

ALSO BY JONATHAN HAIDT

Flourishing: Positive Psychology and the Life Well-Lived (co-editor)

The Happiness Hypothesis

FINDING MODERN TRUTH
IN ANCIENT WISDOM



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Divinity With or Without God

We must not allow the ignoble to injure the noble, or the smaller to injure the greater. Those who nourish the smaller parts will become small men. Those who nourish the greater parts will become great men.

— MENG TZU,¹ 3RD CENT. BCE

God created the angels from intellect without sensuality, the beasts from sensuality without intellect, and humanity from both intellect and sensuality. So when a person's intellect overcomes his sensuality, he is better than the angels, but when his sensuality overcomes his intellect, he is worse than the beasts.

— MUHAMMAD²

OUR LIFE IS THE CREATION of our minds, and we do much of that creating with metaphor. We see new things in terms of things we already understand: Life is a journey, an argument is a war, the mind is a rider on an elephant. With the wrong metaphor we are deluded; with no metaphor we are blind.

The metaphor that has most helped me to understand morality, religion, and the human quest for meaning is *Flatland*, a charming little book written in 1884 by the English novelist and mathematician Edwin Abbot.³ Flatland

is a two-dimensional world whose inhabitants are geometric figures. The protagonist is a square. One day, the square is visited by a sphere from a three-dimensional world called Spaceland. When a sphere visits Flatland, however, all that is visible to Flatlanders is the part of the sphere that lies in their plain—in other words, a circle. The square is astonished that the circle is able to grow or shrink at will (by rising or sinking into the plane of Flatland) and even to disappear and reappear in a different place (by leaving the plane, and then reentering it). The sphere tries to explain the concept of the third dimension to the two-dimensional square, but the square, though skilled at two-dimensional geometry, doesn't get it. He cannot understand what it means to have thickness in addition to height and breadth, nor can he understand that the circle came from up above him, where "up" does not mean from the north. The sphere presents analogies and geometrical demonstrations of how to move from one dimension to two, and then from two to three, but the square still finds the idea of moving "up" out of the plane of Flatland ridiculous.

In desperation, the sphere yanks the square up out of Flatland and into the third dimension so that the square can look down on his world and see it all at once. He can see the inside of all the houses and the guts (insides) of all the inhabitants. The square recalls the experience:

An unspeakable horror seized me. There was darkness; then a dizzy, sickening sensation of sight that was not like seeing; I saw space that was not space: I was myself, and not myself. When I could find voice, I shrieked aloud in agony, "Either this is madness or it is Hell." "It is neither," calmly replied the voice of the sphere, "it is Knowledge; it is Three Dimensions: open your eye once again and try to look steadily." I looked, and, behold, a new world!

The square is awestruck. He prostrates himself before the sphere and becomes the sphere's disciple. Upon his return to Flatland, he struggles to preach the "Gospel of Three Dimensions" to his fellow two-dimensional creatures—but in vain.

We are all, in some way, the square before his enlightenment. We have all encountered something we failed to understand, yet smugly believed we un-

derstood because we couldn't conceive of the dimension to which we were blind. Then one day something happens that makes no sense in our two-dimensional world, and we catch our first glimpse of another dimension.

In all human cultures, the social world has two clear dimensions: a horizontal dimension of closeness or liking, and a vertical one of hierarchy or status. People naturally and effortlessly make distinctions along the horizontal dimension between close versus distant kin, and between friends versus strangers. Many languages have one form of address for those who are close (*tu*, in French) and another for those who are distant (*vous*). We also have a great deal of innate mental structure that prepares us for hierarchical interactions. Even in hunter-gatherer cultures that are in many ways egalitarian, equality is only maintained by active suppression of ever-present tendencies toward hierarchy.⁴ Many languages use the same verbal methods to mark hierarchy as they do to mark closeness (in French, *tu* for subordinates as well as friends, *vous* for superiors as well as strangers). Even in languages such as English that do not have different verb forms for different social relationships, people find a way to mark them anyway: We address people who are distant or superior by using their titles and last names (Mr. Smith, Judge Brown), and use first names for those who are intimate or subordinate.⁵ Our minds automatically keep track of these two dimensions. Think how awkward it was the last time someone you barely knew but greatly revered invited you to call him by first name. Did the name stick in your throat? Conversely, when a salesperson addresses you by first name without having been invited to do so, do you feel slightly offended?

Now imagine yourself happily moving around your two-dimensional social world, a flat land where the X axis is closeness and the Y axis is hierarchy (see figure 9.1). Then one day, you see a person do something extraordinary, or you have an overwhelming experience of natural beauty, and you feel lifted "up." But it's not the "up" of hierarchy, it's some other kind of elevation. This chapter is about that vertical movement. My claim is that the human mind perceives a third dimension, a specifically moral dimension that I will call "divinity." (See the Z axis, coming up out of the plane of the page in figure 9.1). In choosing the label "divinity," I am not assuming that God exists and is there to be perceived. (I myself am a Jewish atheist.) Rather, my research on the moral emotions has led me to conclude that the

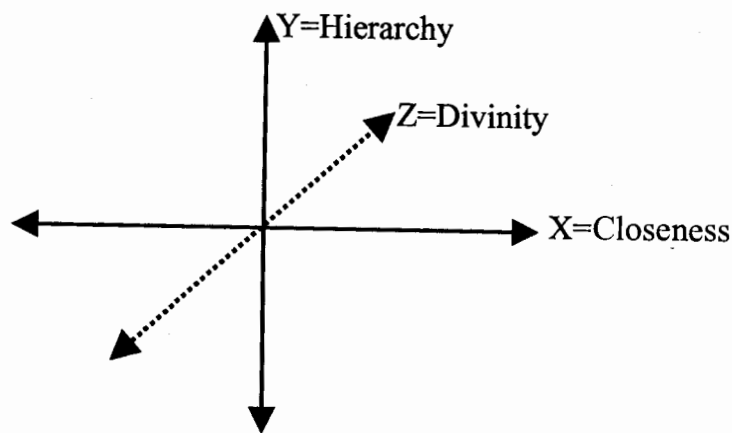


Fig. 9.1 The Three Dimensions of Social Space

human mind simply *does* perceive divinity and sacredness, whether or not God exists. In reaching this conclusion, I lost the smug contempt for religion that I felt in my twenties.

This chapter is about the ancient truth that devoutly religious people grasp, and that secular thinkers often do not: that by our actions and our thoughts, we move up and down on a vertical dimension. In the opening epigraph of this chapter, Meng Tzu called it a dimension of noble versus ignoble. Muhammad, like Christians and Jews before him, made it a dimension of divinity, with angels above and beasts below. An implication of this truth is that we are impoverished as human beings when we lose sight of this dimension and let our world collapse into two dimensions. But at the other extreme, the effort to create a three-dimensional society and impose it on all residents is the hallmark of religious fundamentalism. Fundamentalists, whether Christian, Jewish, Hindu, or Muslim, want to live in nations whose laws are in harmony with—or are taken from—a particular holy book. There are many reasons for democratic Western societies to oppose such fundamentalism, but I believe that the first step in such opposition must be an honest and respectful understanding of its moral motives. I hope that this chapter contributes to such understanding.

