ATHEIST MIND, HUMANIST HEART

Rewriting the Ten Commandments for the Twenty-first Century

LEX BAYER AND JOHN FIGDOR

PRAISE FOR *ATHEIST MIND, HUMANIST HEART*

"It is welcoming and refreshing to see a book on atheism that is not a polemic but a respectful an reasonable discussion of how a nonbeliever might engage the large questions that every human face Readers might discover that believers and humanist atheists share more in common than they think."
—Dudley Rose, associate dean at Harvard Divinity Scho

"*Atheist Mind, Humanist Heart* delivers compelling answers to the simple question of what we shou each believe. This easily understandable yet profound guide will leave you inspired to define your ow beliefs."
—Peter Boghossian, Portland State University, author of *A Manual for Creating Athei*

"The authors approach their very readable and engaging refurbishment of the Ten Commandmen with wisdom, intelligence, accessibility, lucidity, and almost pious sensitivity. However, to increas the sum of human happiness, I would add one non-commandment to their ten: Thou shalt read th book!"
—Peter Atkins, Lincoln College, University of Oxfo

"*Atheist Mind, Humanist Heart* exemplifies a welcome new trend in secular America—the turning attention from all that's wrong with religion to a positive vision of what nonreligious people can for and about. With clear heads and good hearts, Lex Bayer and John Figdor articulate a way to secular that is not just rational but also compassionate and devoted to expanding the public good."
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"What a smart and joyful read—like a flight over the terrain of my own mind and heart wi intelligent guides to point out what I've never noticed before."
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Freethinkers*, and *Atheism for Dummi*

"Conversational, thoughtful, inviting. A very reasonable, very sound, and at times quite visionar offering."
—Phil Zuckerman, Pitzer College, author of *Living the Secular Li*

"An excellent book; worth reading regardless of one's religious or a-religious inclinations. Delicat fair, courteous, the authors are expressing their humility and courage, not confrontation condemnation. They face every issue in a penetrating, transparent, and down-to-earth way. It unreservedly honest, written with genuineness, and holding nothing back."
—Raymond F. Paloutzian, coeditor of *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 2n
Editio

"*Atheist Mind, Humanist Heart* is a wonderful exploration of life as a religious skeptic. Trut meaning, and fulfillment—Bayer and Figdor show that there is much awaiting those who step awa from superstition and embrace life in the real world."
—David Niose, president of the Secular Coalition of America, former president of the America
Humanist Association, author of *Nonbeliever Natio*

"I've devoted my adult life to encouraging everyone to check society's work: How do you know the is a god or gods? What makes you think that democracy is the best form of government? Figdor a

Bayer have done a beautiful thing in *Atheist Mind, Humanist Heart* as they have presented their mor theory. They have shown their work. In doing so, they have presented moral problems as somethi that all people must and can engage personally. I love it!"

—August E. Brunsman IV, executive director of Secular Student Allianc

"With more and more young Americans abandoning organized religion today, toward what values an institutions can—and should—they turn to construct a morally coherent world? This gently voiced b finely crafted book offers answers that may surprise you and will certainly engage you. If you a among those who want to know more than what you *don't* believe, *Atheist Mind, Humanist Hea* offers a rich opportunity to discover what's worth believing—and why—in a world moving pa traditional religious institutions and creeds."

—Richard Parker, Harvard Kennedy Scho

"Starting with a simple question, 'What do I believe?' the authors take us on a delightful journey uncover the truth behind what forms our core beliefs."

—David Silverman, president of American Atheis

"This book is NOT the Ten Commandments 2.0. It's what you get when you use the tools of reaso and humanism to rationally craft and promote better ways of life for everyone in the modern wor and beyond."

—David Fitzgerald, author of *Nailed* and *The Complete Heretic's Guide to Western Religi*

"Okay, so you've become an atheist. Now what? Read this book. That's my recommendation. It wi help you build a new foundation for thinking and living a good life without God."

—John W. Loftus, author of *Why I Became an Atheist* and *The Outsider Test for Fai*

"Atheists need to begin constructing positive principles to live by—and *Atheist Mind, Humanist Hea* provides a thorough demonstration of how to do just that."

—Paul Chiariello, cofounder of Yale Humanist Community, editor of *Applied Sentien*

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INTRODUCTION: QUESTIONING EVERYTHING

In order to determine whether we can know anything with certainty, we first have to doubt everything we know.

—Descartes

LEX BAYER

I was standing in my high school synagogue in South Africa, waving my clenched fist in a circle above my head. Seven times we were supposed to wave a coin above our heads while chanting a special prayer.

I was fulfilling the Jewish practice of Kapparot. On the morning preceding Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, tens of thousands of Jews perform this ceremony. The ritual is supposed to transfer one's sins from oneself to the coin.

There I was, performing this ritual, surrounded by nearly nine hundred other students all twirling our hands above our heads and loudly chanting the same ancient prayer. Peering around at all those waving hands, my own twirls began to slow. *What am I doing?* I asked myself. *Why am I doing something so weird?*

I slowly lowered my hand. I just couldn't do it anymore.

The school was a secular Jewish day school. Science and literature were as much a part of the syllabus as Jewish studies. What had caused me and all these other well-educated, rational young adults to do something so strange, simply because we had been told to do so? As it turns out, the ritual is even more bizarre in its original (and still practiced) form—the believer swings not a coin but a live chicken.[1] Yes, the picture in your mind is correct—the more religious Jews swing a live chicken above their heads to rid themselves of their sins. The coin is just a modern alternative for those without ready access to live poultry.

I can still picture myself standing in the synagogue, staring in disbelief at all those waving hands. That wasn't the first time in my life that I had questioned my religion. But on that day I crossed an invisible line, one that would change the way I acted and believed for the rest of my life. I decided from that moment forward that I would formulate my own beliefs and not just blindly adopt those of others.

