

Materialism, Atheism, and Love of Life

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I: Three Theses on Dancing

When it is all over—the crying and the dancing and the long/exhausting music—I will remember only/ How you once flirted with your death and lifted your dark eyes/ to warn me of the world’s end/ As wild leaves fell, and midnight crashed upon the city./“But it is never over/nothing ends until we want it to/Look, in the shattered midnights/on black ice under silver trees/we are still dancing/dancing.”¹

“Don’t you believe it’s time to let me go?/The clock is winding down and I’m moving slow/I could keep on dancing/Just for show/Don’t you believe it’s time to let me go?”²

“An invitation to the dance is not rendered ironical because the dance cannot last forever, the youngest of us and the most vigorously wound up, after a few hours, has had enough sinuous

¹ Gwendolyn MacEwen, “Late Song,” *Afterworlds*, (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart), 1987, p. 15.

² Emmy Lou Harris, “Take That Ride,” from the album *All I Intended to Be*, Nonesuch Records, 2008.

stepping and prancing. The transitoriness of things is essential to their physical being ... and is not at all sad in itself.”³

Whatever one believes happens after death, every human being who has time to think about the problem must take a stand with regard to the transitoriness of their lives and the things and people they encounter. The poet, the singer, and the philosopher quoted above express the range of possible dispositions towards the problem. The poet, writing meaning into being, sees the transitoriness of things as an illusion cast by objects, an illusion that the human capacity for invention dispels. For MacEwen, the value of things is as we decide it to be. The dance can go on as long as the dancers wish; the order of things prescribes no limit to the joys one may derive from experience and activity. The being of things and their subjective valuation coincide. Things remain in existence so long as the subject continues to value them, and there is no objective power that can bring valuation to a halt.

The singer does not disagree with the poet’s central claim: subjects bring value into being. She sings not of nihilism, but exhaustion. She gives voice to the subjective consequences of the transitoriness of nature in her own embodied being. The gradual decay of her body saps the will to value herself and her relations with her lover. She pleads for release because she knows, with a knowledge born of painful but unavoidable experience, that even the most joyous relations become burdens once the physical vitality their enjoyment requires is depleted. Nature undermines the reasons why anyone would want to continue to dance forever. The mature recognition that every hello entails a good bye is a cause for sadness, but that is a weight that mature consciousness must bear.

³ George Santaya, “A Long Way Round to Nirvana: Development of a Suggestion Found in Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*,” *Some Turns of Thought in Modern Philosophy*, (Charleston, SC: Bibliobazaar), 2007, p. 59.

The poet stresses the joy of creation, the songwriter the burdens of nature. The former affirms joy's potential limitlessness, the latter reminds us of the crushing weight of objects. The philosopher synthesises these opposed dispositions. The philosopher neither creates nor laments, but tries to understand the real structures in which value judgements are made. He feels the joys of sensuous movement, but understands them as dependent upon physical systems that exist in time. Time is the medium in which opposites come together. That which was joyous becomes painfully tedious. The work of philosophical understanding is to properly situate the subject as a centre of judgement and valuation within an objective field of things and forces. Rational judgement and valuation can only proceed from a subject who understands his or her position within that field of forces. Philosophical understanding recognises that limitation is essential to the value of things. A few hours of entwining one's body with other bodies in dance is beautiful. An infinitely long dance, however, would not produce infinite pleasure, but would become unbearable monotony. That the dance must end is not cause for sadness, therefore, but for dancing as well as one can dance, energized by the knowledge that it will be over soon, and one can rest.

