

The Death of God, or Everything Is Permitted

by [David Solway](#) (January 2024)



Seated Man— Paul Cézanne, 1905-6

The tempest's mocking elf

Points to the shipman thus the unseen shelf

He strikes on, only when the timbers start. –Robert Browning, *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*, 1852

And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods. –Genesis 3:5

In consolidating their authority in the early stages of the Russian revolution, the Bolsheviks unleashed what came to be known as the Red Terror, in which hundreds of thousands of Kulaks and Cossacks were killed during the years 1919 and 1920. The ongoing slaughter was justified as furthering the aims of the revolution, intended to create a just society. A Ukrainian newspaper [*The Red Sword*](#) wrote: “To us, everything is permitted, for we are the first to raise the sword not to oppress races and reduce them to slavery, but to liberate humanity”—a very convenient justification to oppress and enslave a people in the name of an ideological commitment to a theoretical and unprovable future. Friedrich Hayek explains in [*The Road to Serfdom*](#): “There is always in the eyes of the collectivist a greater goal which justifies him because the pursuit of the common end of society can know no limits in any rights or values of the individual.”

Everything is permitted? There are no limits? A famous source for the dictum is found in Fyodor Dostoevsky's great novel [*The Brothers Karamazov*](#). Dmitri Karamazov famously poses the question of what would happen to mankind “without God and immortal life,” asking whether this means that “all things are permitted.” As he speculates in his debate with the monk Rakitin, “But what will become of men without God and immortal

life? All things are permitted then, they can do what they like?" Ivan Karamazov similarly argues that, "if there had been any love on earth hitherto, it was not owing to natural law, but simply because men believed in immortality ... The whole natural law lies in that faith ... Moreover, nothing then would be immoral ... even crime must become recognized as lawful and even inevitable."

German philosopher [Friedrich Nietzsche](#), who read Dostoevsky later in life, wrestled with the same predicament. "God is dead," he wrote in [The Gay Science](#) and later in [Thus Spake Zarathustra](#), "God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?"

This, of course, is the money question of the 21st Century. The answer appears self-evident, with its train of anarchic ramifications. Nietzsche continued: "Nothing is true, all is permitted." As he wrote in [The Will to Power](#), articulating the fulcrum of the [postmodern movement](#)—the cynical philosophy of epistemic relativism, anti-reason, double standards, social subjectivism, hermeneutic suspicion and personal irresponsibility for one's choices—"facts are precisely what there are not, there are only interpretations." In other words, I am the arbiter of the moral universe. As the perpetrator of deicide, I myself have become God. My truth, my interpretation of things, of right and wrong, is The Truth. Mine is the "Let there be!"

The work of Jean-Paul Sartre, particularly [Being and Nothingness](#) and [The Flies](#), purports to show how the belief in

the death of god may function as a *productive force* in human life. Such is the central principle of the philosophy of existentialism. This principle was introduced initially in Martin Heidegger's [*Being and Time*](#), where he writes, "The essence of Dasein [being here] lies in its existence." Sartre later [spiced up](#) this line with the snappy epigram, "existence precedes essence." As commonly understood, existentialists developed a conception of the self not as some mysterious thing with a prior nature or "essence" but as a way of being we are constructing *electively* from within. We are performative creatures.

This means our essence is not given in advance; we are contingently "thrown into existence," as Heidegger phrased it, and are burdened with the task of creating ourselves through our choices and actions. Hence, the faldereal we see all about us today, for example, the feminist conviction of gender fluidity, the ascendancy of feeling over reason as the arbitrator of truth, and the licence to assume any identity one wishes, summed up in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ+) movement and its non-stop self-affirmation. Such absurdities may seem trivial in the context of the issue of Divine sanction, but they are indices of the narcissism and self-election that have come to fill the moral void of the age.

As [Mark Tapman](#) points out, the existential prepossession is at the source of the revival of the amoral paganism in our culture and the increasingly popular [Satanic cults and rituals](#) we observe in the public square. They are manifestations of what Carl Trueman, writing for [The Heritage Foundation](#), calls "expressive individualism," borrowing the phrase from Robert Bellah's [Habits of the Heart](#). The idea is that "human beings are defined by their individual psychological core, and that the purpose of life is allowing that core to find social expression in relationships. Anything that challenges it is deemed oppressive." Trueman argues that expressive

individualism “is built on a myth—that we are born free rather than the obvious fact that we are born utterly dependent and spend our lives being dependent upon others to lesser and greater degrees.” The problem is that it is “a myth built into the core of our social imaginary,” more so today than ever before in the wake of the existential creed and its branches, affiliates and derivatives in the centripetal, postmodern and laic society we now live in.