Over the next several years, I tried to make sense of my religious doubts. What began with questioning Judaism soon expanded to questioning *all* religion and ultimately to questioning the very existence of God.

This last conclusion didn't come easily. I analyzed the arguments in favor of a belief in God, as well as the arguments against it, and wrestled with the ramifications of both for some time. In the end, I arrived at the only rational conclusion: God does not exist. I had become an atheist.

My acceptance that God does not exist didn't result in despair or anguish, as religious people often assume. Rather, like most new nonbelievers, I felt an initial wave of relief and liberation. Satisfaction, too. I had earnestly analyzed this mighty metaphysical question and arrived at a conclusion that I both understood and could rationalize. I felt the weight of thousands of years of religious belief lift from my shoulders. The comfort of knowledge remained.

Sadly, the comfort didn't last long. Soon I found myself facing an even bigger problem. I had figured out what I *didn't* believe, but I didn't know yet what I *could* believe. I discovered that while

atheists are steadfast in denying the existence of a God, we often lack a strong assertion of th
alternative—what exactly *do* atheists believe? Without a comprehensive system of assertive beliefs,
felt that any criticism of God and religion was spurious. The practicality of life requires that we ea
believe something. What is it that I believe?

When a colleague heard I had abandoned my belief in God, he challenged me to respond to tl
assertion, attributed to Christian apologist G. K. Chesterton, that "when a man stops believing in Go
he doesn't then believe in nothing, he believes in anything."[2]

I'd like to say I fired back a witty response, but that wasn't the case. The claim brought me u
short. I still had precious values, of course, but once the familiar religious foundations were stripp
away, I didn't quite know how to ascribe any sanctity to those values. I was in effect living my li
according to anything. Historian and author Will Durant, himself an atheist, offered a similar conce
when he declared that "the greatest question of our time is not communism vs. individualism, n
Europe vs. America, not even the East vs. the West; it is whether man can bear to live without God."[3]

The more closely I looked at the values I'd acquired during the course of my life, the greater n
awareness of the weakness of their foundation. I didn't know what I thought I knew. Without a belic
in God—an almighty deity who decides what is right and what is wrong—how could I know why ar
value should be more or less valid than any other? How could I justify the continued importance
morality in my life? Should I even be moral?

JOHN FIGDOR

I was eight years old. It was snowing heavily in Scarsdale, New York, in the earliest hours
December 25, 1992. The light outside the window was casting a faint yellow glow on the frosted glas
but I wasn't focused on the still beauty of this Christmas night. Instead, crouched at the top of tl
stairs like a cat burglar, I peeked through the banister toward the living room. Muted conversatic
filtered up the stairs, along with some rustling in our downstairs hall closet, just out of view.

I crept down one step, two steps, three steps, like a ninja in footie pajamas, until at last the ha
closet came into view. I saw my mom and dad chatting quietly as they retrieved the Christm
presents from their secret hiding spot in the closet and placed them under the tree in our living room
crouched in the shadows, my heart beating out of my chest. I'd just caught my parents in flagran
delicto putting presents under the tree! I gloated silently. I had definitive proof I could share with n
friends. As I watched, my dad took a bite out of one of the cookies I'd left for Santa before returni
to the hall closet to collect a few more presents.

I wouldn't say that disbelieving in Santa made me an atheist, but it did make me realize thre
things: first, things aren't always what they seem or what people say they are; second, supernatur
explanations are suspect; and finally, if you want to find out the truth, you can't just go asking oth
people—you have to investigate for yourself.

That Christmas night episode was the first of a long series of insights that slowly transitioned n
from a believing Christian to an atheist. What began with belief in a naïve version of Christiani
(often referred to in divinity schools as "Sunday school Christianity") was irrevocably damaged th
night with the discovery that Santa wasn't real.

My faith in Christianity continued to diminish during high school, especially during confirmatic
class in the United Church of Christ, the church in which I was raised. Confirmation class w
required for all fourteen-year-olds who wanted to become members. The class was led by
wonderfully progressive Christian minister who didn't shrink from addressing the controversial par

of the Bible. We would have Bible readings and discuss them, talking about what we foun compelling and what we found suspicious.

As the class progressed, I realized that I found most of the book tedious and the rest of it moral and factually suspect.

It was in this class that I abandoned my faith altogether. The occasion was a discussion on th problem of evil—or why bad things happen to good people. As it happens, I was studying th Holocaust at the same time in my social studies class at school. During the discussion, my faint Christian beliefs were utterly unable to explain why a benevolent God would allow the radical evil the Holocaust to happen. Worse, I discovered apologists arguing all sorts of insane things, such as:

- Jews deserved the Holocaust for being insufficiently holy.[4]
- The Bible's answer was in the Book of Job, which suggests that human beings cann question God's morality because God's infinite ways are so far beyond our huma comprehension.[5]

I was appalled. The absence of intellectual rigor in the arguments, the transparent lack of re compassion for the victims of the Holocaust, and the inability of the apologists even to consider t possibility of God's culpability in the world's horrors[6] opened my eyes to the lack of serious answe to this critical problem. The deeper I dug, the worse it became. Not only did I discover a foundation problem with Christian theology (the assertion that God is omnibenevolent, or "perfectly good") bu worse, I found myself turned off by a church that seemed more interested in preserving the dignity a moral purity of God than concerned for the systematic murder of millions.

But in turning away from one problem, I found myself facing another. I had discarded my religiou faith but found myself asking the question, "Now what?" After all, realizing that there isn't a omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent deity watching over the good and punishing the wicked just the first step. Having figured out what I didn't believe in, I now had to investigate what I *shou* believe in. I found myself faced with a whole new set of questions:

- How does morality work without God?
- If I'm not a pawn in God's experiment, what should I do with my life?
- How can I tell what is true and what is false?
- What happens after you die?