The poet implies that happiness demands infinity; the singer sings the melancholy of endings; the philosopher understands the implications of limitations and changes for human life. It is those implications that I want to explore today. My argument is that materialism is not a comprehensive system of understanding which reduces all value to mere physical forces and processes, but rather an internally complex, non-reductive, historically and epistemically dynamic way of thinking. Materialism recognises the need for different sets of concepts to properly grasp the different structures of material organization-- natural, social, cultural, and individual. Its philosophical unity is not derived from reduction of complexity to the simplicity

of basic elements and laws, but from its being a basis from which human beings can make sense of their place in the universe and create meaning in their lives, even though the universe as a physical system is meaningless and without orienting goal. The philosophical unity of materialism, in other words, is the way in which it grasps the human being as a social self-conscious valuing subject. This subject has evolved out of, but is irreducible to, natural elements. Our humanity is grounded in our organism, but is expressed through the social, cultural and individual worlds that we create, collectively and alone. It is in these self-created worlds that we find the substance of lives we can love, provided certain political, economic, and social conditions are met. This love of life can be sustained in the absence of a loving god. Materialism implies atheism, therefore, but neither lead—as so many believers in an eternal other-world contend-- to nihilism. However, to begin, I will consider the religious challenge to the possibility of happiness and justice in a transitory world.

II: The Longing for Eternity

Despite the fact that every experience confirms the transitoriness of things, many, perhaps most, human beings long for eternity. Not only do they long for eternity, they argue that without eternity, happiness and justice are impossible, because the transitoriness of things is not only sad, it is necessarily destructive of the conditions of happiness and justice. If we identify happiness as the realized experience of a good life for individuals and justice as the realized institutions of a good society, the believer in eternity predicates the goodness of both individual and social life on an escape from transitoriness. They agree with Santayana that physical things are essentially transitory, but then argue that as a consequence, our happiness and social justice must have non-material conditions of existence. On earth happiness and justice are always tinged with unhappiness and injustice, which is tantamount to saying that happiness and

justice *as such* are always absent so long as they are grounded in changing experiences and institutions. Both depend upon the power of a creator god to establish the conditions for absolute happiness and justice. I will elaborate upon my meaning through two examples, the first from Pascal's *Pensees* and the second from Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Pascal believes that embodied existence is an impossible search to re-establish unity with a God whose existence is an article of faith but never certain knowledge. We seek the eternal on earth, but must fail in our quest, because where embodied being is, the eternal is not. Knowing this truth, but summoned by our deepest desires to find the eternal, we throw ourselves into life, seeking in one experience after the next a happiness that will last. But every experience fails the test of time. "There was formerly in man a real happiness [but] there remains only the totally empty mark and trace of this happiness, which he tries in vain to fill with everything that surrounds him, seeking from things which are absent the help he does not obtain from present ones, but finding all incapable of that help, because that infinite abyss can be filled only by something infinite and immutable, that is to say, by God himself."⁴ Human beings derive pleasure from the dance, and while they are enjoying it, they project that enjoyment as lasting forever. But they grow sweaty and tired and want to rest. They project rest as the condition of unending enjoyment, but after a few hours, grow restless again for a new experience, projecting that as the basis of a permanent happiness, only to feel that hope collapse. We are thus impelled, according to Pascal, to search fruitlessly for that experience we can enjoy forever. The desire for an infinite, absolute happiness can therefore be satisfied by an infinite and absolute god, or not at all.

⁴ Blaise Pascal, *Selections From The Thoughts*, Arthur H. Beattie, ed., ((New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts), 1965, p. 64.

An analogous reasoning with regard to justice underlies the argument that Dostoyevsky voices through the character of Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Human beings are only capable of imperfect justice, which is to say, no justice at all, since an imperfect justice allows some innocents to suffer and some guilty to prosper. At best, earlier generations are sacrificed for the sake of more complete, but still unfinished, structures of justice in the future. But the demand for justice is, like the demand for happiness, absolute. Satisfaction of this demand entails the existence of god. "I must have justice," Ivan insists. "And not justice in some remote infinite time and space, but here on earth, and that I would see it for myself. ... If I am dead by then, then let me rise again, for if it happens without me, it would be too unfair. Surely I have not suffered simply that I, my crimes and sufferings, may manure the soil of future harmony for somebody else. I want to see with my own eyes the hind lie down with the lion and the victim rise up and embrace his murderer. I want to be there when everybody suddenly understands what it has all been for. All the religions of the world are built on this longing."⁵ While a superficial reading might think Ivan's wish selfish, more careful philosophical attention reveals that what he is rebelling at is the way in which, in history, what justice there is depends upon some being treated as instruments for the sake of the higher justice achieved through their sacrifice. Complete justice requires complete understanding of god's purpose in organizing temporal existence the way that god has. That plan is not apparent to us in our day to day mortal life. Since the victim and those who care about him or her cannot grasp the cosmic plan through which victimization can be justified, they feel that they have suffered unjustly. When there is a horrific tragedy like Newtown, people struggle in vain to understand how a loving god can permit such atrocities to happen. And so, like Ivan, they wait in the hope that after death the