The major question that confronts us plainly has to do with the moral foundation of a world without God in which the individual is credited for devising his own unique and autonomous moral franchise, in which there is no such thing as objective truth but only interpretation, a world devoid of moral absolutes—the quandary in which the West is now foundering. Can religion’s moral and spiritual function be discharged by a profane belief system? The question is moot. Unquestioned belief in a political ideology may yield the comfort of certainty, but it will not stand up to sincere and conscientious scrutiny. A psychological widget is not a spiritual conviction. Of course, a moral system predicated on the accepted existence of a divine source may be violated by fallible men, permitting themselves what is not permissible—what is known as sin—but there is little doubt that in a celestial vacuum there is no longer a defensible moral system to be violated in the first place.

It should be noted that intellectuals are typically prone to treat the issue with a degree of supercilious flippancy or self-righteous animus, as if they were somehow above the basic questions of theology that impinge upon us all. Nobel Laureate in physics Steven Weinberg, for instance, has [claimed](#) that “With or without *religion*, *good people can behave well and bad people can do evil*; but for *good people to do evil*—that takes *religion*.” Controversial and largely unintelligible French psychiatrist [Jacques Lacan](#) argued that psychoanalytic practice inverts Dostoyevsky’s dictum to read instead, “If there is no

God, then everything is *prohibited*.” The equally indigestible Slovenian cultural theorist [Slavoj Zizek](#) announces “If there is a God, then anything is permitted.” Their arguments are too wiredrawn to be taken seriously. Christopher Hitchens’ bestselling and error-clotted [God Is Not Great](#), which denounces religion as “violent, irrational and intolerant,” conflates organized religion with the existence of a transcendent God—or as Søren Kierkegaard wrote in [Fear and Trembling](#), Christianity with Christendom—two very different things. Richard Dawkins’ much-celebrated [The God Delusion](#) is a trove of polemical utterances, affirming that natural selection can ultimately do the work of a deity and establish a moral landscape—a thesis as evidence-poor as any apodictic dogma. Such pseudo-cleverness only distracts from the crucial dilemma of our era.

An important distinction needs to be made here. We are thinking of the Divine as represented and understood in the Judeo-Christian tradition, that is, as the supreme lawgiver, both stern and benevolent, preceptor and Father, dispenser of both justice and mercy, the giver of life and the transcendent authority standing between us and the moral abyss. The seismic problem for the secular West, as is now common knowledge, is that the concept of right and wrong, good and evil, the very ground of ethical behavior, has neither substance nor sanction in the absence of a Creator, of a supreme being paradoxically combining strict limitation and immanent love, underwriting the covenant between man and God.

In the Islamic tradition, however, whose votaries perceive themselves as instruments of the Supreme Will, everything which does not contravene the Koran is permitted.

Sensitivity to another’s suffering is contra-indicated. Here, as the witness of the October 7 massacre in Israel by Hamas terrorists has made manifest, faith in a Supreme Being operates precisely as the justification of violence, of the principle that everything is indeed permitted, at any rate

against the infidel or apostate, along a continuum from the practice of *taqiya* or precautionary lying to all manner of horrendous torture and summary execution against unbelievers. While atrocities have also been condoned in Judeo-Christianity, they are regarded as the faults of men and not as owing to the general thrust of scripture, with only a modicum of isolated passages preaching violence, whereas in Islam, there is pervasive scriptural warrant for acts of savagery. In this case, it is not the absence but the presence of God and submission to His will which enables acts of moral barbarism to be committed. Morality demands it.

There are innumerable such passages in the Koran like *Koran* 9:33 in which Allah sends forth his prophet "to make the true faith supreme over all religions." Sura 5:33 says about infidels, "They shall be slain or crucified, or have their hands and feet cut off." Sura 9:5 says, "Slay the infidels wherever you find them ... and lie in wait for them ... and establish every stratagem (of war against them)." Sura 47:4-9 promises paradise to whoever cuts off the head of an infidel. There are, of course, other more amiable verses, but the underlying theme in the Koran is that there never can be true peace until the world submits to Allah, by conversion if possible, by violence if necessary or expedient. Violence to that end is permissible.

Thus, on the one hand we have a theocratic civilization whose God condones what an apparent minority of Western men and women of devotion regard as impermissible; on the other, the now godless civilization of the West in which what was once regarded as morally impermissible is pragmatically permitted. It is a consummate irony. In the presence of one god and in the absence of another, *everything is equally permitted*: lying, murder and totalitarian control are not phenomena to be deplored but have become the order of the day, whether as the result of a perverted moral atavism in the East or a defunct moral code in the West, a god who slays indiscriminately, or

no god whatsoever to prevent the eclipse of reciprocal decency and mutual respect.