I dived into these questions as a philosophy major at Vassar College, then volunteered in a domest violence shelter in Butte, Montana. But the big questions continued to rattle around in my mind, a after a year in Montana I enrolled in Harvard Divinity School. Before long, I was serving as preside of the Harvard Atheists, Skeptics, and Humanists society.

I began to notice that students were less interested in debating the question of whether God exis than in discussing what to do and how to live. I recall a conversation with Harvard's humani chaplain, Greg Epstein, in which we agreed that while the question, "Does God exist?" was pretty we covered in books, articles, and blogs, the question, "What should one then believe?" was mo important and more interesting for young nonbelievers. Helping to answer that question, I decide was the best way I could help my fellow nonbelievers.

In 2010, I was appointed the humanist chaplain serving Stanford University. Being a humani chaplain, I interact with lots of students and so am confronted with the most significant questions a

concerns facing young nonbelievers. Just as at Harvard, at Stanford the negatives are already we established. These students reject blind faith, whether in God, prophets, or the government. The reject creationism and its rebranded doppelgänger, "intelligent design." But despite all that, there still a real need in the young atheist community to answer the question of what nonbelievers believe in.

* * *

And so, in pursuing very different lives, we, the two authors of this book, having abandoned our faith found ourselves confronted with the same question: *What do we believe* now*?*

Partial answers to this question abound—a book chapter here, a blog post there. But we've yet find a book that comprehensively answers this simple question in an intuitive and nontechnical way. is a challenge for all nonbelievers, but it is an especially unfortunate gap for college students durin the years when many first begin to seriously ask the big questions and to challenge their faith.

It was in part to help answer this question that coauthor John Figdor became a humanist (or atheis chaplain. To some, especially believers, the very idea of a humanist chaplain is a contradiction terms—after all, why would students who do not believe in God want or need a chaplain?

John posed this very question to Greg Epstein, the humanist chaplain at Harvard, while he was student there. As is his habit, Epstein answered the question with a series of questions:

> Don't students who are nonreligious deserve to have a nonjudgmental person to talk to about problems such as adjusting to life away from one's parents, coping with the intense academic environment, and coming to terms with sickness or death in the family? Don't nonreligious students deserve to have a person on campus organizing interesting education programs and charity drives? Don't nonreligious students deserve a representative to ensure that their perspectives are welcomed on campus?

When John found himself answering "yes" to all of these questions, he knew that he was on a pa to becoming a humanist chaplain himself. But even then he knew the title "humanist chaplain" wasn ideal. After all, "chaplain" is generally understood to be a fundamentally religious word, meaning priest or minister. The term doesn't really describe him. He is neither a priest nor a minister but community organizer, friend, and advocate for nonreligious students. But the term chaplain is s ubiquitous in our educational system that nonreligious advocates such as John are forced for practic reasons to accept the title, however awkward it may be. If a special term were invented lil "councilor" or "advisor," that name would be given second-class status. Chaplaincies tend to have special status and administrative privileges within most university structures, so adopting the chapla nomenclature creates an equal and alternative voice to that of traditional religions on campus.

As an interesting aside, the history of the term "chaplain" has been one of expanding definitions. the beginning, only Christian chaplains were allowed on the Harvard campus. But as time passed, Jew were eventually welcomed into the fraternity of college and university chaplains, followed much lat by Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Jain, and Sikh chaplains. Now colleges such as Harvard and Stanfo have more than thirty chaplains, representing a vast diversity of religious and *nonreligious* beliefs.[7]

As the biographies that opened this book underscore, we grew up on different continents with ve different upbringings. John trained as an analytic philosopher, religious studies scholar, and colleg chaplain, while Lex was educated in engineering and technology entrepreneurship. When we met Stanford, we quickly found that, despite our different backgrounds and perspectives, our ways thinking were surprisingly similar.

We both have an interest in philosophy, debate, rigorous logic, and skepticism—classi characteristics of the atheist mind. We also both care deeply about compassionate ethics, person integrity, society, and morals—our humanist hearts. Between the two, as our own stories show, lies

gap that still remains to be filled, not just for our own lives but also for the atheist and humani[st] community.

This book is the result of our combined efforts to fill the void of disbelief that remains after [the] rejection of God by answering the questions, "What should one believe after abandoning faith?" an[d] "What are the positive principles of atheism?" We have decided to answer these challenges in a[n] unorthodox way—by updating the Ten Commandments to a version for the twenty-first century, [a] version that reflects modern secular thought, science, psychology, and philosophy. A version that [is] intellectually rigorous but easily understandable, reflecting both the atheist mind and the humani[st] heart. Our goal is to provide a clear and comprehensive framework of secular beliefs about lif[e,] human behavior, and ethics. We call our version Ten Non-commandments for the Twenty-firs[t] Century.

Why "non-commandments"? Because a defining difference between our version and the original [is] that ours are amendable. Our non-commandments are not written in stone, nor do we pretend th[at] these are the only valid answers to the challenge of meaning without God. Rather, they are our be[st] attempt to answer these questions as we see them today, at this point in our own atheist and humani[st] lives, and to be as transparent as possible in our explanations of our arguments.

In writing this book, we encountered something that will be familiar to many readers: the differen[ce] between an idea in thought and an idea in words. Just as we often realize something makes no sen[se] only after we say it aloud, thoughts that seemed lucid and strong in our minds often showed the[ir] flaws once they were committed to the page. The exercise of writing down our beliefs helped us tru[ly] discover our beliefs and how they all tie together.

We enthusiastically invite the reader to join us in this conversation. This is not a sermon from tw[o] guys with all the answers, but a dialogue by two questioning, flawed individuals about the mo[st] important questions we face as human beings. We hope that our thoughts may serve as a usef[ul] reference for the many nonbelievers out there. But even more important, we hope to encourage yo[u] and others to reflect on your own beliefs. We hope that you will add to our work and discover you[r] own personal non-commandments, and that together we might all attain a deeper understanding of o[ur] innermost beliefs.