⁵ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, (New York: Grosset and Dunlap), pp. 267-268.

whole story might be revealed to them, so that they might understand and then experience the universal and absolute justice denied to them, and to all people, on earth. If that god should somehow not exist, then the suffering of the victims cannot be redeemed, and that would be the worst sort of injustice.

While I agree with Pascal and Dostoyevsky that absolute happiness and absolute justice are not possible unless an absolute and omnipotent god exists, I disagree that good human lives—lives that we not only live, but love living—require absolute forms of happiness and justice. Since the materialist cannot accept the existence of ideal, spiritual substances—souls, angels, gods—because no credible account can be offered of their nature, their structure, or the powers by which they act, he or she must be at the same time an atheist. Yet, neither atheism nor materialism entails nihilism or, what amounts to the same thing, unbridled egocentric hedonism. Properly interpreted, materialism is the best philosophical position from which the life-value of finite embodied existence can be grasped. While there is an irreducible tragic element to mortal life, our ability to bear the tragedy is what ultimately elevates that life beyond mere biological functioning, enabling each life to become a partial but nevertheless satisfying ethical whole. I recognise that the idea of a partial whole is a contradiction, but it is a contradiction that follows not from an error of logic, but from the life of human beings as individuals within natural fields of life support and social fields of life-development that extend in time and space beyond the span of individual lives. I will begin to unpack my meaning and support these claims with a general explanation of what I mean by “materialism,” contrasting it with the reductionist physicalism it is typically taken to be.

III: Materialism

A crucial reason why many people believe that materialism cannot provide a satisfactory account of human life as an ethical whole—as a meaningful life worth living, and not just a set of biological functions-- is because it has typically been articulated, from the Greek atomists to contemporary natural scientists, as a reductionist and mechanistic.⁶ By “reductionist” and “mechanistic” I mean that materialists have typically argued that explanation and understanding amount to the analysis of complex phenomena into their more basic constituents and the fundamental physical laws that govern their interaction. The fundamental laws of the universe are laws of physical causality by which simple elements are combined into molecular structures and molecular structures into higher order systems like living things and human societies. Reductionists normally do not deny that these higher order structures appear to operate according to laws that are distinct from the laws that govern their physical constituents, but go on to argue that all higher order operations must ultimately be explained in terms of the laws and elements that define the most fundamental structures of physical reality. The zoologist E.O. Wilson provides a paradigmatic explanation of the reductionist understanding of materialism. “The deeper agenda ... that ... takes the name of reductionism [is] to fold the laws and principles of each level of organization into those at more general, hence more fundamental levels. Its strong form is total consilience, which holds that nature is organized by simple universal laws of physics to which all other laws and principles can eventually be reduced.”⁷ While Wilson is committed to this strong view, he admits that it might be necessary to accept the irreducible reality of distinct classes of entities governed by distinct laws and dynamics not all of which are reducible to physics. Paintings may be made of oil on a surface, and we cannot appreciate them

⁶ For an historical overview and critique of the problems of treating materialism as reductionist physicalism see Jeff Noonan, *Materialist Ethics and Life Value*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press), 2012, pp. 17-45.

