Death in the Clouds

Important Concepts

Ontological Claims

An **ontological claim** is a claim about the existence of some entity.

E.g., "God exists."

However, if it turns out that the emergence of monotheistic gods facilitated collective action, it is feasible that theists could use this in defense of their religious conviction.

Empirical Claims of DCT (theist version)

❏ After revelation, human societies increased in complexity as religious devotion to God spread (the Big Gods hypothesis).
❏ Watched people are well-behaved people (social monitoring hypothesis)

Ontological Claim of DCT (theist version)

❏ God exists

Empirical Claims of DCT (atheist version)

- ❏ After revelation, human societies increased in complexity as religious devotion to God spread (the Big Gods hypothesis).
- ❏ Watched people are well-behaved people (social monitoring hypothesis)

The Ontological Question:
Does God exist?

Metaphysical Claims

A **metaphysical claim** is a claim that goes beyond the realm of the physical; i.e., beyond the realm that can be experienced with the five senses.

E.g., "After death, our souls move on to a different realm."

Natural Theology

Natural Theology is a type of inquiry that:

a. seeks to establish the existence of God (an ontological claim),
b. by using reason and the senses to show how some things could not exist without God (a metaphysical claim).

One argument for God's existence that follows this framework comes from William Paley (1802).

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William Paley
Natural Theology

Oxford World's Classics

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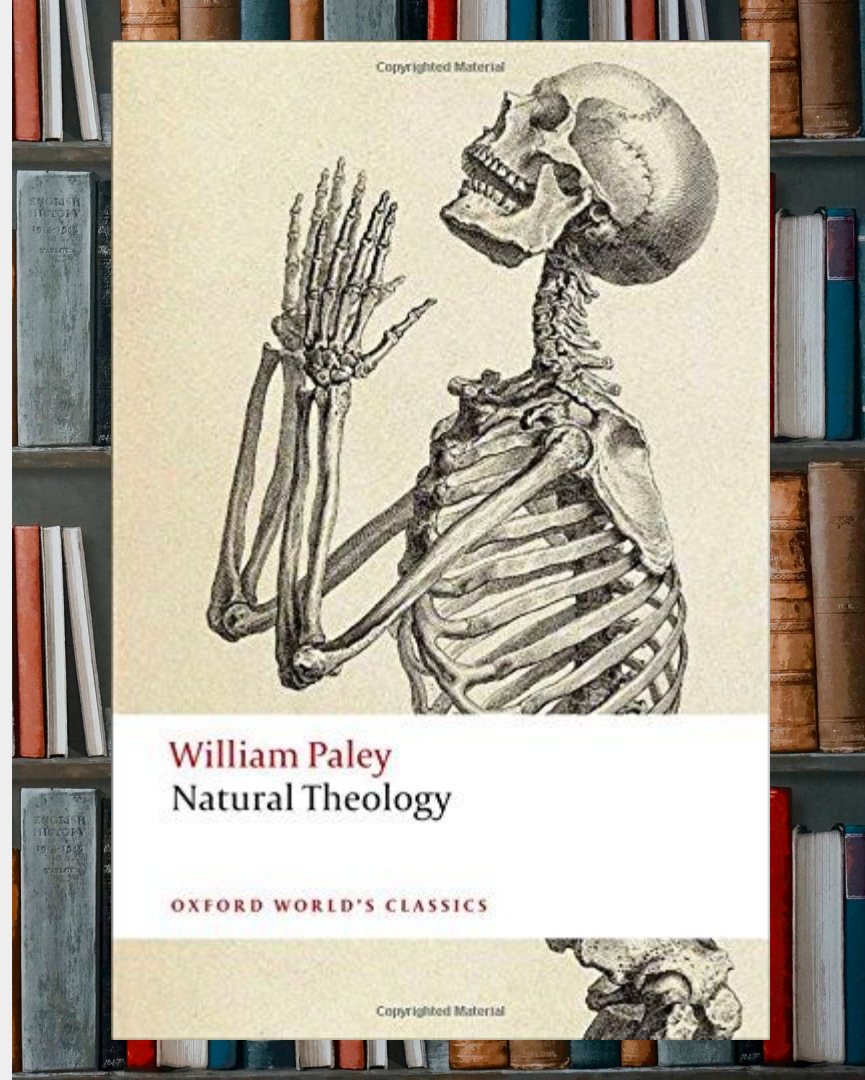
The Teleological Argument

1. A watch displays order for a purpose.
2. We correctly conclude that such order was created by a maker.
3. The universe also displays order for a purpose.
4. Therefore, we should likewise conclude that it was created by a maker.