REWRITING THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

Say what you will about the Ten Commandments, you must always come back to the pleasant fact that there are only ten of them.

—H. L. Mencken

An atheist, an agnostic, and a humanist walk into a restaurant . . .

We'll begin with some definitions. What is the difference between atheists, agnostics, and humanists? First off, we should acknowledge that these terms have precise philosophical definitions as well as popular meanings in society. Since this book is aimed at a nontechnical audience, we'll be referring to the popular uses of these terms.

ATHEIST, AGNOSTIC, HUMANIST

Atheists do not believe in a God or gods. Agnostics say they don't know whether a God or gods exist, and many go further to say that the existence of a deity or deities is unknowable. On first glance, it may seem as if these are two distinct categories, but it is actually possible for one person to be both an atheist and an agnostic. In fact, it's extremely common.

Atheists do not believe in a God, but that doesn't mean they claim to be certain. Though years of thought and study often lead atheists to be extremely confident in their conclusions, it's very rare to find one who claims to have definitive proof that God does not exist. If someone asked you your age, you would answer with full confidence. But if someone asked if there were any possibility that you were wrong, no matter how slight—any chance you have been mistaken all these years, that your birth certificate had an error, or that a massive conspiracy in your family hid the fact that you are actually one year older than you thought—you would probably have to admit that, yes, there was a tiny chance that you were wrong, a chance that's so small that it wasn't worth mentioning.

That is how most atheists feel about God.

Most agnostics have views that are impossible to distinguish from most atheists, but they choose to emphasize the doubt, while the atheists choose to emphasize their confidence. That is why it is possible and common for an atheist to also be an agnostic and an agnostic to also be an atheist. Each has simply chosen to emphasize a different aspect of his or her belief.

The commonality between the beliefs of atheists and agnostics is much greater than the difference. Both groups recognize that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence,[1] and both agree that there isn't extraordinary evidence for the existence of God. The difference is that the atheist moves from the recognition that extraordinary evidence for the existence of God hasn't been presented to the confident (but not certain) belief that God probably doesn't exist.

For his book *The God Delusion,* prominent atheist biologist Richard Dawkins created a useful seven-point scale to express the degrees of religious belief and doubt. Scoring a one on the scale indicates a person's absolute certainty that God exists. A seven indicates absolute certainty that God does *not* exist. In both these two instances (a one and a seven on the scale), the person is saying that no new information could ever change his or her mind. (Think back to the example of knowing your age.

to see how foolish that would be.)

Someone who identifies on the scale as a two believes God exists but stops short of claimin[g] absolute certainty. A three is a little less certain; four is exactly in the middle; a five leans towar[d] doubt; and a six indicates a strong confidence (but not certainty) that God does not exist.

Even Dawkins himself, who is probably the most well-known atheist alive today, calls himself a s[ix] on the scale, not a seven (a 6.9, to be more specific[2]). When an interviewer a few years ago asked hi[m] why he doesn't call himself an agnostic, he said, "Well, I *am* an agnostic." The papers the next da[y] broke the story: "The world's most famous atheist admits that he is actually an agnostic!" But sayin[g] that Dawkins "admits" to being an agnostic is like saying a Christian "admits" to being a Baptist or [a] Methodist. "Baptist" or "Methodist" simply emphasizes different aspects that a person who believ[es] in Jesus decides to identify with. The same is usually true for an atheist and agnostic.

The media made a story out of Dawkins's statement because most people (mainly religiou[s] believers) think agnostic means a four on the scale—someone who thinks there is an equal chan[ce] (fifty-fifty) that God exists or does not exist. But as we've already noted, people who self-identify [as] agnostics are usually deeply skeptical of the possibility of God's existence. If pressed, they typical[ly] would say that they think that God is a low- or very-low-probability hypothesis, putting them at a fi[ve] or a six on the scale.

But because they are assumed to be smack in the middle, agnostics are often accused of bein[g] wishy-washy and fence-sitters. And because atheists are assumed to be sevens, they are often accuse[d] of being closed-minded or arrogant. One of the goals of this book is to change these misconception[s] and remove the stigma from self-identifying as an atheist or agnostic.

Why do we call ourselves atheists? Because we agree with Dawkins when he further argues th[at] people who declare that they are agnostic about the existence of God should be similarly agnost[ic] about the existence of fairies at the bottom of the garden. If an agnostic claims that we have to ho[ld] out making a judgment about whether God exists, then we should be equally careful to declare o[ur] doubts about knowing whether or not fairies exist. But most of us are very comfortable saying outrig[ht] that we do not believe in these fantasies, emphasizing our confidence rather than the sliver of doub[t]. We feel little need to clarify that, while the probability of fairies existing is extremely low, i[n] principle it is not possible to completely disprove their existence. For this reason, Dawkins als[o] describes himself as a de facto atheist.[3]

You may wonder, as we have, why so many people grant God a benefit of doubt that is not extende[d] to analogous beings such as fairies (or Santa or Bigfoot). On reflection, we see three main reason[s]. First, God is typically portrayed as having measures at his disposal to punish doubters an[d] nonbelievers. The fear of punishment—including going to hell for eternity, or at least exclusion fro[m] the possibility of going to heaven—can lead many of us to want to hedge our bets just a little. Secon[d], the possibility that a higher, all-knowing power is somehow guiding our lives for the best might fe[el] comforting. Third, religion plays an enormous role in society. In the United States its role [is] reinforced through the Pledge of Allegiance and the printing of "In God We Trust" on our currency. Since the majority of people in the world are religious believers, there is often public pressure [to] conform, and questioning the existence of God is socially discouraged in many places.