⁷ E.O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*, (New York: Vintage Books), 1998, p. 60.

without seeing them, but their meaning and aesthetic value might not be explicable in terms of the laws which govern the ways in which paint on a certain surface reflects light. A non-reductionist materialism is thus not a contradiction in terms. It is the only form of materialism that is compatible with understanding human life as potentially meaningful and good. Since I am a materialist and committed to the view that the most important things about human life are that it can be meaningful and good, the coherence of my position depends upon my providing a coherent account of a non-reductive materialism.

The strong reductionist interpretation of materialism defended by Wilson and others looks to it as a comprehensive philosophical-scientific program whose ultimate goal is the unification of all human knowledge. The ultimate unification of human knowledge would mean that the arc the evolution of matter has taken could be traced from the Big Bang to Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, from the formation of the Milky Way to the Sermon on the Mount, from the movements of tectonic plates to the *Bhagavad Gita* as seamless developments in which nothing of any epistemic importance is lost as we gradually reduce all explanation to the language of physics. This drive for unity makes this interpretation of materialism the mirror image of the idealism it purportedly rejects. True, where idealism searches for its principle of unity at the highest level, in the orienting Idea that explains the purpose of material organization, the reductionist program seeks the material structures to which the Idea can be reduced and eliminated. Both, however, err in so far as they reject that which I regard as of essential importance to any philosophical system, what Theodor Adorno calls its capacity to respect the "preponderance of the object."⁸

What Adorno means, I believe, is that philosophy, whether materialist or idealist, errs when it substitutes for the actual complexity and multi-dimensionality of experience an internally

⁸ Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, (London: Continuum), 2003, p. 192.

unified set of concepts which satisfies the human mind's need for unity but negates in the process the real differentiations of structure and content that characterise objective reality at distinct levels of organization. If Adorno is correct, then reductionist materialism proceeds not from the experience of material reality, but from a prior epistemic commitment, not authorized by experience or material reality, to internal systematic unity as the hallmark of truth. If, by contrast, the materialist allows the object to preponderate, she will recognise that there are many different layers or levels of objectivity, all of which need to be grasped by concepts adequate to their real nature as disclosed by passive experience of them and active engagement with them. In this sense, materialism is not so much an internally unified systematic philosophy as it is an on-going effort to express, explain, and develop all the concepts necessary to grasp humanity's "real conditions of life, and our relations with our kind," as Marx said.⁹ The non-reductionist, *historical* materialist argues that the condition of possibility of the *Duino Elegies* is found in the natural, social, cultural, systems which the life of Rilke presupposed, but the essence of the poems is their meaning, not their conditions of possibility or the material through which that meaning is transmitted. That which applies to poetry, I contend, applies to life as a whole. Natural science explains how it came to be, not what it means or what it is worth.

Human beings and their creations are always the outcome and combination of on-going processes at distinct levels of organization whose unity is not found in their reducibility to basic physical elements and forces, but in the contribution they make to meaningful and valuable lives. The human species is the unintentional outcome of the evolution of matter and energy into homeostatic patterns which in turn evolved into self-replicating cells which combined into sentient organisms which developed into social self-conscious agents. At no point in this process

⁹ Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers), 1986, p. 37.

does the materialist find any intentionality at work in the natural processes, but he does find intentionality- in the social self-conscious human beings that have emerged out of evolution. Human beings *have* a natural history, but the capacities for social self-conscious creation that distinguish us from other life forms are not explicable by reduction to that natural history, or the natural history of matter and energy that preceded the emergence of life. To understand human beings we need a layered approach that focuses on the ways in which individuals appropriate and unify in themselves the natural forces, the social institutions, and cultural codes that form the “real conditions of their lives.” Meaning is that which human individuals create through their interpretive reflection on that which they are able to do and not do within those real conditions of life.