ARE WE NOT ANIMALS?

I first found divinity in disgust. When I began to study morality, I read the moral codes of many cultures, and the first thing I learned is that most cultures are very concerned about food, sex, menstruation, and the handling of corpses. Because I had always thought morality was about how people treat each other, I dismissed all this stuff about “purity” and “pollution” (as the anthropologists call it) as extraneous to real morality. Why are women in many cultures forbidden to enter temples or touch religious artifacts while they are menstruating, or for a few weeks after giving birth?⁶ It must be some sort of sexist effort to control women. Why is eating pork an abomination for Jews and Muslims? Must be a health-related effort to avoid trichinosis. But as I read further, I began to discern an underlying logic: the logic of disgust. According to the leading theory of disgust in the 1980s, by Paul Rozin,⁷ disgust is largely about animals and the products of animal bodies (few plants or inorganic materials are disgusting), and disgusting things are contagious by touch. Disgust therefore seemed somehow related to the concerns about animals, body products (blood, excrement), washing, and touch that are so clear in the Old Testament, the Koran, Hindu scriptures, and many ethnographies of traditional societies. When I went to talk to Rozin about the possible role of disgust in morality and religion, I found that he had been thinking about the same question. With Professor Clark McCauley of Bryn Mawr College, we began to study disgust and the role it plays in social life.

Disgust has its evolutionary origins in helping people decide what to eat.⁸ During the evolutionary transition in which our ancestors’ brains expanded greatly, so did their production of tools and weapons, and so did their consumption of meat.⁹ (Many scientists think these changes were all interrelated, along with the greater interdependence of male and female that I discussed in chapter 6). But when early humans went for meat, including scavenging the carcasses left by other predators, they exposed themselves to a galaxy of new microbes and parasites, most of which are contagious in a way that plant toxins are not: If a poisonous berry brushes up against your baked potato, it won’t make the potato harmful or disgusting. Disgust was originally shaped by natural selection as a guardian of the

mouth: It gave an advantage to individuals who went beyond the sensory properties of a potentially edible object (does it smell good?) and thought about where it came from and what it had touched. Animals that routinely eat or crawl on corpses, excrement, or garbage piles (rats, maggots, vultures, cockroaches) trigger disgust in us: We won't eat them, and anything they have touched becomes contaminated. We're also disgusted by most of the body products of other people, particularly excrement, mucus, and blood, which may transmit diseases among people. Disgust extinguishes desire (hunger) and motivates purifying behaviors such as washing or, if it's too late, vomiting.

But disgust doesn't guard just the mouth; its elicitors expanded during biological and cultural evolution so that now it guards the body more generally.¹⁰ Disgust plays a role in sexuality analogous to its role in food selection by guiding people to the narrow class of culturally acceptable sexual partners and sexual acts. Once again, disgust turns off desire and motivates concerns about purification, separation, and cleansing. Disgust also gives us a queasy feeling when we see people with skin lesions, deformities, amputations, extreme obesity or thinness, and other violations of the culturally ideal outer envelope of the human body. It is the exterior that matters: Cancer in the lungs or a missing kidney is not disgusting; a tumor on the face or a missing finger is.

This expansion, from guardian of the mouth to guardian of the body, makes sense from a purely biological perspective: We humans have always lived in larger, denser groups than most other primates, and we lived on the ground, too, not in trees, so we were more exposed to the ravages of microbes and parasites that spread by physical contact. Disgust makes us careful about contact. But the most fascinating thing about disgust is that it is recruited to support so many of the norms, rituals, and beliefs that cultures use to define themselves.¹¹ For example, many cultures draw a sharp line between humans and animals, insisting that people are somehow above, better than, or more god-like than other animals. The human body is often thought of as a temple that houses divinity within: "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? . . . [T]herefore glorify God in your body" (1 CORINTHIANS 6:19–20).

Yet a culture that says that humans are not animals, or that the body is a temple, faces a big problem: Our bodies do all the same things that animal bodies do, including eating, defecating, copulating, bleeding, and dying. The overwhelming evidence is that we *are* animals, and so a culture that rejects our animality must go to great lengths to hide the evidence. Biological processes must be carried out in the right way, and disgust is a guardian of that rightness. Imagine visiting a town where people wear no clothes, never bathe, have sex "doggie-style" in public, and eat raw meat by biting off pieces directly from the carcass. Okay, perhaps you'd pay to see such a freak show, but as with all freak shows, you would emerge degraded (literally: brought *down*). You would feel disgust at this "savage" behavior and know, viscerally, that there was something wrong with these people. Disgust is the guardian of the temple of the body. In this imaginary town, the guardians have been murdered, and the temples have gone to the dogs.

The idea that the third dimension—divinity—runs from animals below to god(s) above, with people in the middle, was perfectly captured by the seventeenth-century New England Puritan Cotton Mather, who observed a dog urinating at the same time he himself was urinating. Overwhelmed with disgust at the vileness of his own urination, Mather wrote this resolution in his diary: "Yet I will be a more noble creature; and at the very time when my natural necessities debase me into the condition of the beast, my spirit shall (I say at that very time!) rise and soar."¹²

If the human body is a temple that sometimes gets dirty, it makes sense that "cleanliness is next to Godliness."¹³ If you don't perceive this third dimension, then it is not clear why God would care about the amount of dirt on your skin or in your home. But if you do live in a three-dimensional world, then disgust is like Jacob's ladder: It is rooted in the earth, in our biological necessities, but it leads or guides people toward heaven—or, at least, toward something felt to be, somehow, "up."

THE ETHIC OF DIVINITY

After graduate school, I spent two years working with Richard Shweder, a psychological anthropologist at the University of Chicago who is the leading

thinker in the field of cultural psychology. Shweder does much of his research in the Indian city of Bhubaneswar, in the state of Orissa, on the Bay of Bengal. Bhubaneswar is an ancient temple town—its old city grew up around the gigantic and ornate Lingaraj temple, built in the seventh century and still a major pilgrimage center for Hindus. Shweder's research on morality¹⁴ in Bhubaneswar and elsewhere shows that when people think about morality, their moral concepts cluster into three groups, which he calls the ethic of autonomy, the ethic of community, and the ethic of divinity. When people think and act using the ethic of autonomy, their goal is to protect individuals from harm and grant them the maximum degree of autonomy, which they can use to pursue their own goals. When people use the ethic of community, their goal is to protect the integrity of groups, families, companies, or nations, and they value virtues such as obedience, loyalty, and wise leadership. When people use the ethic of divinity, their goal is to protect from degradation the divinity that exists in each person, and they value living in a pure and holy way, free from moral pollutants such as lust, greed, and hatred. Cultures vary in their relative reliance on these three ethics, which correspond, roughly, to the X, Y, and Z axes of figure 9.1. In my dissertation research¹⁵ on moral judgment in Brazil and the United States, I found that educated Americans of high social class relied overwhelmingly on the ethic of autonomy in their moral discourse, whereas Brazilians, and people of lower social class in both countries, made much greater use of the ethics of community and divinity.