Where do humanists fit into this picture? Humanists are people who think that they can lead a li[fe] of meaning and value without a belief in God or the supernatural. Humanists stress the goodness [of] human beings, emphasize common human needs, and seek rational ways of solving human problem[s]. Essentially, humanists are atheists and agnostics who, in addition to having serious doubts about th[e] existence of God, also emphasize and promote values such as empathy, compassion, social justic[e]

critical thinking, and science literacy.

While we have discussed these labels to help clarify the terms we are using, the similarities among these three perspectives are far greater than their differences. As it turns out, most atheists and agnostics are humanists, most humanists are atheist and agnostic, and most agnostics do not believe in God.

Now we can finish the joke at the beginning of the chapter: An atheist, an agnostic, and a humanist walk into a restaurant . . . and the hostess says, "Table for one?"

STATEMENTS OF SECULAR BELIEF

The Ten Commandments are the foundation of Judeo-Christian beliefs. The Bible teaches that these Ten Commandments were delivered directly by God to Moses on Mount Sinai.[4] God engraved these laws onto two stone tablets that Moses then delivered to the people of Israel. These commandments are said to be the word of God and are among the core pillars of faith for believers.

The atheist worldview lacks a similar set of statements expressing the most important secular beliefs—statements of what atheists do believe. That is what we intend to do in the pages ahead.

Many atheist groups, personalities, and bloggers have created statements of belief in the past. A few of the more notable examples include the Humanist Manifesto I, II, and III created by the American Humanist Association (AHA)[5] and the Minimum Statement by the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU).[6] On the humorous side are the Penn Commandments[7] by magician Penn Jillette, George Carlin's reduction of the original Ten Commandments to two,[8] and Christopher Hitchens's version, whose eighth commandment is a passionate plea to turn off your cell phone.[9]

However, our list differs from these in a few important ways. We begin by spelling out our assumptions, then justify each belief with a rationale for each claim. Along the way, we work from two guiding principles woven tightly into the atheist mind-set: that all claims must be supported by evidence and that all arguments should be logically consistent.

This isn't how such lists are usually built, of course. Most beliefs are sourced to an authority—whether the Bible, a revered teacher, the Pope, or Mom and Dad—and believed because that authority is held in high regard. Ours is a different approach, a list based not on a top-down authority but built from the bottom up on evidence and justification. This is similar to constructing a high-rise building. First a solid foundation is laid. Only when that foundation is deemed solid and level is the first floor added to it. Each floor is inspected carefully in turn before the next is added, and the next, until the building is complete.

So too will the atheist framework of belief start by constructing a fundamental foundation and then layering additional "floors" of beliefs upon it. Each layer of belief will be explored and justified before adding additional layers. The higher floors will offer panoramic views into the world of ethics and morality. Because all of our beliefs and assumptions are articulated in our reasoning process, we are confident that each new floor is placed on a solid understructure. And because our reasons will be articulated out loud, you won't have to take our word for it—you can decide for yourself if any false assumptions are present.

The biblical Ten Commandments are said to be the work of God. As such, they are held to be indisputable and sacred, requiring no justification. By comparison, the Ten Non-commandments we outline claim no sanctity or authority. They are the nonholy, nonabsolutist work of two self-reflecting atheists. They are meant to be debated, examined, and improved on. As two individuals in a community of millions, we claim no special authority, position, or jurisdiction to write down such

list. We can't even declare that they speak for the atheist community at large. Rather, our intent is t demonstrate the process that two highly motivated atheists pursued in order to arrive at our best eff for the list of Ten Non-commandments for the Twenty-first Century. In formulating these beliefs, w have attempted to be deliberately transparent, rational, and honest in our approach so as to lay ba our inner thoughts, logic, and biases.

We decided to take the time and energy to understand what our core beliefs are and where the come from. Not being able to clearly express our most important beliefs felt like an abdication of o responsibility to engage the world honestly. While our initial intent was to decide for ourselves which beliefs we should hold and the reasons for those beliefs, we also have another motivation: we hope encourage and convince you to formulate and reflect on your *own* beliefs. After we walk you throug our process, chapter 12 will guide you through the process of committing your own beliefs to pape We hope this book will be the catalyst for you to seek out a deep understanding of your person beliefs and for you to find your own Ten Non-commandments. If the unexamined life is not wor living, then the unexamined belief is not worth holding or acting on.

A BRIEF LOOK AT THE ORIGINALS

The Judeo-Christian Ten Commandments are described in the Bible in Exodus (20:1–17) and again Deuteronomy (5:1–21). Many people are surprised (as you may be soon) when they read the actu passages. For such an important statement of beliefs, they're a bit of a mess—nothing like the Te Commandments most of us learned when we were young. The lists you've seen carved into stor monuments are loose abbreviations of the originals. The biblical commandments aren't neat demarcated into ten sections, and the passages themselves contain more than ten imperativ statements. The original verses are also less restrained than the Sunday school version: they includ colorful language about the consequences for those who do not follow them.

Religious groups differ slightly in how they arrange the commandments, as well as how the rephrase them, although the differences are subtle. The full version of the biblical commandments listed and grouped in Exodus (20:1–17) in the King James Bible[10] is as follows:

I. *I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage Thou shalt have no other gods before me.*

II. *Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down thysel to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; And shewing mercy unt thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.*

III. *Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless tha taketh his name in vain.*

IV. *Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, no thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.*

V. *Honor thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy Go giveth thee.*

VI. *Thou shalt not kill.*

VII. *Thou shalt not commit adultery.*

VIII.   Thou shalt not steal.

~~*IX.   Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.*~~

X.   Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour's.

A bit different than you remember them? Take the second commandment. It's usually abbreviate as, "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image." But, it actually goes on to enumerate muc broader prohibitions, and further adds a less-than-veiled threat of God's punishment for its violation.