The understanding of each layer of structure- natural, social, cultural—demands sets of concepts appropriate to their nature. Natural structures of matter and energy can be explained by scientific method, but the social institutions and cultural systems created by the human beings that evolved out of those structures of matter and energy require new sets of categories which capture that which is unique to those levels. That which is unique, that which distinguishes them from natural systems, is that they are the products of collective human labour. The social institutions and cultural systems that human beings have built, unlike the natural processes that underlie them, cannot be understood without reference to the conscious purposes according to which the people who build and sustain and transform those systems act. That claim does not mean that social and cultural systems cannot develop powers of their own which constrain individual goals and purposes, only that those constraints are distinct from the constraints which natural forces exercise of human life.

Whereas natural elements and forces constitute more permanent constraints on human life- we require definite material inputs from the natural system of life-support if we are to survive- social and cultural forces are ultimately susceptible to deliberate alteration. This claim is not a dogmatic assertion, but is supported by the entire history of political and social struggle. All life-forms struggle, consciously or unconsciously, to live. Human beings struggle not only to live, but to live well. Oppressed people are generally kept alive that their labour might be exploited in the particular social interests of ruling classes; the fact that they struggle against the oppressive structures that define and constrain their lives proves that mere life is not enough for human beings, but that only such life as satisfies certain uniquely human requirements is acceptable. A *good* life presupposes life, but “goodness” is not a category of biology, but ethics, broadly understood as the inquiry into the comprehensive conditions of human lives worth living.

Just as with materialist metaphysics there are reductionist forms of materialist ethics and non-reductionist forms. The ancient and early modern versions of reductionist materialist ethics generally argued that good and bad lives had to reduce to objective bodily states-- pleasure and pain. Knowledge of the processes by which pleasure and pain could be reliably produced or avoided thus constituted knowledge of how to live the good life—a life in which pleasures outweighed pains. In the contemporary world this mechanical hedonism has generally been supplanted by more sophisticated models of naturalized ethics. Ethical dispositions are understood as products of evolution, and the good life generally treated as a set of behaviours, knowable by natural scientific means, which enable human individuals to flourish within the communities and ecosystems in which they live. As Sam Harris, a neuroscientist and committed defender of naturalised ethics argues, “we will increasingly understand good and evil, right and

wrong, in scientific terms, because moral concerns translate into facts about how our thoughts and behaviours affect the well-being of conscious creatures like ourselves. If there are facts to be known about the well-being of such creatures—and there are—then there must be right and wrong answers to moral questions.”¹⁰ This contemporary reductionist approach is superior to classical hedonistic approaches in so far as it develops a more robust conception of good as well-being and allows room for growth of knowledge about what is good for human beings. It thus makes room for learning, development, and social change: our lives can be better or worse, we can learn the causes which prevent lives from being good, and work to overcome them. Nevertheless, there are two problems with a scientific naturalised ethics.

The first is the way in which it puts natural science in the forefront of social development towards the good life. While it is true that there are facts about how human thoughts and behaviours affect well-being, these are not exclusively the province of natural science. To make ethics the object of natural science is to make it the preserve of experts, and to make it the preserve of experts is to abstract it from collective struggles to identify and remove the social, political, cultural, and economic causes of oppression, exploitation, alienation, and deprivation. For the non-reductionist, historical materialist science can be an ally in the struggle for better worlds, but only an ally. The real agents of ethical progress are democratic movements in which are combined a range of ways of understanding each of which is made necessary by the fact that human well-being has different elements: biological, economic, political, cultural, psychological, aesthetic, and interpersonal-relational.

¹⁰ Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values*, (New York: Simon and Shuster), 2010, p. 62.