To learn more about the ethic of divinity, I went to Bhubaneswar for three months in 1993, to interview priests, monks, and other experts on Hindu worship and practice. To prepare, I read everything I could about Hinduism and the anthropology of purity and pollution, including *The Laws of Manu*,¹⁶ a guidebook for Brahmin men (the priestly caste) written in the first or second century. Manu tells Brahmins how to live, eat, pray, and interact with other people while still attending to what Cotton Mather called their "natural necessities." In one passage, Manu lists the times when a priest should "not even think about" reciting the holy vedas (scriptures):

while expelling urine or excrement, when food is still left on his mouth and hands, while eating at a ceremony for the dead, . . . when one has

eaten flesh or the food of a woman who has just given birth, . . . when jackals howl, . . . in a cremation ground, . . . while wearing a garment that he has worn in sexual union, while accepting anything at a ceremony for the dead, when one has just eaten or has not digested (his food) or has vomited or belched, . . . when blood flows from one's limbs or when one has been wounded by a weapon.

This passage is extraordinary because it lists every category of disgust that Rozin, McCauley, and I had studied: food, body products, animals, sex, death, body envelope violations, and hygiene. Manu is saying that the presence in *mind* of the holy vedas is not compatible with contamination of the *body* from any source of disgust.¹⁷ Divinity and disgust must be kept separate at all times.

When I arrived in Bhubaneswar, I quickly found that the ethic of divinity is not just ancient history. Even though Bhubaneswar is physically flat, it has a highly variable spiritual topography with peaks at each of its hundreds of temples. As a non-Hindu, I was allowed into the courtyards of temple compounds; and if I removed my shoes and any leather items (leather is polluting), I could usually enter the antechamber of the temple building. I could look into the inner sanctum where the god was housed, but had I crossed the threshold to join the Brahmin priest within, I would have polluted it and offended everyone. At the highest peak of divinity—the Lingaraj temple itself—I was not even allowed to enter the compound, although foreigners were invited to look in from an observation platform just outside the walls. It was not a matter of secrecy; it was a matter of contamination by people such as me who had not followed the proper procedures of bathing, diet, hygiene, and prayer for maintaining religious purity.

Hindu homes in Bhubaneswar have the same concentric structure as the temples: Leave your shoes at the door, socialize in the outer rooms, but never go into the kitchen or the room or area where offerings are made to deities. These two areas are maintained as zones of the highest purity. Even the human body has peaks and valleys, the head and the right hand being pure, the left hand and the feet being polluted. I had to take extraordinary care to keep my feet from touching anyone and to avoid handing something to another person with my left hand. As I moved around Bhubaneswar, I felt

like a square in Spaceland as I tried to navigate a three-dimensional world with only the dimmest perception of its third dimension.

The interviews I conducted helped me to see a little better. My goal was to find out whether purity and pollution were really just about keeping biological “necessities” separate from divinity, or whether these practices had a deeper relationship to virtue and morality. I found a variety of opinions. Some of the less-educated village priests saw the rituals related to purity and pollution as basic rules of the game, things you simply must do because religious tradition demands it. But many of the people I interviewed took a broader view and saw purity and pollution practices as means to an end: spiritual and moral advancement, or moving up on the third dimension. For example, when I asked why it was important to guard one’s purity, the headmaster of a Sanskrit school (a school that trains religious scholars) responded in this way:

We ourselves can be gods or demons. It depends on karma. If a person behaves like a demon, for example he kills someone, then that person is truly a demon. A person who behaves in a divine manner, because a person has divinity in him, he is like a god. . . . We should know that we are gods. If we think like gods we become like gods, if we think like demons we become like demons. What is wrong with being like a demon? What is going on nowadays, it is demonic. Divine behavior means not cheating people, not killing people. Complete character. You have divinity, you are a god.

The headmaster, who of course had not read Shweder, gave a perfect statement of the ethic of divinity. Purity is not just about the body, it is about the soul. If you know that you have divinity in you, you will act accordingly: You will treat people well, and you will treat your body as a temple. In so doing, you will accumulate good karma, and you will come back in your next life at a higher level—literally higher on the vertical dimension of divinity. If you lose sight of your divinity, you will give in to your baser motives. In so doing, you will accumulate bad karma, and in your next incarnation you will return at a lower level as an animal or a demon. This

linkage of virtue, purity, and divinity is not uniquely Indian; Ralph Waldo Emerson said exactly the same thing:

He who does a good deed is instantly ennobled. He who does a mean deed is by the action itself contracted. He who puts off impurity thereby puts on purity. If a man is at heart just, then in so far is he God.¹⁸

SACRED INTRUSIONS

When I returned to Flatland (the United States), I didn’t have to think about purity and pollution anymore. I didn’t have to think about the second dimension—hierarchy—very much, either. American university culture has only mild hierarchy (students often address professors by first name) compared with most Indian settings. So in some ways my life was reduced to one dimension—closeness, and my behavior was constrained only by the ethic of autonomy, which allowed me to do whatever I wanted, as long as I didn’t hurt anyone else.

Yet, once I had learned to see in three dimensions, I saw glimmers of divinity scattered all about. I began to feel disgust for the American practice of marching around one’s own house—even one’s bedroom—wearing the same shoes that, minutes earlier, had walked through city streets. I adopted the Indian practice of removing my shoes at my door, and asking visitors to do likewise, which made my apartment feel more like a sanctuary, a clean and peaceful space separated more fully than before from the outside world. I noticed that it felt wrong to bring certain books into the bathroom. I noticed that people often spoke about morality using a language of “higher” and “lower.” I became aware of my own subtle feelings upon witnessing people behaving in sleazy or “degraded” ways, feelings that were more than just disapproval; they were feelings of having been brought “down” in some way myself.

In my academic work, I discovered that the ethic of divinity had been central to public discourse in the United States until the time of the World War I, after which it began to fade (except in a few places, such as the

American South—which also maintained racial segregation practices based on notions of physical purity). For example, advice aimed at young people in the Victorian era routinely spoke of purity and pollution. In a widely reprinted book from 1897 titled *What a Young Man Ought to Know*,¹⁹ Sylvanus Stall devoted an entire chapter to “personal purity” in which he noted that

God has made no mistake in giving man a strong sexual nature, but any young man makes a fatal mistake if he allows the sexual to dominate, to degrade, and to destroy that which is highest and noblest in his nature.

To guard their purity, Stall advised young men to avoid eating pork, masturbating, and reading novels. By the 1936 edition, this entire chapter had been removed.

