is morally preferable to their being worse off.
6. Beyond a certain point, self-interest becomes selfishness.
7. If you earn something, you have a right to it.
8. It's permissible to restrict complete stranger's access to your personal possessions.
9. It's okay to punish people who intentionally do wrong.
10. It's wrong to punish the innocent.<sup>21</sup>



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This list exhibits a number of curious features. First, it appears to be more or less random; why these maxims and not others? Second, it's not clear that all of Rosenberg's maxims are moral rather than simply being prudential: are we to be nice to people who are nice to us because it is a policy that pays (prudential), or because it is the right thing to do even if it doesn't yield dividends (moral)? Third, it's not at all clear that all of these maxims, or even any proper subset of them, are actually core to any society's morality. Rosenberg concedes that that not every part of his core morality need be shared by every culture; it is enough, he thinks, if there is substantial overlap between the moral cores of all human cultures. However, even with this concession, it's not clear that there is, in fact, any extensive overlap, except on some very limited matters that I'll come to shortly. And finally, the really important point—where do these maxims or norms come from?

Rosenberg's answer to this question is that they arise from the constraints of survival and reproduction, from a kind of Darwinian process of behavioural selection, pushing us towards cooperation and a version of utilitarian ethics. The moral codes that we endorse almost certainly must have been selected for in a long course of blind variation and environmental filtration. Nature, or as Rosenberg constantly refers to it in an anthropomorphic mode, Mother Nature, seduces us into thinking our core moral principles are right, even though, as nihilists, we know that all our moral judgements are false. Here, Mother Nature functions something like the atheists' conception of the theists' God, except that, instead of issuing arbitrary commands as God apparently does, Mother Nature pulls the wool over our eyes and simply deceives us so that we may survive and reproduce!

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<sup>21</sup> Rosenberg, p. 104.

Does the 'we' who supposedly endorse these moral codes include scientific atheists? Yes! According to Rosenberg, 'the most scientific among us accept these core principles as binding. Such norms reveal their force on us by making our widely-agreed-on moral judgments somehow feel correct, right, true, and enforceable on everyone else. And when we are completely honest with ourselves and others, we really do *sincerely endorse* some moral rules we can't fully state as being right, correct, true, or binding on everyone.'<sup>22</sup> But, as Rosenberg frankly admits, the fact that our moral core is the result of a long process of natural selection gives us no reason to think that it is somehow true or correct. Mother Nature selected this moral core for us but that doesn't make it to be true in any significant sense.

Returning to a point I made earlier, Rosenberg himself raises the awkward point that there are many things that we (Rosenberg's 'we', whoever they are) find morally objectionable that are not, or not necessarily, ruled out by our common moral core, such as purdah and suttee, female genital mutilation and honour killing, the Hindu caste system, the Samurai Code of Bushido, the stoning of women who have committed adultery, or the cutting off of thieves' right hands. Of these objectionable practices, he asks, 'Isn't the high dudgeon we want to effect in the face of this sort of barbarism flatly inconsistent with nihilism—any kind, nice or not?'<sup>23</sup> I would be inclined to answer Rosenberg's question with a flat—yes! Not only will natural selection not justify moral indignation in the face of outrageous



Survival of the Fittest

human practices, but in fact, it seems that natural selection (or Mother Nature, if you prefer Rosenberg's saccharine anthropomorphism<sup>24</sup>) actually produces and enforces norms that many consider to be immoral, such as racism, sexism, and xenophobia. Evolution pushes us every bit as much towards savage competition as cooperation, and if savage competition works, how can a utilitarian-based ethics reject it?

It is true that no group can survive if in-group homicide is not prohibited, but the survival of the group does not only permit the killing of out-group individuals, it sometimes positively requires and encourages it! So too with property. No society can survive if in-group theft is permitted, but societies have long had a cordial propensity to help themselves to the property of other societies or groups. As recently as the seventeenth century, cattle-raiding along and across the English-Scottish border was a major industry, supported and encouraged by people on both sides of the borders, and, more often than not, accompanied by arson and murder. It is less than obvious, then, to put it charitably, that natural selection, or Mother Nature, will produce the kind of moral maxims that Rosenberg desires. Rosenberg, however, is unperturbed by this objection. The problem, it seems, is simply that we don't have the correct beliefs, and once we have those, then, he blandly assures us, that combining our core morality with them will give us the results we want. Rosenberg grounds his core maxims on the mysterious machinations of Mother Nature, but his purported solution is less than obvious, and considerably less than plausible, for it doesn't solve his problem: it simply shifts it from the practical arena to the speculative arena. *What* correct beliefs is he talking about, one wonders, and where do *they* come from?

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22 Rosenberg, p. 106.

23 Rosenberg, p. 143.

24 Like the Dame in the pantomime, Mother Nature is rarely off the stage, making an appearance on at least twenty five occasions in Rosenberg's book.



**“The most persistent questions atheists get asked by theists are these two: In a world you think is devoid of purpose, why do you bother getting up in the morning? And in such a world, what stops you from cutting all the moral corners you can?”**

—Alex Rosenberg,  
*The Atheist's Guide to Reality*



Despite his best efforts to reassure us all, theists and atheists alike, that nihilism doesn't have to be nasty, that it can in fact be nice, Rosenberg's book is the 'respectable' atheist's nightmare! He is to be congratulated for demonstrating the implications of scientism, and for doing so starkly. He may not be bothered by these implications, but almost everybody else will be, including many atheists who are not as ruthless as he is in trying to follow atheism where it leads and live a truly 'undeluded' life. If atheists accept Rosenberg's scientism, and with it, its rejection of free will, they cannot reject his nihilism, and so are left without any possible coherent grounding for their morality, outside of some kind of utilitarianism . On the other hand, if they reject Rosenberg's nihilism, which they should do if they want to retain any possible hope of having a grounded morality, then they must reject his scientism, in whole or in part, and then it will not be open to them to flippantly deny the freedom of the will when it becomes argumentatively convenient to do so.

