



# **A Brief Introduction to Reasonable Global Values and Natural Meaning**

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## **The Problem**

Like many Atheists, I talk a lot about religion.

A Christian I talked with, when I was a teenager, made this point:

She had something to believe in, that explained the world and provided guidance on how to live a good life,

whereas I, as an Atheist, had nothing but a *disbelief* in god(s).

What did I *believe* in? Her question has stayed with me for the rest of my life.

But what we really need to know is not just what we believe in, but how should we behave.

What do we value?



## *Values*

### **What are Values? How do we find meaning?**

Value are not things infusing the ether, like a herbal tea from the celestial tea pot.

Our value choices are based on our beliefs about the nature of the world.

**Our choices reflect our values, and our values guide our choices.**

## *Meaning*

Meaning comes from seeing our life in a wider context.

For **theists** this context is God(s) and stories about creation and our relationship with God(s).

For **some religions** the context includes stories about nirvana and enlightenment.

How can an Atheist find a similar context, with rich stories and meaning?



## We take a comprehensive view.

Let's consider seven domains of knowledge:

- |                                      |   |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| For <b>Analysis:</b><br>we look at   | 1. Philosophy,<br>2. Science and<br>3. History. |
| For <b>Expression:</b><br>we look at | 4. Religion and<br>5. Culture.                  |
| For <b>Action:</b><br>we look at     | 6. Personal Practice and<br>7. Politics.        |

Finally we pull it all together into a **Global Vision**.

We focus here on how we find values in these domains of knowledge, rather than specific beliefs

### 1. Theoretical Analysis: Philosophy

Science is not the only source of knowledge.

Our philosophy **confronts** us with most of the *core choices* that lead to our *core values*:

- based on what we **know** and **feel**, but also on what we can **justify**, if not prove.
- We can't conduct scientific tests to prove or disprove our **philosophical** conclusions.



## 1.1 Epistemology

The big philosophical question is: What is Truth?

**We face a dilemma:** *On the one hand, everything that happens is either caused or chaotic!*

- Perhaps everything, our thoughts, beliefs and values, is caused by physical laws, or by God.
- If not, then they're not caused by anything.

This is not free will. It's just random chance.

*On the other hand, we feel and act as though we can make real choices.*

**This dilemma** remains unresolved in philosophy, science, history, religion, art and politics.

- We **can't solve** the dilemma using reason and the evidence.
- Because **reason is limited**, some people rely on **revelation**, but **arbitrarily** choose which revelation, and which of its rules to follow, and that is not a solution.
- When experts can't solve the issue, we should have no opinion.
- But ***we have to choose*** one way or the other.

Ultimately, despite the evidence to the contrary, we choose to value the **Truth**: that *it is valid to seek the truth.*



We also choose to value ***Diversity***: because we can't ignore that a reasonable person could make difference choices.

### ***1.2 Metaphysics***

The second biggest question is: What is real?

#### **Appearance and Reality**

- We don't know whether the underlying reality, behind appearances, is some permanent *thing*,
- or ever changing *events*, or perhaps it is
- incomprehensible and unknowable.

An unknowable reality can't provide meaning, purpose and value – because it's unknown!

- Science says the universe is a sequence of *events* as fundamental particles move about,
- but still doesn't tell us what the ultimate nature of reality is. Whatever it is, it's more than what we, or science, can perceive.

**We partition** reality with language.

- We use language to identify, think about and talk about these: ***things*** and ***events***.
- Different languages and cultures partition the world differently, into different concepts.



- We all construct our reality through concepts such as space and time, perceptions of sight, sound, touch, and some order or causality.
- But some experiences can't be adequately described in words: ordinary things like smells and music, as well as 'spiritual' experiences.

We value the idea of a shared public natural reality, despite its uncertainty and subjectivity, which we call this *life*. We value *diversity* because it is OK to partition the world differently.

### **1.3 Theology**

As an atheist I think there are no grounds for believing in God(s), but that's a separate topic.