The vertical dimension of divinity was so obvious to people in the Victorian age that even scientists referred to it. In a chemistry textbook from 1867, after describing methods of synthesizing ethyl alcohol, the author felt compelled to warn his young readers that alcohol has the effect of “dulling the intellectual operations and moral instincts; seeming to pervert and destroy all that is pure and holy in man, while it robs him of his highest attribute—reason.”²⁰ In his 1892 book promoting Darwin’s theory of evolution, Joseph Le Conte, a professor of geology at the University of California at Berkeley, practically quoted Meng Tzu and Muhammad: “Man is possessed of two natures—a lower, in common with animals, and a higher, peculiar to himself. The whole meaning of sin is the humiliating bondage of the higher to the lower.”²¹

But as science, technology, and the industrial age progressed, the Western world became “desacralized.” At least that’s the argument made by the great historian of religion Mircea Eliade. In *The Sacred and the Profane*,²² Eliade shows that the perception of sacredness is a human universal. Regardless of their differences, all religions have places (temples, shrines, holy trees), times (holy days, sunrise, solstices), and activities (prayer, special dancing) that allow for contact or communication with something otherworldly and pure. To mark off sacredness, all other times, places, and activities are defined as profane (ordinary, not sacred). The borders be-

tween the sacred and the profane must be carefully guarded, and that’s what rules of purity and pollution are all about. Eliade says that the modern West is the first culture in human history that has managed to strip time and space of all sacredness and to produce a fully practical, efficient, and profane world. This is the world that religious fundamentalists find unbearable and are sometimes willing to use force to fight against.

Eliade’s most compelling point, for me, is that sacredness is so irrepressible that it intrudes repeatedly into the modern profane world in the form of “crypto-religious” behavior. Eliade noted that even a person committed to a profane existence has

privileged places, qualitatively different from all others—a man’s birthplace, or the scenes of his first love, or certain places in the first foreign city he visited in his youth. Even for the most frankly nonreligious man, all these places still retain an exceptional, a unique quality; they are the “holy places” of his private universe, as if it were in such spots that he had received the revelation of a reality other than that in which he participates through his ordinary daily life.

When I read this, I gasped. Eliade had perfectly pegged my feeble spirituality, limited as it is to places, books, people, and events that have given me moments of uplift and enlightenment. Even atheists have intimations of sacredness, particularly when in love or in nature. We just don’t infer that God caused those feelings.

ELEVATION AND AGAPE

My time in India did not make me religious, but it did lead to an intellectual awakening. Shortly after moving to the University of Virginia in 1995, I was writing yet another article about how social disgust is triggered when we see people moving “down” on the vertical dimension of divinity. Suddenly it occurred to me that I had never really thought about the emotional reaction to seeing people move “up.” I had referred in passing to the feeling of being “uplifted,” but had never even wondered whether “uplift” is a real,

honest-to-goodness emotion. I began to interrogate friends, family, and students: “When you see someone do a really good deed, do you feel something? What exactly? Where in your body do you feel it? Does it make you want to do anything?” I found that most people had the same feelings I did, and the same difficulty articulating exactly what they were. People talked about an open, warm, or glowing feeling. Some specifically mentioned the heart; others claimed they could not say where in their bodies they felt it, yet even as they were denying a specific location, their hands sometimes made a circular motion in front of the chest, fingers pointing inward as if to indicate something moving in the heart. Some people mentioned feelings of chills, or of choking up. Most said this feeling made them want to perform good deeds or become better in some way. Whatever this feeling was, it was beginning to look like an emotion worthy of study. Yet there was no research of any kind on this emotion in the psychological literature, which was focused at the time on the six “basic” emotions²³ known to have distinctive facial expressions: joy, sadness, fear, anger, disgust, and surprise.

If I believed in God, I would believe that he sent me to the University of Virginia for a reason. At UVA, a great deal of crypto-religious activity centers around Thomas Jefferson, our founder, whose home sits like a temple on a small mountaintop (Monticello) a few miles away. Jefferson wrote the holiest text of American history—the Declaration of Independence. He also wrote thousands of letters, many of which reveal his views on psychology, education, and religion. After arriving at UVA, having an Eliade-style crypto-religious experience at Monticello, and committing myself to the cult of Jefferson, I read a collection of his letters. There I found a full and perfect description of the emotion I had just begun thinking about.

In 1771, Jefferson’s relative Robert Skipwith asked him for advice on what books to buy for the personal library he hoped to build. Jefferson, who loved giving advice almost as much as he loved books, happily obliged. Jefferson sent along a catalogue of serious works of history and philosophy, but he also recommended the purchase of fiction. In his day (as in Sylvanus Stall’s), plays and novels were not regarded as worthy of a dignified man’s time, but Jefferson justified his unorthodox advice by pointing out that great writing can trigger beneficial emotions:

When any . . . act of charity or of gratitude, for instance, is presented either to our sight or imagination, we are deeply impressed with its beauty and feel a strong desire in ourselves of doing charitable and grateful acts also. On the contrary, when we see or read of any atrocious deed, we are disgusted with its deformity, and conceive an abhorrence of vice. Now every emotion of this kind is an exercise of our virtuous dispositions, and dispositions of the mind, like limbs of the body, acquire strength by exercise.²⁴

Jefferson went on to say that the physical feelings and motivational effects caused by great literature are as powerful as those caused by real events. He considered the example of a contemporary French play, asking whether the fidelity and generosity of its hero does not

dilate [the reader’s] breast and elevate his sentiments as much as any similar incident which real history can furnish? Does [the reader] not in fact feel himself a better man while reading them, and privately covenant to copy the fair example?

This extraordinary statement is more than just a poetic description of the joys of reading. It is also a precise scientific definition of an emotion. In emotion research, we generally study emotions by specifying their components, and Jefferson gives us most of the major components: an eliciting or triggering condition (displays of charity, gratitude, or other virtues); physical changes in the body (“dilation” in the chest); a motivation (a desire of “doing charitable and grateful acts also”); and a characteristic feeling beyond bodily sensations (elevated sentiments). Jefferson had described exactly the emotion I had just “discovered.” He even said that it was the opposite of disgust. As an act of crypto-religious glorification, I considered calling this emotion “Jefferson’s emotion,” but thought better of it, and chose the word “elevation,” which Jefferson himself had used to capture the sense of rising on a vertical dimension, away from disgust.

For the past seven years I have been studying elevation in the lab. My students and I have used a variety of means to induce elevation and have

found that video clips from documentaries about heroes and altruists, and selections from the Oprah Winfrey show, work well. In most of our studies, we show people in one group an elevating video, while people in the control condition see a video designed to amuse them, such as a Jerry Seinfeld monologue. We know (from Alice Isen's coins and cookies studies)²⁵ that feeling happy brings a variety of positive effects, so in our research we always try to show that elevation is not just a form of happiness. In our most comprehensive study,²⁶ Sara Algoe and I showed videos to research subjects in the lab and had them fill out a recording sheet about what they felt and what they wanted to do. Sara then gave them a stack of blank recording sheets and told them to keep an eye out, for the next three weeks, for instances of someone doing something good for someone else (in the elevation condition) or for times when they saw someone else tell a joke (in the amusement/control condition). We also added a third condition to study nonmoral admiration: People in this condition watched a video about the superhuman abilities of the basketball star Michael Jordan, and were then asked to record times when they witnessed someone doing something unusually skillful.