Objections
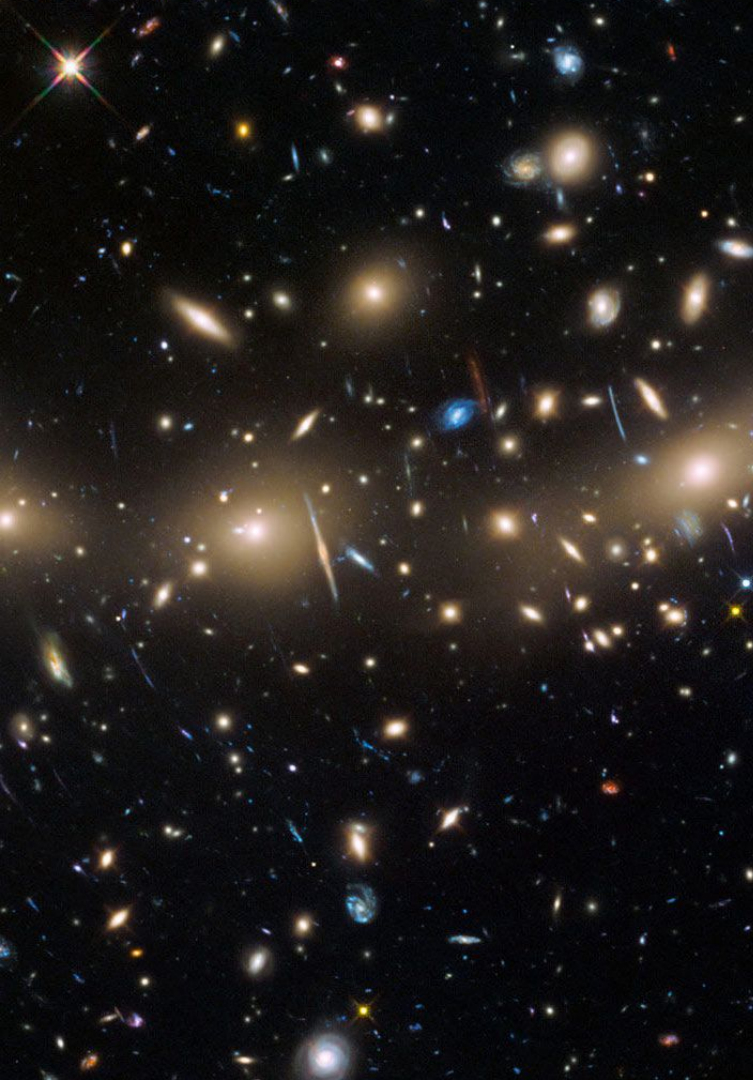
First off, we can say that the universe does not display purpose.

Even though there are some regularities in the universe (like stable galactic formations and solar systems), none of these have any obvious purpose.

Moreover, these regularities only appear so from our perspective.