The second problem that even a sophisticated reductionist materialist ethics faces is that it ignores the subjective moment of fully good lives. I agree with Harris that the history of scientific and philosophical inquiry and political struggle do generate objective insights into a range of natural, socio-cultural, and temporal life-requirements upon which good human lives depend. However, good lives are not simply lives in which those objective life-requirements are satisfied. Human beings must not only have their life-requirements satisfied as objects of expert scientific administration, they must become, through their own actions, social self-conscious contributing members to the practices, relationships and institutions through which those life-requirements are satisfied. A society that feeds and educates and employs its citizens is better than one that does not. But the good life for human beings can only be understood in the active voice- human beings must work together to feed themselves, rather than just be fed, educate themselves, rather than just be educated, govern themselves, rather than just be governed. In other words, the good life for human beings is not only to have life-requirements satisfied, it is to actively participate in their satisfaction in ways that enables the development of our life-capacities for experience, thought, and imagination, for mutualistic relationships, and for creative activity that contributes back to the natural and social worlds from which life-sustaining and life-developing resources are appropriated. Moreover, both these processes- life-requirement satisfaction and life-capacity development must derive from a social-self-conscious desire on the part of people to *want* to cooperate, to *want* to contribute, to *want* govern their lives according to democratic principles rooted in the life-interests they share with others. Thus, good human lives must be lived from the inside, according to a vocation which cannot be quantified in scientific terms but which is essential to bind in coherent unity the subject that experiences and acts with the natural and social worlds in which she experiences and acts. As McMurtry argues, “at the

highest level of abstraction, *the vocation of each individual is to do what s/he can that is of life-value to others and of life-interest to self. For none to shirk the duty of giving back in to what enables the humanity of each is ... the human ordering of social justice ...* The value of such work for others, in turn, is defined by its contribution to the provision of the universal goods each and all require to live *as human*.”¹¹ A coherent materialist ethics, one which grasps the objective and subjective moments of a good human life must not only be non-reductionist and historical it must be life-valuable.

The good for life-value materialist ethics is not pleasure abstractly conceived as a uniform bodily state produced by a variety of external causes, or the satisfaction of a scientifically determined set of objective requirements of well-being, although it involves both sensuous pleasure and life-requirement satisfaction. Since human beings are not simply life-forms with needs, but socially self-conscious agents with goals, the good life must unite, in the social self-consciousness of each agent, the instrumental life-value of resources and relationships with the intrinsic life-value of the free development and enjoyment of our life-capacities. Whether people regard the life-value of their own lives in concert with, rather than in opposition to, the lives of others is a function of the ruling value system which people internalise. Where that ruling value-system prioritises life-value over non-living system requirements (for example, the need to make money-profits) people learn to see themselves as intrinsically valuable members of natural fields of life-support and social fields of life-development, neither more nor less important than others, but partners in the demands and joys of human living. In such situations, the demands of social life are not experienced as oppressive burdens, and personal joys are not had at the expense of others. Instead, individual project and natural and social health

¹¹ John McMurtry, “Human Rights Versus Corporate Rights: Life-Value, The Civil Commons, and Social Justice, *Studies in Social Justice*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2011, p. 25.

cohere. Life becomes worth living, an object of love for each living agent, to the extent that he or she either lives within, or is contributing to the development of, a society in which life-value principles predominate. But if those are the sorts of lives that are worth living, are they not worth living forever? Does it not follow from this life-value materialist conception of the good life that it is better the longer that it goes on, such that if it could last eternally, it would be eternally valuable? Does the fact that materialism is atheistic not force it to accept limitations on life that contradict the life-value its ethics affirms? I will address this crucial question by way of conclusion.

IV: Atheism

The materialism that I defend- historical, life-valuable- regards natural science as competent to explain the fundamental elements, structures, and processes of the physical universe. Natural science progressively uncovers the how and the what of the universe, but it cannot tell us the why. Purposes are problems that emerge out of the physical organization of the universe once socially self-conscious beings have evolved. The purposes of life are problems for material beings, but their importance cannot be understood by talking about what the beings who have purposes are made of, or the fact that they experience a genetically programmed drive to survive and reproduce. Human purposes go beyond survival and reproduction- people not only strive to live, but to live well. Nevertheless, while regarding purposes and meanings as *sui generis* products of material evolution not reducible in explanation to the material systems out of which they emerge, historical, life-value materialism cannot accept the religious supposition that the only way to explain the meaning and reality of purposes is to posit the existence of a god . As we saw in the second section, for its most thoughtful defenders, the existence of god is not a

dogmatic assertion, but a logically and ethically necessary ground to our own experience of what is necessary for happiness and social justice.