Both parts of Sara's study show that Jefferson got it exactly right. People really do respond emotionally to acts of moral beauty, and these emotional reactions involve warm or pleasant feelings in the chest and conscious desires to help others or become a better person oneself. A new discovery in Sara's study is that moral elevation appears to be different from admiration for nonmoral excellence. Subjects in the admiration condition were more likely to report feeling chills or tingles on their skin, and to report feeling energized or "psyched up." Witnessing extraordinarily skillful actions gives people the drive and energy to try to copy those actions.²⁷ Elevation, in contrast, is a calmer feeling, not associated with signs of physiological arousal. This distinction might help explain a puzzle about elevation. Although people say, in all our studies, that they *want* to do good deeds, in two studies where we gave them the opportunity to sign up for volunteer work or to help an experimenter pick up a stack of papers she had dropped, we did not find that elevation made people behave much differently.

What's going on here? How could an emotion that makes people rise on the dimension of divinity not make them behave more altruistically? It's

too soon to know for sure, but a recent finding suggests that love could be the answer. Three undergraduate honors students have worked with me on the physiology of elevation—Chris Oveis, Gary Sherman, and Jen Silvers. We've all been intrigued by the frequency with which people who are feeling elevation point to the heart. We believe they're not just speaking metaphorically. Chris and Gary have found hints that the vagus nerve might be activated during elevation. The vagus nerve is the main nerve of the parasympathetic nervous system, which calms people down, and undoes the arousal caused by the sympathetic (fight-or-flight) system. The vagus nerve is the main nerve that controls heart rate, and it has a variety of other effects on the heart and lungs, so if people feel something in the chest, the vagus nerve is the main suspect, and it has already been implicated in research on feelings of gratitude and "appreciation."²⁸ But it's difficult to measure the activity of the vagus nerve directly, and so far Chris and Gary have found only hints, not conclusive proof.

Nerves have accomplices, however; they sometimes work with hormones to produce long-lasting effects, and the vagus nerve works with the hormone oxytocin to create feelings of calmness, love, and desire for contact that encourage bonding and attachment.²⁹ Jen Silvers was interested in the possible role of oxytocin in elevation, but because we did not have the resources to draw blood from subjects before and after watching an elevating video (which we'd have to do to detect a change in oxytocin levels), I told Jen to scour the research literature to find an indirect measure—something oxytocin does to people that we could measure without a hypodermic needle. Jen found one: lactation. One of oxytocin's many jobs in regulating the attachment of mothers and children is to trigger the release of milk in mothers who breast-feed.

In one of the boldest undergraduate honors theses ever done in the UVA psychology department, Jen brought forty-five lactating women into our lab (one at a time), with their babies, and asked them to insert nursing pads into their bras. Half the women then watched an elevating clip from an Oprah Winfrey show (about a musician who, after expressing his gratitude to the music teacher who had saved him from a life of gang violence, finds out that Oprah has brought in some of *his own* students to express their gratitude to him). The other mothers saw a video clip featuring several

comedians. The women watched the videos in a private screening room, and a video camera (not hidden) recorded their behavior. When the videos were over, the mothers were left alone with their children for five minutes. At the end of the study, Jen weighed the nursing pads to measure milk release, and later coded the videos for whether the mothers nursed their babies or played warmly with them. The effect was one of the biggest I have ever found in any study: Nearly half of the mothers in the elevation condition either leaked milk or nursed their babies; only a few of the mothers in the comedy condition leaked or nursed. Furthermore, the elevated mothers showed more warmth in the way they touched and cuddled their babies. All of this suggests that oxytocin might be released during moments of elevation. And if this is true, then perhaps it was naive of me to expect that elevation would actually cause people to help strangers (even though they often say they want to do so). Oxytocin causes bonding, not action. Elevation may fill people with feelings of love, trust,³⁰ and openness, making them more receptive to new relationships; yet, given their feelings of relaxation and passivity, they might be less likely to engage in active altruism toward strangers.

The relationship of elevation to love and trust was beautifully expressed in a letter I once received from a man in Massachusetts, David Whitford, who had read about my work on elevation. Whitford's Unitarian church had asked each of its members to write a spiritual autobiography—an account of how each had become the spiritual person he or she is now. In one section of his autobiography, Whitford puzzled over why he was so often moved to tears during church services. He noticed that he shed two kinds of tears in church. The first he called “tears of compassion,” such as the time he cried during a sermon on Mothers' Day on the subject of children who were abandoned or neglected. These cases felt to him like “being pricked in the soul,” after which “love pours out” for those who are suffering. But he called the second kind “tears of celebration”; he could just as well have called them tears of elevation:

There's another kind of tear. This one's less about giving love and more about the joy of receiving love, or maybe just detecting love (whether it's directed at me or at someone else). It's the kind of tear that flows in response

to expressions of courage, or compassion, or kindness by others. A few weeks after Mother's Day, we met here in the sanctuary after the service and considered whether to become a Welcoming Congregation [a congregation that welcomes gay people]. When John stood in support of the resolution, and spoke of how, as far as he knew, he was the first gay man to come out at First Parish, in the early 1970s, I cried for his courage. Later, when all hands went up and the resolution passed unanimously, I cried for the love expressed by our congregation in that act. That was a tear of celebration, a tear of receptiveness to what is good in the world, a tear that says it's okay, relax, let down your guard, there are good people in the world, there is good in people, love is real, it's in our nature. That kind of tear is also like being pricked, only now the love pours in.³¹

Growing up Jewish in a devoutly Christian country, I was frequently puzzled by references to Christ's love and love through Christ. Now that I understand elevation and the third dimension, I think I'm beginning to get it. For many people, one of the pleasures of going to church is the experience of collective elevation. People step out of their everyday profane existence, which offers only occasional opportunities for movement on the third dimension, and come together with a community of like-hearted people who are also hoping to feel a “lift” from stories about Christ, virtuous people in the Bible, saints, or exemplary members of their own community. When this happens, people find themselves overflowing with love, but it is not exactly the love that grows out of attachment relationships.³² That love has a specific object, and it turns to pain when the object is gone. This love has no specific object; it is *agape*. It feels like a love of all humankind, and because humans find it hard to believe that something comes from nothing, it seems natural to attribute the love to Christ, or to the Holy Spirit moving within one's own heart. Such experiences give direct and subjectively compelling evidence that God resides within each person. And once a person knows this “truth,” the ethic of divinity becomes self-evident. Some ways of living are compatible with divinity—they bring out the higher, nobler self; others do not. The split between the Christian left and the Christian right could be, in part, that some people see tolerance and acceptance as part of their nobler selves; others feel that

they can best honor God by working to change society and its laws to conform to the ethic of divinity, even if that means imposing religious laws on people of other faiths.