We know that
a. the early universe was very chaotic (Stenger 2008: 121), and
b. that some parts of the universe are still chaotic (galaxies crashing into each other, black holes swallowing entire solar systems).
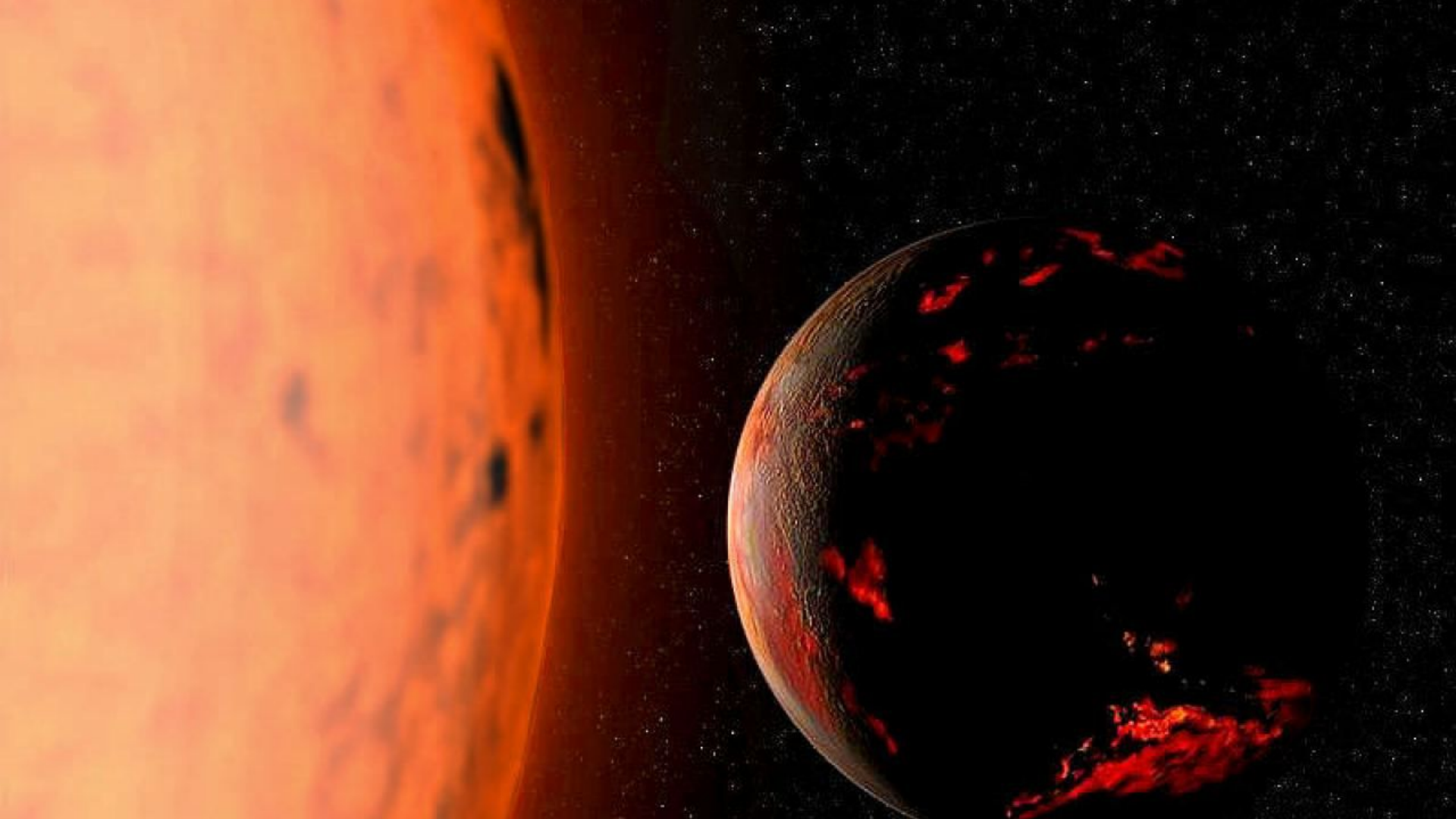
If theists argue that our solar system has the purpose of harboring life, we can remind them that this is only temporary, since life on this planet will be impossible in 0.9-1.5 billion years (see Bostrom and Cirkovic 2008: 34).

Global **Catastrophic** Risks

Edited by NICK BOSTROM and MILAN M. ĆIRKOVIĆ

Lastly, even if we agree that there is some kind of order to the universe, this is not the same kind of order that is seen in a watch, see Firestone (in press).

INFORMAL FALLACY OF THE DAY
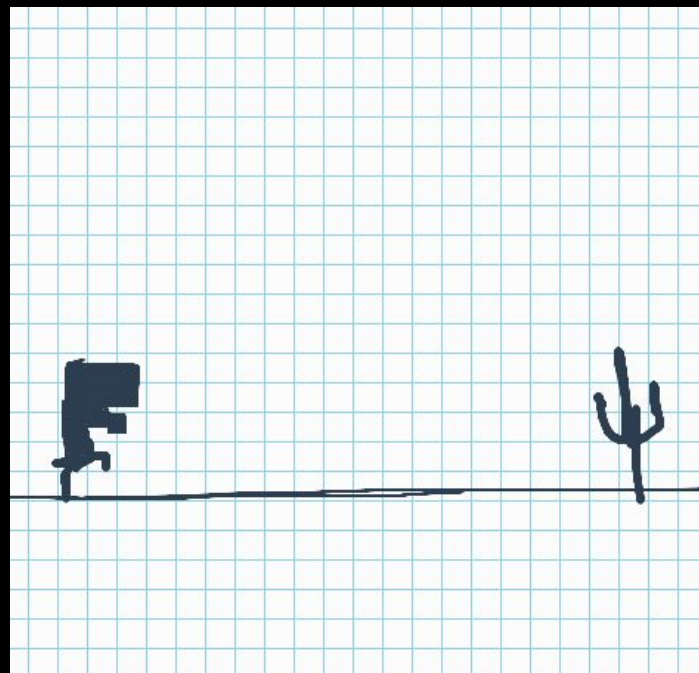
Equivocation

This is a fallacy in which an arguer uses a word with a particular meaning in one premise, and then uses the same word with a different meaning in another premise.