An atheist who wishes to retain an intellectually defensible morality may say, 'I don't accept Rosenberg's scientism and its consequences, especially nihilism. However, I agree with him, in part, in believing that morality arises more or less spontaneously from the dynamics of human interaction and is ultimately justified by its efficacy in making social life possible.' There's something to be said for this position. Certainly, as I've already noted, no group can survive if physical violence and theft are tolerated within that group, so that all groups prohibit those actions, at least against fellow insiders. But we are still left with a problem. These prohibitions, natural and quasi-spontaneous though they may be, don't extend to those outside my group, and even within my group, they won't, as Rosenberg concedes, cover all that one might wish to have covered by morality, including, for example, racism and sexism. Indeed, racism is a key aspect of ingroup morality, and sexism, broadly defined, tends to emerge naturally from the phenomenon of human dimorphism.

In early societies, law, custom and morality tended to be for the most part indistinguishable from one another. To this complex and undifferentiated mass, we can often add religion. When Moses came down from Mount Horeb with the tablets of the Commandments, one commandment instructed the Israelites not to kill, and another, not to steal. When the Israelites heard this, did they say to themselves, 'Well, that's unexpected! Who could have foreseen that?' Were these not ethical prohibitions that they already knew and followed? If so, what was the point of their being commanded by God? Just this. What up to now was primarily a matter of law, custom and morality, had now received a divine sanction, although, with the exception of the commandment prohibiting the bearing of false witness, the commandments as a whole are limited in their range of prohibited acts to acts of violence against person and property. You won't find anything here directly prohibiting racism, xenophobia or any of our latter-day commandments. These ultimately arise from the belief that we are all created morally equal, but this certainly doesn't come from atheism.



Rosenberg's claim to be able to detect a substantial core of morality common to all societies, then, is blatantly unpersuasive, the anthropological evidence indicating that any such core is significantly more limited than he envisages, and very much less than he requires.

If an atheist were to protest at an instance of racism and were challenged as to why it should not be tolerated, what reasons could he adduce? Would it be something like the TV advertisement that tells us, 'Because we are all human, we're all equal.' The US Declaration of Independence states boldly, 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal', but not only is this resounding claim not self-evident, it's also, from a descriptive point of view, patently false. Just look around you and you will see that this is so. Is it prescriptively self-evidently true? Yes? Why is that? What justification can an atheist offer to support his prescription? A Christian, on the other hand, can, as mentioned, offer a universal form of justification for the prescription in as much as, from a Christian perspective, we are all made in the image and likeness of God our Father, by God our Father, and so, ultimately, we are all his children. The brotherhood of man requires the fatherhood of God.

## NIHILISM

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**“I like the idea of a black sun;  
like a black hole in space,  
sucking everything into  
darkness, where we came from  
and where we’re heading”**

— Irvine Welsh, *The Blade Artist*

## Conclusion

Much of what Rosenberg naïvely takes to be elements of a common core of morality are derivative from our culture’s creation by Christianity, and by its cultural absorption of Judeo-Christian norms. The anthropologist, Frans de Waal, no particular friend of religious institutions, remarks, ‘Science is not in the business of spelling out the meaning of life and even less in telling us how to live our lives .... Even the staunchest atheist growing up in Western society cannot avoid having absorbed the basic tenets of Christian morality. Our societies are steeped in it; everything we have accomplished over the centuries, even science, developed either hand in hand with or in opposition to religion, but never separately. It is impossible to know what morality would look like without religion. It would require a visit to a human culture that is not now and never was religious. That such cultures do not exist should give us pause.’<sup>25</sup> If I may paraphrase Nietzsche, it is puzzling that a society should be happy to kill God, but persist in regarding his commands as obligatory.

If atheism is correct, then (à la Rosenberg) there is no free will (or purpose or meaning or intention). But if there is no free will, then the phenomenon of choice is an illusion, and if choice is an illusion, then ethics can have no purchase. Why should morality of any kind, even in its bizarre Rosenbergian form of ‘nice nihilism’, exercise any influence on us, once we know that it’s an illusion? Given the persistence of residual Christian morality, even in our increasingly post-post-Christian society, it is likely that atheists will be, for the most part, well-behaved members of society, honest workers, and loving parents. But true as this may be, the question remains: what, apart from their parasitic reliance on Christian norms, justifies their morality beyond the absolute minimum of the prohibition of in-group violence against person and property?

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<sup>25</sup> de Waal, p. 110.

The denial of free will, of purpose, and of intentionality is a high price to pay for deicide, higher than most people, including, I suspect, most atheists would be willing to pay. If they are to protect themselves from the uncomfortable conclusions of their would-be best friend Rosenberg, atheists must divorce their atheism from scientism, otherwise, they can have no grounded morality, only a simulacrum of such.

In the end, atheists cannot have their moral cake and eat it too, denying free will (and intentionality and purpose) when it is convenient, then sneaking it in the back door again when they need it to counter objections to their arguments. Atheists can't have it everyway, but which way is it to be? Will it be the life-world, the world of free will, intentionality, and substantive ethics inhabited by theists and, descriptively at least, by unintelligent (in Rosenberg's view) atheists; or are they prepared to shiver in the arctic and inhuman moral tundra sketched for them by Rosenberg and Harris that is the only possible moral habitation of the intelligent atheist?

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<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-017-0151>. Cf. Vesey-Byrne.

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