- But if some god(s) did exist, we still need to work out our values independently of God so we can tell whether the god(s) are good and worth following.
- And no religion explains existence itself or answers the ultimate question: "why".
- There may be evolutionary explanations, but without god, most of us still choose to live.
- We value *life*, this natural *life* as opposed to death, the afterlife and the supernatural.



## **1.4 Mind**

The evidence shows there is no consciousness or mind without a working brain.

- There is no life before birth or after death, no ghosts or spirits, no reincarnation, no karma, no eternal damnation and no divine retribution on earth. This is extremely liberating.
- If our minds are physical things, we have hope that society can find effective interventions to improve people's behaviour, rather than appealing to some unknowable "free will".

We value *life* and *love* even more because they are ephemeral.

## **1.5 Ethics**

Evolutionary science can't tell us what we *should* do. • But ethics in most of us is driven by the feelings of compassion and altruistic behaviour acquired as humans evolved.

- However, most of us need still some prodding to be good, and
- Psychopaths seem to not feel compassion at all.



Some clever people get their ethics from their enlightened self-interest, and that's almost enough. So we need to manage those who are **weak, mean** or **foolish** by legal and cultural means.

### **Three Ethical Choices**

We don't just choose to be "good". We make three separate ethical choices. ● We choose to value *love*: feeling compassion or empathy; and a desire to reduce suffering and promote personal "fulfilment". ● We choose to assign *responsibility* but only when there is "a potential for an intervention to be effective". ● We choose to value *equality*: there's no reason to believe one person is innately worth more than another.

### **1.6 Aesthetics**

Science can provide some insight into the origins of our sense of beauty,

especially in singing, music & dance as pre-linguistic forms of communication.

This is why these sublime experiences are often wordless or mystical. But the choices we often make reflect that we value *beauty*.



## *Core Values from Philosophy*

The **Core Values** we obtain from our philosophy are: ***Truth, Diversity, Reality, Life, Love, Beauty, Equality and Responsibility.***

As we discuss later, our final core value is ***Hope.***

- We expect most people can live with these values (apart from psychopaths and fanatics) even if they use different language to express or justify them.

All our **behavioural guidelines are based on these core values.**

These 9 core values are ***orthogonal*** and **coherent**

That is:

- They don't overlap.
- Choosing one doesn't imply another.
- They fit together.

We need to choose *all* of them.

Trying to find one or two **all-encompassing values**, like Truth or Compassion, doesn't work because it leaves out **other core choices** which **reflect other core values.**



## 2. Practical Analysis: Science

Science provides better explanations than other world views of:

- How the universe, life and humans evolved after the big bang;
- How suffering began and how we can minimise it.

### What we Value

Science tells us what *is*, not what *ought* to be, what *does* happen, not what *should* happen.

But, for example, science tells us racism, sexism and homophobia aren't based on clear distinctions in reality, reinforcing our *core* value of *equality*.

### *Derived values*

The scientific method is based on *core* values that we rephrase or combine. Call these *derived* values.

**For instance:** *honesty* isn't a *core* value because it's *derived* from our belief that there is an ultimate *Truth* to be honest about, and on *Love* and *Equality*, because lying is hurtful and unfair.

**Other *derived* values** inherent in the scientific method are: *transparency*, *tolerance* and *reason*.



## ***Effecting values***

Science and history help us to find ways to put into *effect* our *core* values. For instance:

- Science helps with helping drug addicts,
- using harm minimisation
- rather than harsh and ineffective punishments.

We revise such *effecting* values as new evidence comes to light.

- Many atheists confuse these *effecting* values from science with *core* values from philosophy.

## **3. Practical Analysis: History**

History tells us how:

- humans spread around the world; and civilisations developed at different rates; and
- how technology, business & government evolved; & what we can do to minimise their harm.

## **What we Value**

History focuses on what *has* happened, or might happen, not what *should* happen. History shows that personal and political action has worked in the past, giving us grounds for *hope*.



History tells us about the many people whose examples we can follow.