AWE AND TRANSCENDENCE

Virtue is not the only cause of movement on the third dimension. The vastness and beauty of nature similarly stirs the soul. Immanuel Kant explicitly linked morality and nature when he declared that the two causes of genuine awe are “the starry sky above and the moral law within.”³³ Darwin felt spiritually uplifted while exploring South America:

In my journal I wrote that whilst standing in midst of the grandeur of a Brazilian forest, “it is not possible to give an adequate idea of the higher feelings of wonder, admiration, and devotion which fill and elevate the mind.” I well remember my conviction that there is more in man than the breath of his body.³⁴

The New England transcendentalist movement was based directly on the idea that God is to be found in each person and in nature, so spending time alone in the woods is a way of knowing and worshiping God. Ralph Waldo Emerson, a founder of the movement, wrote:

Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental; to be brothers, to be acquaintances, master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty.³⁵

Something about the vastness and beauty of nature makes the self feel small and insignificant, and anything that shrinks the self creates an oppor-

tunity for spiritual experience. In chapter 1, I wrote about the divided self—the many ways in which people feel as though they have multiple selves or intelligences that sometimes conflict. This division is often explained by positing a soul—a higher, noble, spiritual self, which is tied down to a body—a lower, base, carnal self. The soul escapes the body only at death; but before then, spiritual practices, great sermons, and awe at nature can give the soul a taste of the freedom to come.

There are many other ways of getting such a foretaste. People often refer to viewing great art, hearing a symphony, or listening to an inspiring speaker as (crypto) religious experiences. And some things give more than a taste: They give a full-blown, though temporary, escape. When the hallucinogenic drugs LSD and psilocybin became widely known in the West, medical researchers called these drugs “psychoto-mimetic” because they mimicked some of the symptoms of psychotic disorders such as schizophrenia. But those who tried the drugs generally rejected that label and made up terms such as “psychedelic” (manifesting the mind) and “entheogen” (generating God from within). The Aztec word for the psilocybin mushroom was *teonanacatl*, which means literally “god’s flesh”; when it was eaten in religious ceremonies, it gave many the experience of a direct encounter with God.³⁶

Drugs that create an altered mental state have an obvious usefulness in marking off sacred experiences from profane, and therefore many drugs, including alcohol and marijuana, play a role in religious rites in some cultures. But there is something special about the phenethylamines—the drug class that includes LSD and psilocybin. Drugs in this class, whether naturally occurring (as in psilocybin, mescaline, or yage) or synthesized by a chemist (LSD, ecstasy, DMT) are unmatched in their ability to induce massive alterations of perception and emotion that sometimes feel, even to secular users, like contact with divinity, and that cause people to feel afterwards that they’ve been transformed.³⁷ The effects of these drugs depend greatly on what Timothy Leary and the other early psychedelic explorers called “set and setting,” referring to the user’s mental set, and to the setting in which the drugs are taken. When people bring a reverential mindset and take the drugs in a safe and supportive setting, as is done in the initiation rites of some traditional cultures,³⁸ these drugs can be catalysts for spiritual and personal growth.

In the most direct test of this catalyst hypothesis, Walter Pahnke,³⁹ a physician working on a dissertation in theology, brought twenty graduate students in theology into a room below the chapel at Boston University on Good Friday 1962. He gave ten of the students 30 milligrams of psilocybin; the other ten were given identical-looking pills containing vitamin B5 (nicotinic acid), which creates feelings of tingles and flushing on the skin. The vitamin B5 is what's known as an active placebo: It creates real bodily feelings, so if the beneficial effects of psilocybin were just placebo effects, the control group would have good reason to show them. Over the next few hours, the whole group listened (via speakers) to the Good Friday service going on in the chapel upstairs. Nobody, not even Pahnke, knew who had taken which pill. But two hours after the pills were taken, there could be no doubt. Those who had taken the placebo were the first to feel something happening, and they assumed they had gotten the psilocybin. But nothing else happened. Half an hour later, the other students began an experience that many later described as one of the most important in their lives. Pahnke interviewed them after the drug wore off, and again a week later, and again six months later. He found that most of the people in the psilocybin group reported most of the nine features of mystical experience he had set out to measure. The strongest and most consistent effects included feelings of unity with the universe, transcendence of time and space, joy, a difficulty putting the experience into words, and a feeling of having been changed for the better. Many reported seeing beautiful colors and patterns and having profound feelings of ecstasy, fear, and awe.

Awe is *the* emotion of self-transcendence. My friend Dacher Keltner, an expert on emotion at the University of California at Berkeley, proposed to me a few years ago that we review the literature on awe and try to make sense of it ourselves. We found⁴⁰ that scientific psychology had almost nothing to say about awe. It can't be studied in other animals or created easily in the lab, so it doesn't lend itself to experimental research. But philosophers, sociologists, and theologians had a great deal to say about it. As we traced the word "awe" back in history, we discovered that it has always had a link to fear and submission in the presence of something much greater than the self. It's only in very modern times—in our de-sacralized world, perhaps—that awe has been reduced to surprise plus approval, and

the word "awesome," much used by American teenagers, has come to mean little more than "double-plus good" (to use George Orwell's term from 1984). Keltner and I concluded that the emotion of awe happens when two conditions are met: a person perceives something vast (usually physically vast, but sometimes conceptually vast, such as a grand theory; or socially vast, such as great fame or power); and the vast thing cannot be accommodated by the person's existing mental structures. Something enormous can't be processed, and when people are stumped, stopped in their cognitive tracks while in the presence of something vast, they feel small, powerless, passive, and receptive. They often (though not always) feel fear, admiration, elevation, or a sense of beauty as well. By stopping people and making them receptive, awe creates an opening for change, and this is why awe plays a role in most stories of religious conversion.

We found a prototype of awe—a perfect but extreme case—in the dramatic climax of the *Bhagavad Gita*. The *Gita* is an episode within the much longer story of the *Mahabharata*, an epic work about a war between two branches of an Indian royal family. As the hero of the story, Arjuna, is about to lead his troops into battle, he loses his nerve and refuses to fight. He does not want to lead his kinsmen into slaughter against his kinsmen. The *Gita* is the story of how Krishna (a form of the god Vishnu) persuades Arjuna that he must lead his troops into battle. In the middle of the battlefield, with troops arrayed on both sides, Krishna gives a detailed and abstract theological lecture on the topic of dharma—the moral law of the universe. Arjuna's dharma requires that he fight and win this war. Not surprisingly (given the weakness of reason when it comes to motivating action), Arjuna is unmoved. Arjuna asks Krishna to show him this universe of which he speaks. Krishna grants Arjuna's request and gives him a cosmic eye that allows him to see God and the universe as they really are. Arjuna then has an experience that sounds to modern readers like an LSD trip. He sees suns, gods, and infinite time. He is filled with amazement. His hair stands on end. He is disoriented and confused, unable to comprehend the wonders he is seeing. I don't know whether Edwin Abbot read the *Bhagavad Gita*, but the square's experience in *Space-land* is exactly like Arjuna's. Arjuna is clearly in a state of awe when he says, "Things never before seen have I seen, and ecstatic is my joy; yet fear-and-trembling perturb my mind."⁴¹ When the cosmic eye is removed and Arjuna

comes “down” from his trip, he does just what the square did: He prostrates himself before the God who enlightened him, and he begs to serve. Krishna commands Arjuna to be loyal to him, and to cut off all other attachments. Arjuna gladly obeys, and, from then on, he honors Krishna’s commands.