The commandments can be divided into two sections. The first four deal mostly with th relationship between God and humans, while the rest deal with the ethics of human relationships. O Ten Non-commandments for the Twenty-first Century will also be divided into two sections. The fir set will deal with beliefs about the world—what exists, what's true, and what's false. These belie will satisfy the atheist mind, which values reason, observational data, and evidence. The second s will focus on ethics—how we should behave and treat each other. These beliefs will satisfy th humanist heart, which values human interactions, community, and society.

Now it's time to start constructing Ten Non-commandments for the Twenty-first Century.

A FRAMEWORK FOR FACTS

THE PARADOX OF BELIEF

"Begin at the beginning," the King said, very gravely, "and go on till you come to the end: then stop."

—Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

We begin by suggesting a framework of secular belief. It begins with the simple question, *How can* justify any of my beliefs?

When thinking about why we believe in anything, we quickly realize that every belief is based other preexisting beliefs. Consider, for example, the belief that brushing our teeth keeps them health Why do we believe this? Because brushing helps removes plaque buildup that causes teeth to decay.

But why do we believe plaque causes decay? Because our dentists, teachers, and parents told us Why do we trust what our dentist says? Because other dentists and articles and books we've re confirmed it. Why do we believe those accounts? Because they presented many more pieces information confirming the link between plaque, bacterial growth, and tooth decay. And why do v believe *those* pieces of information?

There seems to be no end. It's like the old story of a learned man giving a public lecture in which mentions that the earth orbits the sun.[1] At the end of the lecture an elderly lady approaches the lecter and sternly informs him that he is wrong: the world, she says, is actually resting on the back of a gia turtle. The learned man smiles and asks, "What is the turtle standing on?" The old lady doesn't ev blink and replies, "Another turtle, of course!" When the learned man starts to respond, "And what *that* turtle—" she interrupts him: "You're very clever, young man . . . but it's turtles all the wa down!"

Just like that cosmic stack of turtles, the process of justifying beliefs based on other beliefs nev ends—unless at some point we manage to arrive at a belief that doesn't rely on justification from a prior belief. That would be a foundational source of belief.

But this creates a paradox of its own: we can only justify a belief by basing it ultimately on sour beliefs, and source beliefs by definition have no justifying beliefs. So the only way to justify particular belief is to start with an unjustifiable belief.

It's like getting down to the last turtle to find it resting on . . . nothing at all.

How maddening! Instead of clarifying how we can decide what to believe, we've instead prove that the only way to justify beliefs is to acknowledge that certain principles must be accepted witho justification.

But if we can't justify these source beliefs, how can we figure out which source beliefs are the rig ones? How do we know it's *this* belief and not the one inside the next fortune cookie? The usu answer is simple: we choose the beliefs that we *want* to be true. But if we really care about justifyir our beliefs, that's hardly enough. We'll have to wrestle with the paradox.

One approach to this challenge is to treat the problem the same way mathematicians approac proofs: they determine a core set of assumptions and then prove theorems based on those assumptior Instead of presuming source beliefs are beliefs based on faith, let's instead regard them as the startir assumptions for a logical proof. We can put forth a set of core assumptions and then develop a broad system of belief based on those assumptions. If the resulting system fails to create a cohesive a

comprehensive system of belief, then we can start over. The initial assumptions can then be reformulated until a set is found that does lead to a consistent, meaningful "theorem of life."

As an example of this process we can look at an age-old question confronted by mapmakers: what is the maximum number of colors needed to color a map so that no two regions—whether countries, counties, or any other shapes—share both a border and a color? In 1852, a student at the University of London named Francis Guthrie took on the challenge while coloring a map of English counties. He realized that, despite the convoluted shapes of some counties and the fact that each shares borders with many other counties, no more than four colors seemed necessary. If he would alternate colors between adjacent neighboring counties he found that he didn't need more than four colors to complete the map. So he made an intuitive assumption that only four colors were sufficient for any map combination of shapes, real or manufactured, no matter how complex or how arranged. If his assumption were correct, you could throw a handful of cutout shapes on a table—triangles, snowflakes, wavy lines, whatever—and need no more than four colors to color the resulting mess.

The four-color theorem, as it was known, was simple to test but devilishly hard to prove. Generations of mapmakers after Guthrie tested it with every map they made and, sure enough, no one ever needed a fifth color. But this was not the same as proof, of course. There was always the possibility that the next map would need more than four colors. Still, even though the assumption could never be entirely proven by real-world testing, with every successful application of the theorem the odds of such an exception diminished, and confidence in it justifiably increased.

It wasn't until 1976 that a team of mathematicians at the University of Illinois finally harnessed the power of a computer to solve the theorem.[2] (Interestingly, another, more powerful computer was required to test the solution of the first, and that wasn't achieved until 2005.)[3]

Like the four-color theorem, an unproven assumption can be tested to see if it generates a coherent result. The more it does so, the more the confidence in that theorem may increase—even if it is never fully proven.

The approach of treating starting beliefs as assumptions removes the predicament of not knowing how to pick and choose between unjustifiable beliefs. If these beliefs are going to be rudimentary enough to form the basis of any belief system, no other system can be used to pick them because such a system would then become a core belief itself. By adopting the notion of starting assumptions, there's no need to be forced to choose source beliefs. Rather, different combinations of these beliefs can be evaluated in light of the results they yield.

As you will see, the heuristic of this entire book is that we need to be willing to reassess our lives with empirical checks. We need to continuously test our assumptions rather than presuppose them. We must look at everything with fresh eyes and not adopt the biases of others.

TOOLS FOR EVALUATING ASSUMPTIONS

Two other ideas may be useful in selecting a set of starting assumptions. The first is to favor simplicity. This is called Ockham's razor, after the fourteenth-century philosopher and theologian William of Ockham. The "razor" refers to any principle that helps narrow possibilities. This principle states that the answer that requires the fewest assumptions while explaining all of the facts is most likely to be correct.