Islam will no doubt resist comprehensive reform, as it has since the *hijra* of 622 AD. But it is not germane to the spiritual life of the West. We are not dealing with a mandate but with a vacancy. What, then, is to be done? Clearly, we cannot live happily, prosper and flourish in a world where everything is permitted, a world in which, writes [Robert Spencer](#), “a conscienceless, remorseless clique of authoritarians [operate] a machine of defamation and destruction in order to attain and protect their own interests.”

One possible solution was proposed by the German philosopher [Hans Vaihinger](#) in his magisterial [*The Philosophy of 'As if': A System of the Theoretical, Practical and Religious Fictions of Mankind*](#) (German: *Die Philosophie des Als Ob*). The book argues for inexact premises or cropped assumptions or partial fictions as a viable way of negotiating an overwhelmingly complex world. It does not recommend lying *as such* but suggests simplified models of human disciplines and discoveries that are often *formally* incomplete, but nevertheless close enough to a possible truth to furnish some degree of cognitive security. The practice of *Als Ob* is an art of adjustment, whose chief instrument is the construction of myths, figments, paralogisms or analogies by which life becomes manageable.

It is as if we were treating with the Gestalt [Law of Prägnanz](#), which helps us to see wholes out of clusters of indiscriminate particulars, assembling ambiguous or complex shapes and images in the most coherent form possible. Issues of morality or faith are obviously orders of magnitude greater than merely arranging for sensible aggregates. On this higher level, we must proceed in the daily practice of life and relationship “as if” ethical certainty were possible; in the sphere of religion, we must believe “as if” there were a God. Such

actions may help to unify and make sense of our experience and may ideally constitute the first step toward genuine conviction.

The theory of Als Ob bears some resemblance to the argument from Intelligent Design, which states that the almost infinite array of patterns, honed mathematical sequences, physical constants and “exquisitely improbable” complexity (in physicist Stephen Meyer’s words from his monumental [Return of the God Hypothesis](#)) that we observe in the world point to a cosmic Designer rather than an evolutionary dice thrower. The parameters that allow for life on earth have to be finely tuned to one part in 10 to the 90th power, which is like “looking for one elementary particle blindfolded in 10 billion universes our size.” The information that organizes such sequences cannot come from the sequences themselves—information does not inform itself—but argues for a supervening mind. “We may have good reasons to believe in God,” Meyer concludes, “without being able to achieve that unattainable standard of absolute certain proof.” Intelligent Design (or theism) has at least as much or greater explanatory power than competing systems of origins. It does not provide proof, “but the best explanation of the same kind of standard of evidence that we would want to attain for a very good scientific theory.” The world actually looks *as if* it were designed by a transmundane mind. Als Ob has much to recommend it.

It is at this point that [Blaise Pascal](#)’s celebrated “[wager](#)” enters into the equation. Simply put, it pays to believe in God and abide to the best of one’s ability by His commandments. If there is no God, nothing has been lost. If He exists, then there is an afterlife and your reward may be eternity in heaven or, should you falter, suffering in hell. It is, therefore, a supremely rational decision to worship the Lord and strive to live a good life. *Everything is not permitted*. Live and behave *as if* there were limits to

unbridled desire and rampant egotism, *as if* there were a God who presides over the moral universe. However we may temporize or indulge in skepticism, the most serious matter in life is death.

One can envision three possible objections to the wager. For many, imagination just doesn't stretch that far. Also, one is forfeiting pleasures and advantages, however ill-advised or corrupt, in this life for what may amount to a conjecture. And it is somehow demeaning to consider brokering a business deal with God, investing in faith for future dividends, which does not feel like real spirituality—although that didn't stop Abraham from bargaining with the Lord ([Genesis 18:20-33](#)) or the Lord from bargaining with the Devil ([Job 1:6-12](#)). Nevertheless, without assuming the existence of a moral universe in which charity, honesty and empathy, however honored in the breach, determine the behavior of individuals and groups, social misery, political suffering and personal hopelessness will continue to be the human lot, at least for Western man.

For myself, I do not know whether God exists or not; after all, who am I to say? Nor can I simply will myself to believe or force myself to love the Lord because it happens to profit me. I am not betting man. But that doesn't prevent me from talking to Him most every night when I sit in the garden nursing a glass of vespertine Scotch.

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David Solway's latest book is [Crossing the Jordan: On Judaism, Islam, and the West](#) (NER Press). His previous book is [Notes from a Derelict Culture](#), Black House Publishing, 2019, London. A CD of his original songs, [Partial to Cain](#), appeared in 2019.

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