Arjuna’s experience is extreme—the stuff of scripture; yet many people have had a spiritually transformative experience that included many of the same elements. In what is still the greatest work on the psychology of religion, William James analyzed the “varieties of religious experience,”⁴² including rapid and gradual religious conversions and experiences with drugs and nature. James found such extraordinary similarity in the reports of these experiences that he thought they revealed deep psychological truths. One of the deepest truths, James said, was that we experience life as a divided self, torn by conflicting desires. Religious experiences are real and common, whether or not God exists, and these experiences often make people feel whole and at peace. In the rapid type of conversion experience (such as those of Arjuna and the square), the old self, full of petty concerns, doubts, and grasping attachments, is washed away in an instant, usually an instant of profound awe. People feel reborn and often remember the exact time and place of this rebirth, the moment they surrendered their will to a higher power and were granted direct experience of deeper truth. After such rebirth, fear and worry are greatly diminished and the world seems clean, new, and bright. The self is changed in ways that any priest, rabbi, or psychotherapist would call miraculous. James described these changes:

The man who lives in his religious centre of personal energy, and is actuated by spiritual enthusiasms, differs from his previous carnal self in perfectly definite ways. The new ardor which burns in his breast consumes in its glow the lower “noes” which formerly beset him, and keeps him immune against infection from the entire groveling portion of his nature. Magnanimities once impossible are now easy; paltry conventionalities and mean incentives once tyrannical hold no sway. The stone wall inside of him has fallen, the hardness in his heart has broken down. The rest of us can, I think, imagine this by recalling our state of feeling in those temporary “melting moods” into which either the trials of real life, or the theatre, or a novel sometimes throw us. Especially if we weep! For it is then as if

our tears broke through an inveterate inner dam, and let all sorts of ancient peccancies and moral stagnancies drain away, leaving us now washed and soft of heart and open to every nobler leading.⁴³

James’s “melting moods” are strikingly similar to the feelings of elevation described by Jefferson and by David Whitford.

Atheists may protest that they, too, can have many of the same experiences without God. The psychologist who took such secular experiences seriously was Abraham Maslow, Harry Harlow’s first graduate student and a founder of humanistic psychology. Maslow collected reports of what he called “peak experiences”—those extraordinary self-transcendent moments that feel qualitatively different from ordinary life. In a small gem of a book, *Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences*,⁴⁴ Maslow listed twenty-five common features of peak experiences, nearly all of which can be found somewhere in William James. Here are some: The universe is perceived as a unified whole where everything is accepted and nothing is judged or ranked; egocentrism and goal-striving disappear as a person feels merged with the universe (and often with God); perceptions of time and space are altered; and the person is flooded with feelings of wonder, awe, joy, love, and gratitude.

Maslow’s goal was to demonstrate that spiritual life has a naturalistic meaning, that peak experiences are a basic fact about the human mind. In all eras and all cultures, many people have had these experiences, and Maslow suggested that all religions are based on the insights of somebody’s peak experience. Peak experiences make people nobler, just as James had said, and religions were created as methods of promoting peak experiences and then maximizing their ennobling powers. Religions sometimes lose touch with their origins, however; they are sometimes taken over by people who have not had peak experiences—the bureaucrats and company men who want to routinize procedures and guard orthodoxy for orthodoxy’s sake. This, Maslow said, is why many young people became disenchanted with organized religion in the mid-twentieth-century, searching instead for peak experiences in psychedelic drugs, Eastern religions, and new forms of Christian worship.

Maslow’s analysis probably does not shock you. It makes sense as a secular psychological explanation of religion. But what is most surprising in *Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences* is Maslow’s attack on science for

becoming as sterile as organized religion. The historians of science Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park⁴⁵ later documented this change. They showed that scientists and philosophers had traditionally held an attitude of wonder toward the natural world and the objects of their inquiry. But in the late sixteenth century, European scientists began to look down on wonder; they began to see it as the mark of a childish mind, whereas the mature scientist went about coolly cataloging the laws of the world. Scientists may tell us in their memoirs about their private sense of wonder, but the everyday world of the scientist is one that rigidly separates facts from values and emotions. Maslow echoed Eliade in claiming that science has helped to de-sacralize the world, that it is devoted to documenting only what *is*, rather than what is *good* or what is *beautiful*. One might object that there is an academic division of labor; the good and the beautiful are the province of the humanities, not of the sciences. Maslow charged, however, that the humanities had abdicated their responsibility with their retreat to relativism, their skepticism about the possibility of truth, and their preference for novelty and iconoclasm over beauty. He founded humanistic psychology in part to feed the widespread hunger for knowledge about values and to investigate the sort of truth people glimpse in peak experiences. Maslow did not believe religions were literally true (as actual accounts of God and creation), but he thought they were based on the most important truths of life, and he wanted to unite those truths with the truths of science. His goal was nothing less than the reformation of education and, therefore, of society: "Education must be seen as at least partially an effort to produce the good human being, to foster the good life and the good society."⁴⁶

THE SATANIC SELF

The self is one of the great paradoxes of human evolution. Like the fire stolen by Prometheus, it made us powerful but exacted a cost. In *The Curse of the Self*,⁴⁷ the social psychologist Mark Leary points out that many other animals can think, but none, so far as we know, spend much time thinking about themselves. Only a few other primates (and perhaps dolphins) can

even learn that the image in a mirror belongs to them.⁴⁸ Only a creature with language ability has the mental apparatus to focus attention on the self, to think about the self's invisible attributes and long term goals, to create a narrative about that self, and then to react emotionally to thoughts about that narrative. Leary suggests that this ability to create a self gave our ancestors many useful skills, such as long-term planning, conscious decision making and self-control, and the ability to see other people's perspectives. Because these skills are all important for enabling human beings to work closely together on large projects, the development of the self may have been crucial to the development of human ultrasociality. But by giving each one of us an inner world, a world full of simulations, social comparisons, and reputational concerns, the self also gave each one of us a personal tormenter. We all now live amid a whirlpool of inner chatter, much of which is negative (threats loom larger than opportunities), and most of which is useless. It is important to note that the self is not exactly the rider—much of the self is unconscious and automatic—but because the self emerges from conscious verbal thinking and storytelling, it can be constructed only by the rider.