For example: after taking a stroll one evening, you notice that the lights are on in your apartment. You come up with two possible explanations:

1. You forgot to turn them off when leaving the house.

2. Your neighbor was baking cookies and didn't have milk at home, so he came into you apartment to borrow milk, turned on the lights when he came in, and never turned them o when he left.

The first hypothesis requires only one assumption—that you forgot to turn the lights off. The secon hypothesis requires several assumptions—that your neighbor was baking cookies, wanted milk to g with the cookies, didn't have any milk, thought your apartment was the best place to get some, w able to get into your apartment, and left the lights on when he was finished. Both would explain th facts you can see, but if we apply Ockham's razor, we would favor the first hypothesis since requires fewer assumptions.

If we apply the razor to our search for source beliefs, it follows that a system of beliefs that requir fewer source beliefs has a greater likelihood of being valid. In other words, the fewer leaps of fai (unjustifiable source beliefs) required in order to create a system of belief, the less faith we need ar the more confident we can be in the outcome.[4]

Of course, it's possible to misuse this concept—typically by ignoring the requirement to explain a the facts. For example, the hypothesis that height alone determines a person's weight is a lot simpl than the notion that the complex interplay of a few dozen genes, diet, and exercise does so. But th simpler explanation fails to explain all the facts—namely, the stunning range of actual variation v see in real-life height-to-weight ratios. The five-foot-five sumo wrestler who weighs a hundred poun more than the six-foot-nine basketball player presents an instant (and fatal) problem for the simpl answer. Thus, simpler is better so long as it explains all the facts.

A second tool for choosing basic source beliefs is to think about what it would mean to *deny* particular source belief. In other words, if a particular belief were not true, would the resultin worldview make sense? To return to the mapmaker's problem, the very first map that required fiv colors would have rendered the four-color theorem invalid.

There are often logical consequences to accepting or rejecting an assumption, even if it can't l justified with prior assumptions. Evaluating the consequences of beliefs can be helpful in determinin what type of assumptions may be needed to form a valid system of belief.

We have to be careful with this tool as well. The best example of its misuse might be the "argumen from consequences." God's existence is often assumed to be true because so many people think th consequences of his nonexistence would be terrible.[5]

But you can't argue that something is false solely because it produces consequences that are n *good*. Otherwise you'd have an argument that the Holocaust never happened because the world wou be better if it hadn't. On the other hand, you *can* argue that something is false because it produc consequences that are not *true*.

THE MOST BASIC OF ASSUMPTIONS

At this point, our discussion is limited to beliefs about what *facts* we should believe. Later we approach the more complex but essential question of how we should *behave*.

We propose that to develop a coherent framework of factual belief, we need to accept three co assumptions:

1. An external reality exists.

2. Our senses perceive this external reality.

3. ~~Language and thought are tools for describing and understanding what our senses perceive.~~

In the study of philosophy, the belief in the above three assumptions is known as "perspectiv[al] realism." These three assumptions are so elemental that we take them for granted in our everyda[y] lives. But it's worth examining them in some depth since they will form the cornerstone of a[ll] subsequent beliefs we will discuss.

External Reality

A belief in an external reality is the acceptance that the world, universe, and everything in [it] physically exist and are real. It is a belief that the world is independent of the way any individu[al] thinks about it.[6] The opposite would be to believe in a mind-created reality, or a reality that resid[es] solely in our minds or our dreams.

It is not possible to definitively *prove* that the world we exist in is indeed an external realit[y]. Reality is perceived only through the perspective of the mind, so the whole thing could just be a[n] illusion.[7] But the reality is that in daily life, we all assume that objects we see actually exist and th[at] our fellow humans can also interact with and perceive them. Anyone who feels uncomfortable wi[th] accepting the notion of an external reality should ask why, when leaving a two-story building, he [or] she would rather walk down the stairs than take a shortcut by just hopping out the window.[8] In *re[al] life*, we don't jump out of windows thinking we'll just float down to the sidewalk unharmed, and w[e] certainly don't behave as if reality were just a figment of our imaginations. Rather, our daily action[s] show that we take for granted that the world around us is real and that we exist within it.

The existence of an external reality allows for a much greater concept —that "truth" is simply a[n] accurate description of what is. It is our contention that reality and truth *are the same thing.* The wor[ld] that exists around us right now is a truth. The fact that the air we inhale with each breath consis[ts] mostly of nitrogen and oxygen is a truth. The audible words that someone says are a truth. What th[at] person actually means by those words is a truth as well, whether or not others know it. A truth or fa[ct] is simply an accurate account of reality. A belief in the contrary—in a subjective view of reality–[—] would deny the existence of facts or certainties. From that perspective, truth becomes a relativ[e] concept. My truth—not just my opinions or experience, but my actual truth in apprehension of t[he] universe—could be different from yours.

Consider an example of two friends, both passionate fans of a college basketball team that finish[ed] an exciting, record-setting season but lost the conference championship in a squeaker. One claims th[at] the season was a huge success because the team won most of its games and played better than ev[er] before. But the other claims that the season was a failure because they lost the most important game–[—] the championship. Each friend offers differing interpretations of the season, and they even off[er] different views on what events actually took place in some of the games. But a set of facts exists an[d] is real, whether or not the friends see eye to eye and regardless of their different interpretations-[—] games won and lost, points scored, assists, fouls, the works. The facts happened, even if people diff[er] on what those facts meant.

That is what it means for truth and reality to be one and the same.