History's lessons are less certain than those of science but they still provide *effecting* values. Eg:  
*prosperity, productivity, property, rule of law, human rights, freedom and democracy.*

### **Ancillary values**

History shows

- it takes *courage, strength* and *self-discipline* to follow our chosen path in our personal lives, and
- political action needs *loyalty, duty, honour* and *commitment*.

These **ancillary values** aren't *core* values because

- they are also used for evil purposes, such as Nazism and terrorist attacks;
- they are useful only when in support of *justifiable core* values,
- rather than supporting our clan, team, state or race.



#### 4. Expression: Religion

Now we move on to the more expressive domains. The best of religion is about our *ultimate concerns* - what we care about most, guiding how we live.

Religions have a common structure:

- Beliefs about our origins: a paradise now lost, and the origins of suffering;
- Behavioural guidelines and rituals: to reduce suffering or obtain redemption;
- Sources of inspiration, exemplary models: sacred texts, prophets or teachers.

These form a **grand narrative**, a wider context providing values, meaning and purpose.

#### What we Value

How we choose to interpret sacred texts, literally, or as allegories, or as fairy tales, reflects our pre-existing values. • Religion is not in reality the *source* of value but provides examples of how to express our values, especially in narratives, such as ‘*The Good Samaritan*’. • Wisdom can be found in some religious stories **regardless of** whether they are **historically true** or **scientifically valid**.



We take from each religion whatever good it offers  
**and discard the rest.**

## **5. Expression: Art, Media and Culture**

We are all affected by the culture(s) we grow up and live in. It is pervasive and often unnoticed.

We need to become aware of our cultural biases, and revel in the *diversity* available to us now.

The media and the arts don't just entertain us, they provide information and insight into ourselves.

### **What we Value**

Like religion, culture, media and the arts help us to express values, but don't provide *core* values.

**For the media** especially we need legal and informal media guidelines or controls to promote such values as:

**Authenticity:** which is a *derived* value  
to responsibly convey the truth; and

**Balance:** which is an *effecting* value  
– presenting views in context,  
weighted according to the evidence.

But we all need to be better media consumers.



## 6. Action: Personal Practice

This analysis enables us to develop rational, evidence based guidelines for our personal lives,

- reasonable guidelines that most people listening could accept,

Sometimes these are simple and prescriptive but, often we balance one value against another.

### What we Value

We choose as our *core* personal values:

*Truth, Diversity, Life, Love, Beauty, Responsibility, Equality and Hope.*

These **core personal values** are:

- **Consistent with** our understanding of **reality** from science, history, religion and culture.
- and the *hard choices* we make as we resolve dilemmas.

Our core values reflect core choices,

- That we make in a dynamic world,
- not nebulous *things* extracted from the ether.

We can't *undo* knowing that we choose our values *Derived, effecting & ancillary* values from science & history help us to implement our *core* values.



## 7. Action: Politics

### What we Value

Our political values can be based on all the other values discussed to date. For example:

- We *derive* values of *human rights* from the core values of *love* and *equality*
- We adopt **effecting** values such as *prosperity, productivity, freedom and democracy* which history shows promote our core values of *truth, diversity, life, responsibility, equality* and *hope*;
- In politics especially we need *ancillary* values such as *loyalty* and *commitment*.

Now we pull all this together.

## 8. A Vision of a Reasonable Global Way

All beliefs and values can be updated in the light of new evidence, insights and reasoning. They are not perfect forever. But despite this uncertainty they provide a coherent, comprehensive story.

We accept that some mysteries can't be resolved. We can only embrace them.



- No science, religion or philosophy resolves the mystery of existence itself or answers the ultimate question: “why?”
- We acknowledge a minimal degree of faith is required in choosing the values we espouse.

### **Choice: A Mystery**

The greatest **mystery** is the dilemma we started with: our supposed freedom of **choice**.

- Perhaps we do make our choices “freely”; perhaps it is random; perhaps it is determined by our genes or upbringing, according to the laws of nature. Regardless, we do, in fact, make choices.

### **What we Feel**

How does all this make us feel?