Leary's analysis shows why the self is a problem for all major religions: The self is the main obstacle to spiritual advancement, in three ways. First, the constant stream of trivial concerns and egocentric thoughts keeps people locked in the material and profane world, unable to perceive sacredness and divinity. This is why Eastern religions rely heavily on meditation, an effective means of quieting the chatter of the self. Second, spiritual transformation is essentially the transformation of the self, weakening it, pruning it back—in some sense, killing it—and often the self objects. Give up my possessions and the prestige they bring? No way! Love my enemies, after what they did to me? Forget about it. And third, following a spiritual path is invariably hard work, requiring years of meditation, prayer, self-control, and sometimes self-denial. The self does not like to be denied, and it is adept at finding reasons to bend the rules or cheat. Many religions teach that egoistic attachments to pleasure and reputation are constant temptations to leave the path of virtue. In a sense, the self is Satan, or, at least, Satan's portal.

For all these reasons, the self is a problem for the ethic of divinity. The big greedy self is like a brick holding down the soul. Only by seeing the self

in this way, I believe, can one understand and even respect the moral motivations of those who want to make their society conform more closely to the particular religion they follow.

FLATLAND AND THE CULTURE WAR

Humor helps people cope with adversity, and after George W. Bush received a majority of the votes in the U.S. presidential election of 2004, 49 percent of Americans had a lot of coping to do. Many people in the “blue states” (those where a majority voted for John Kerry, shown on all electoral maps in blue) could not understand why people in the “red states” supported Bush and his policies. Liberals posted maps of the United States on the Internet that showed the blue states (all in the Northeast, the upper Midwest, and along the West coast) labeled “United States of America”; the red states (almost the whole interior and south of the nation) were labeled “Jesusland.” Conservatives countered with their own map in which the blue states were labeled “New France,” but I think a more accurate parody, from the right’s point of view, might have been to call the blue states “Selfland.”

I am not suggesting that people who voted for John Kerry are any more selfish than those who voted for George Bush—indeed, the taxation and social policies of the two candidates suggest just the opposite. But I am trying to understand the mutual incomprehension of the two sides in the culture war, and I believe that Shweder’s three ethics—particularly the ethic of divinity—are the key to it.

Which of the following quotations inspires you more: (1) “Self-esteem is the basis of any democracy”; (2) “It’s not all about you.” The first is attributed to Gloria Steinem,⁴⁹ a founder of the feminist movement in the 1970s. It claims that sexism, racism, and oppression make particular groups of people feel unworthy and therefore undermine their participation in democracy. This quote also reflects the core idea of the ethic of autonomy: Individuals are what really matter in life, so the ideal society protects all individuals from harm and respects their autonomy and freedom of choice. The ethic of autonomy is well suited to helping people with different back-

grounds and values get along with each other because it allows each person to pursue the life she chooses, as long as those choices don’t interfere with the rights of others.

The second quote is the opening line of the world’s biggest-selling book in 2003 and 2004, *The Purpose Driven Life* by Rick Warren,⁵⁰ a guide for finding purpose and meaning through faith in Jesus Christ and the revelation of the Bible. From Warren’s perspective, the self is the cause of our problems and therefore efforts to raise children’s self-esteem directly with awards, praise, and exercises to make them feel “special” are positively evil. The core idea of the ethic of divinity is that each person has divinity inside, so the ideal society helps people live in a way consistent with that divinity. What an individual desires is not particularly important—many desires come from the carnal self. Schools, families, and the media should all work together to help children overcome their sense of self and entitlement and live instead in the way Christ intended.

Many of the key battles in the American culture war are essentially about whether some aspect of life should be structured by the ethic of autonomy or by the ethic of divinity.⁵¹ (The ethic of community, which stresses the importance of the group over that of the individual, tends to be allied with the ethic of divinity). Should there be prayer in schools? Should the Ten Commandments be posted in schools and courthouses? Should the phrase “under God” be struck from the American pledge of allegiance? Liberals usually want to keep religion out of public life so that people cannot be forced to participate against their will, but religious conservatives want schools and courthouses re-sacralized. They want their children to live in a (particular) three-dimensional world, and if the schools won’t provide it, they sometimes turn to home-schooling instead.

Should people be allowed to use birth control, abortion, reproductive technologies, and assisted suicide as they please? It depends on whether your goal is to empower people to manage some of the most important choices of their lives, or whether you think all such decisions must be made by God. If the book title *Our Bodies, Ourselves* sounds like a noble act of defiance to you, you will support people’s rights to choose their own sexual activities and to modify their bodies as they please. But if you believe that “God prescribed every single detail of your body,”⁵² as Warren writes in *The*

Purpose Driven Life, you will probably be offended by sexual diversity and by body modifications such as piercings and plastic surgery. My students and I have interviewed political liberals and conservatives about sexual morality,⁵³ and about body modifications,⁵⁴ and in both studies we found that liberals were much more permissive and relied overwhelmingly on the ethic of autonomy; conservatives, much more critical, used all three ethics in their discourse. For example, one conservative man justified his condemnation of a story about an unusual form of masturbation:

It's a sin because it distances ourselves from God. It's a pleasure that God did not design for us to enjoy because sexual pleasures, through, you know, a married heterosexual couple, were designed by God in order to reproduce.⁵⁵

On issue after issue, liberals want to maximize autonomy by removing limits, barriers, and restrictions. The religious right, on the other hand, wants to structure personal, social, and political relationships in three dimensions and so create a landscape of purity and pollution where restrictions maintain the separation of the sacred and the profane. For the religious right, hell on earth is a flat land of unlimited freedom where selves roam around with no higher purpose than expressing and developing themselves.



As a liberal, I value tolerance and openness to new ideas. I have done my best, in this chapter, to be tolerant toward those whose politics I oppose and to find merit in religious ideas I do not hold. But although I have begun to see the richness that divinity adds to human experience, I do not entirely lament the “flattening” of life in the West over the last few hundred years. An unfortunate tendency of three-dimensional societies is that they often include one or more groups that get pushed down on the third dimension and then treated badly, or worse. Look at the conditions of “untouchables” in India until recently, or at the plight of Jews in medieval Europe and in purity-obsessed Nazi Germany, or at the humiliation of African Americans in the segregated South. The American religious right now

seems to be trying to push homosexuals down in a similar way. Liberalism and the ethic of autonomy are great protectors against such injustices. I believe it is dangerous for the ethic of divinity to supersede the ethic of autonomy in the governance of a diverse modern democracy. However, I also believe that life in a society that entirely ignored the ethic of divinity would be ugly and unsatisfying.

Because the culture war is ideological, both sides use the myth of pure evil. To acknowledge that the other side might be right about *anything* is an act of treason. My research on the third dimension, however, has freed me from the myth and made it easy for me to think treasonous thoughts. Here's one: If the third dimension and perceptions of sacredness are an important part of human nature, then the scientific community should accept religiosity as a normal and healthy aspect of human nature—an aspect that is as deep, important, and interesting as sexuality or language (which we study intensely). Here's another treasonous thought: If religious people are right in believing that religion is the source of their greatest happiness, then maybe the rest of us who are looking for happiness and meaning can learn something from them, whether or not we believe in God. That's the topic of the final chapter.