Using Our Senses

The second core assumption is that our senses—our eyes, ears, sense of touch, smell, and taste-[—] perceive the external reality around us. Our eyes see a table because a table exists in reality. In theor[y]

this is something we can never prove—that a table really exists or that an object that appears round ~~truly round. We have no other source of information about whether our perception is accurate.~~

Bertrand Russell explored the relationship between our senses and reality in his book *The Problem of Philosophy.*[9] We never perceive the world directly, Russell said—we perceive our sense-data, and they in turn perceive the world. The fact that our senses are forever standing between us and reality poses a problem because our senses can be misled by changing conditions or by our state of mind. table that appears red in the morning can look brown at noon and purple at dusk. It can look huge in small room and tiny in a cavernous one. Press on the table with your fingertips, and you're not feeling the table—you're feeling the sensation of your fingertips being compressed. Or at least you *think* you are, since any number of things can cause you to experience that sensation. Do you really know that table is causing that feeling, or is it all in your mind?

Maybe there's no table there at all!

Just about the time Russell has us doubting the existence of tables (and everything else), he rescues reality. Even if a hundred different people describe a given table in a hundred different ways, reminds us, they can usually agree that they are in fact looking at a table. That common denominator suggests that our confidence in the table's existence is justified, even if we can't quite sort out the details of color, texture, and size. And even if we disagree on everything else, we can accept that it *has* these attributes—it *has* a color, a texture, and a size. And our senses, limited as they are, represent our best chance of discovering the truth about those attributes.

Of course, in everyday life we take for granted the validity of what our senses perceive since we interact with the world all around us. This core assumption further implies that our *only* source for making assessments about what is true or not, what exists in reality and what does not, is our senses To rephrase, if we can't perceive something or its effects without the use of our senses, then we have no ability to evaluate whether or not it's true.[10]

It goes without saying that the ability of our senses to perceive reality can be greatly enhanced an extended through the use of tools, instruments, and technology. Millions of people see the world around them with better clarity and detail because of their eyeglasses or contact lenses. Scanning electron microscopes let us see tiny objects such as a single hair on the leg of a housefly. Ultrasound can peer through the womb of a mother to reveal the developmental stage of a fetus. Radar can alert us of aircraft hundreds of miles away. The use of tools and instruments to derive knowledge about the world is commonplace.

But all of these instruments have one crucial thing in common: they all translate their acquired information into a form that we can perceive through our rudimentary senses. It is still our senses alone that ultimately allow us to perceive what these instruments detect. We also rely on our senses to confirm the accuracy of these tools. Looking in the sky for an airplane can validate radar. Looking the newborn child can confirm the ultrasound diagnosis.

Of course, our senses are not infallible, in part because our minds interpret what we see and can therefore bias our perceptions. Still, aside from people who have mental disorders, what we perceive with our senses is generally accurate. For example, when one looks at a spoon that is placed inside of glass of water it may appear bent. Although we know that the spoon is not really bent, but refracted the observation that the spoon *appears* bent is an accurate reflection of what is real. The problem not with the ability of our senses to observe reality but with the conclusions the mind may draw from what is seen. So if a person thought the spoon actually was bent, that would be a false conclusion based on a misinterpretation of good data. Our senses' abilities to feel the spoon in the water confirm that it is indeed as straight as it was before it went into the glass.

We will deal more with how we should process the information our senses receive and how to de with conflicting information about what to believe later in the book. At this point it's enough to sa our senses are the only source for ascertaining what is real and what is not in the external reali (despite their deficiencies).

The senses we are referring to include only the five rudimentary senses of sight, touch, hearin smell, and taste.[11] Why not include other senses such as a "sixth sense" (extrasensory perception) the "heart" (intuition) as part of the list of senses that inform us about what exists in this world? W will deal with this issue more explicitly in forthcoming sections. For now, let's see how muc progress can be made by accepting only the five biological senses.

Using Our Minds

The last core assumption we propose is that language and thought are tools for describing ar understanding what our senses perceive. The phrase "language and thought" will be used througho the book to represent a broad range of more nuanced terms, including language, words, semantic logic, mathematics, statistics, thought, mind, and intellect. This assumption requires us to think abo words, definitions, and other concepts in ways that may be unfamiliar. But it is critical for the steps come, so let's take it slowly and break things down for better comprehension.

Language, words, semantics, logic, mathematics, statistics, thought, mind, the intellect, and the lil can be lumped together since they can be viewed as one and the same—tools used to communica meaning. Such tools create necessary starting points for discourse, and their validity is rooted in the definitions. Consider language for a moment. In order to even ask the question, "How can one justi one's beliefs?" there needs to be agreement on what the words *belief* and *justify* mean.

Agreement is at the heart of language. Unlike physical reality, there's no inherent "truth" about th meaning of a certain word, and there's no universally right word for a given thing or idea. A wor means what we mutually agree it means. Reality is independent of our ideas and perceptions of it, b language is entirely dependent on them. There can be many correct words for a single thing (hell bonjour, guten tag, hola, shalom, néih hóu), and conversely a single sound can mean different things speakers of different languages. The long i sound, for example, means *eye* in English, *yes* in Scots, ar *egg* in German—each the result of subjective agreement in that culture.

For another example of the nature of language, we can turn to the language of mathematics. Th Pythagorean theorem asserts that the sum of the squares of the sides of a right-angled triangle equa the square of the hypotenuse. This is true not because there is some inherent wisdom in the assertion but because the definitions of *sum, squares, equal,* and *triangle* make that statement coherent. It ma take the mind of a genius like Pythagoras to demonstrate some of the principles of mathematics, b the proof of the resulting theorem does not require a leap of faith—it just requires an understanding how we have defined those terms.

These definitional truths can further be used to describe real objects in the external reality—th length of a triangle drawn on paper can represent the measurement of an actual triangular object th exists in the world. Were we not to accept the validity of these tools, we would lack an ability to for any thoughts, concepts, or principles based on what we observe through our senses.

This core assumption in definitional truths also includes the use of our minds and intellect manipulate and process thoughts and data. The power of our mind allows us to define language ar objects, manipulate numbers, and develop rules. By accepting the validity of this assumption, we als accept the use of language and thoughts to derive other facts and information that may not initially l clear to us. We can then use these conclusions to reflect back on the external reality. This ability t

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