- Science helps to explain **why we are as we are** and is the basis for our *universal narrative*, helping us to find our place in the world.
- **Long term, global** history adds to the narrative, helping to free us from our limited personal perspectives, to escape from identity politics.
- Science and history’s explanations are good now. They will only get better as we learn more.



- The **best** of religion and culture add richness and depth to the *universal narrative*, through multiple stories, in which we find insights into ourselves and the world.
- In our personal and political lives, this *universal narrative* gives us the **confidence** that our actions can be justified; that it is valid to join the struggle, to live, and to pursue truth and justice.
- We can find meaning and purpose in this context. This vision of how everything fits together is more **intellectually** and **emotionally satisfying** than any alternative. • It **motivates** us to defend the liberal pluralist democracies that permit these values. It leads to a degree of **contentment** that is otherwise unobtainable to an informed, reasonable, global citizen.
- It's our modern mythology, the Big Picture, the ultimate truth: how we **see** reality, **feel** about it and **react** in a coherent way.



## *Secular Rituals*

How we react is often via secular rituals, which are part of our daily personal and political lives.

- On a personal level these include: Regular **celebrations**: like birthdays and anniversaries; Celebrating **life's stages**: like graduation, marriage and funerals; Activities of **daily living**: like cooking, brushing teeth, exercise, card nights; **Communing with nature**: like meditation, bushwalking, surfing, gardening.
- On a **community** or political level these include: **annual celebrations** such as New Year, and various national days; the **rituals of business**, democracy, the law, the military, sport and entertainment; but mostly our **routine acts** of consideration and politeness as we deal with other people.

These rituals are consistent with our universal narrative. They provide connections to ourselves and the world outside, and help us to live a meaningful life. *We can claim all these beneficial secular rituals as reflections of this worldview.*



## ***Is this a religion?***

This approach certainly has characteristics that are similar to religion:

- A focus our ultimate concerns: values, meaning and purpose.
- A universal narrative that describes our origins,
- the origins of suffering, and ways to address it;
- Exemplary models we can emulate;
- An appreciation of mystery, beauty and awe;
- Rituals and guidelines for conducting and celebrating our lives.

## ***Court Case***

In the Scientology case, the Australian High Court referred to the supernatural as a belief in ***more than the reality normally perceived by our senses***, and/or ***more than mere reason*** and the evidence.

**Consistently** with this legal definition:

- We believe in a reality that is beyond our ordinary perceptions, that even science can't know.
- We choose our core values even though they are in some respects contrary to reason.



### ***More than reason?***

But the ***more*** in “*more than mere reason*” is not unreason. The ***more*** is choice.

Those judges were picturing two distinct worlds, two *things*, obscuring that reality is dynamic.

Morality is making choices, a set of *events*, not a mysterious *thing* permeating the ether.

***To that extent only***, we say this worldview involves the supernatural, *using the words of the courts*.

### ***The Transcendent***

Another criteria for religion is a belief in the transcendent.

- Some think that this means something that transcends the universe, such as a god.
- Others talk of the transcendent as something that **transcends us as individuals**, i.e.
- something that is more important than ourselves, something we would sacrifice ourselves for.



*To that extent,*

- we can say this worldview involves the transcendent,
- because these values are shared by many people, and many of us would risk ourselves to support these values.

### **Religious or Secular?**

So we can legitimately call this approach to life a **natural, rational religion**.

Many will prefer NOT to call this a religion because of the connotations of that word.

You may prefer to call it a world view or a philosophy. It doesn't matter in most contexts.



## ***Conclusion***

So when a Christian evangelist or an Islamic terrorist accuses me of having no faith, no values, no meaning or purpose; or a sceptic says there is no reason for hope, I have something substantial to say.

I don't have to mumble about using reason or science. I know these aren't enough.

I can say that I *choose* a set of reasonable, global beliefs and values,

- which is a sensible philosophy of life,
- scientifically and historically valid,
- continually evolving,
- emotionally satisfying,
- providing rich narratives defining my place in the universe, and
- useful guidelines for life, and daily rituals,

which I simply call

***A Reasonable Global Way.***

Thanks for your time.