Just as the assertion that god exists need not be dogmatic, so too the atheist counter-assertion that there is no god need not be dogmatic. The materialism I defend treats atheism as the outcome of hundreds of years of scientific research into the origins, elements, structures, and processes that define the physical universe. If one admits the competence of natural science to explain these elements and processes, then it is a matter of epistemic consistency to demand of the religious believer an account of the nature of god that is either consistent with the secure insights of natural science (for an example, an empirically comprehensible explanation of the causal power by which god acts) or an intelligible explanation of why the existence of god cannot be explained in scientific terms but which remains an object in which people can rationally believe. Assuming that religious people will regard the first demand as missing the point of their beliefs, then only the second demand is fair and non-dogmatic. The possible responses to that challenge are crystallised in the passages I cited earlier from Pascal and Dostoyevsky. It is rational to believe in God because we feel the need for happiness and for justice, and without god, there can be neither. If there is no god, life is without meaning or purpose, for the self as well as for the community, and that would be intolerable. Yet we do not find life intolerable, and we work to be happy and for justice, which is only explicable if god exists. Therefore god exists. Materialism cannot accept this argument, because, as I noted, materialism cannot ignore the implications of natural science. At the same time, the life-value materialism that I defend does not regard science as competent to explain happiness and justice. How, then, does it answer the religious assertion that there can be neither happiness nor justice without god.

It answers this challenge by elaborating on Santayana's claim that the transitoriness of things is not sad in itself. For historical, life-value materialism not only is transitoriness not sad in itself, it is a fundamental material condition of the value of life, its requirements, and its capacities for experience, relationship, and activity. To value something implies that we care and concern ourselves with the object of value. If something is an object of care and concern there must be some vulnerability, some fragility to the object. It is the vulnerability to damage—the transitoriness of the states that make objects *worth* caring and concerning ourselves about, that elicits our care and concern. We are extremely gentle with infant life-forms, because we know how easily they can be harmed. As a community, we expend effort and resources to preserve ancient artefacts and art works against decay and damage. If there were no possibility of damage, then we would not need care or concern ourselves with anything; there would be no reason to do so, because the object would require nothing of us. It is because life itself is fragile, mutable, transitory, susceptible to better and worse states and the condition of our valuing anything else at all that it is the ultimate object of care and concern. In other words, life-value is grounded in the finitude of life. Remove that finitude by extending it forever- on earth or in heaven- and we would undermine its value. There would no longer be any reason to attend to life, our own or others' and life would be reduced to insipid play that would become unbearable.¹² In the afterlife that religious people argue is necessary for happiness and justice there would be neither, because eternal beings would require nothing from each other or the environment in which they existed. The existence of anything, including themselves, would be a matter of indifference, because nothing they did could make their existence better or worse.

¹² For more on the unbearability of eternal life see Bernard Williams, "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the tedium of Immortality," *Problems of the Self*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1973, pp. 82-100.

“We come out of the dark, and we go into the dark again, and in between lie the experiences of our lives,” wrote Thomas Mann in *The Magic Mountain*.¹³ Without the dark, the beauty of the light and all it illuminates would be impossible. Limitation, and death as the ultimate limitation, is necessary to enable us to value the resources, experiences, and activities that make up our lives, but also to find the anger and energy necessary to fight for those resources, experiences, and activities when the ruling value system denies them to us or to others. That which we know to be true of ourselves- that we are harmed when deprived of life-requirements, when we are not free to explore and act according to our own projects- we know to be true of other people. We know this not by any *a priori* insight into other minds; we know it by seeing how people behave when they are deprived, oppressed, and alienated. Eventually, they rebel against the causes of their deprivation, and they always call out in solidarity to others for help. There would be no history of political struggle for the conditions of justice- which coincide with the conditions of universal happiness—if life were not vulnerable to the harms of deprivation and if it did not eventually end. The motivation to live well, as socially self-conscious individuals, and to organize ourselves well as communities of socially self-conscious interdependent individuals, finds its deep roots in the finitude of life. Santayana is correct: the end of the dance is no cause for sadness, but for striving: to dance well as an individual dancer, as a dance partner, as a teacher of those who do not yet know how to dance, and as an opponent of anyone who tries to prevent people from dancing in their own way.

Still, there will always be dances we cannot attend, moves that we cannot master, partners we will never dance with, and people opposed to certain styles of dance. For the materialist there is a tragic structure to life because every individual, as Dostoyevsky and Pascal

¹³ Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, (New York: Random House), 1952, pp. 536-537.

argued, strives for an absolute wholeness, but their mortality ensures that only a partial wholeness is possible. My sense of tragedy is derived from Lucien Goldmann's study of the work of Pascal and Racine. Goldmann argues that in their works is born a modern understanding of tragedy as a confrontation between an individual who demands absolute knowledge and fulfillment and a silent God who alone could satisfy the demand but does not, at least while the tragic person is alive on earth. "The tragic mind," Goldmann writes, "is constantly haunted by both hope and fear ... [and is thus] forced to live in uninterrupted tension, without wither knowing or accepting an instant of repose. But the absolute demand for theoretical and practical certainty also implies a second consequence: that man is alone, placed between a blind world and a hidden and silent God."¹⁴ Instead of answers, "all that the tragic man finds before him is the eternal silence of infinite space."¹⁵ The tragedy is redoubled for the materialist, since for him god is not only hidden but absent, which means that the universe will never speak the sorts of answers that would be required to make his life absolutely whole.

Thus, life can only ever be a partial whole. Partial—because some possibilities for experience and action must go unrealized and some struggles for justice must continue past the lifetime of the given individual. Life activity is thus always the exertion of effort and the confrontation with the failure of those efforts. "All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail Again. Fail Better," Beckett writes.¹⁶ There is nothing to be done, for the individual, to overcome this partiality, this dialectic of effort, failure, and renewed effort. Taking life – but not ourselves—seriously depends upon our ability to bear this partiality and to keep working to "fail better" until death makes the next round of effort impossible for us,

¹⁴ Lucien Goldmann, *The Hidden God*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul), 1970, p. 67.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹⁶ Samuel Beckett, "Worstward HO," *Nohow On*, (New York: Grove Press), 1980, p. 89.

but not for the people who come to stand in our place, and make that place their own. Tragedy makes life partially whole when we want it to be absolutely whole, but it does not destroy the possibility of our loving it even though its most basic condition is its finitude.

If only partial wholeness is possible in life partial wholes must be real, if contradictory in abstract expression. The wholeness of life is established by the individual's own reflective contentment that she has spared no effort to experience and enjoy the value of the efforts she has made while alive. Partial wholeness is ethically, not ontologically whole. It is not achieved by always following the rules, for many social rules are themselves unethical, opposed to justice, to the social conditions of good lives for all. Instead, ethical wholeness is achieved by presence of mind and attention to what a given situation demands practiced over the course of life. Different situations make different demands. Some situations call for understanding, others for laughter, others for tenderness, still others for anger; some situations demand quiet and solitude, others require relationships to others, some situations demand that we learn how to preserve something, others that we learn how to change things. It is this capacity to pay attention and to shape one's life by the demands of the situation, to learn to value ourselves in so far as we become people who are able to rise to the occasion in the different ways that different occasions demand, that elevates human life above mere biological functioning, that makes it an ethical whole. Far from imprisoning us within our own egos, acceptance of life's finitude opens us out to the world—to its beauty, to its injustices—so that we might act so as to experience for ourselves as much of what is beautiful and joyous and ensure that others are able to do so likewise. In that way we serve happiness and justice simultaneously, and then leave it to the subsequent generations to fail better than we ourselves did.