Standard Form(?)
1. Man is the only rational animal.
2. No woman is a man.
3. Therefore, no woman is rational.

Storytime!

The Russian Famine (1601-1603)

The Spanish Flu Pandemic (1918)

Malaria

Zika

Winegard (2019: 2) provides the following statistic:

"The mosquito has killed more people than *any* other cause of death in human history. Statistical extrapolation situated mosquito-inflicted deaths approaching *half of all humans that have ever lived.*"

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

The
MOSQUITO

A HUMAN HISTORY OF OUR
DEADLIEST PREDATOR

TIMOTHY C. WINEGARD
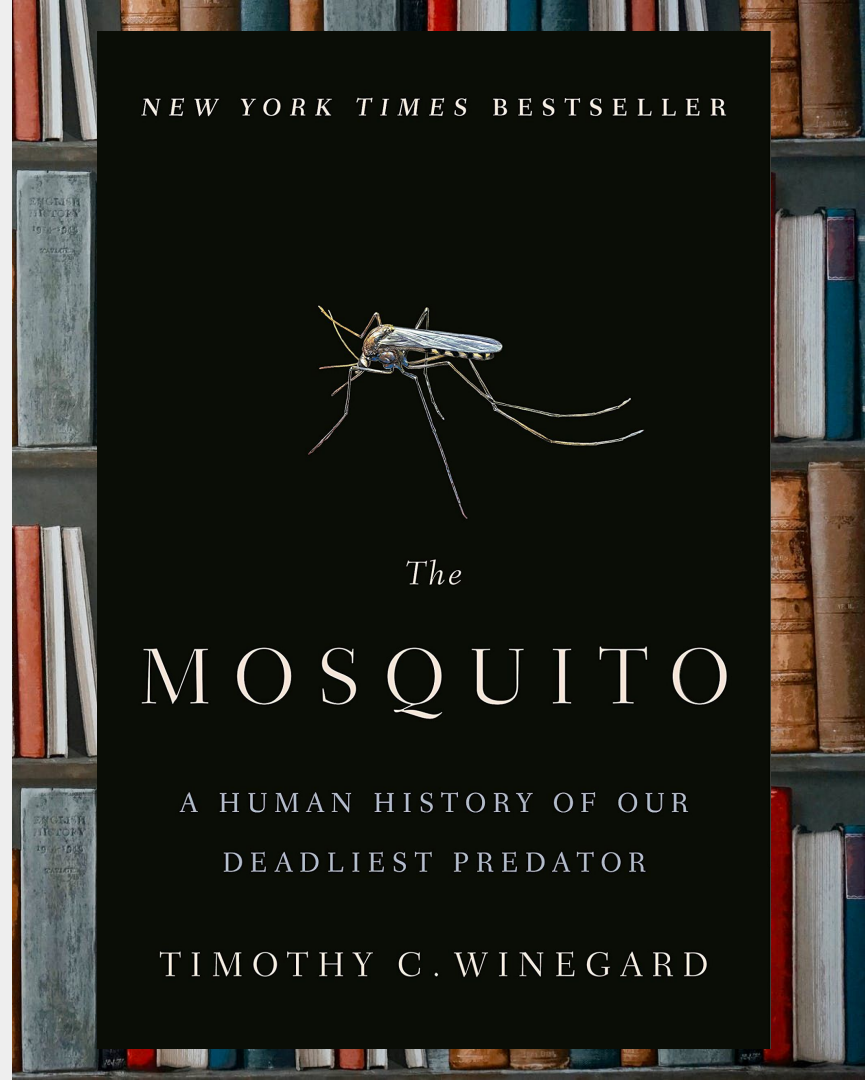
The Problem of Evil

1. If God exists, then there would be no unnecessary suffering.
2. But there exists unnecessary suffering.
3. Therefore, God does not exist.

Question:
Could it be that the question of whether or not God exists is an empty question (i.e., a question without an answer)?

Various philosophers in the 20th century (e.g., Rudolf Carnap) argued that some questions (like questions over the existence of God) are **pseudo-problems**, unsolvable squabbles that don't deserve to be pondered.

The Logical Structure of the World

and

Pseudoproblems in Philosophy

Rudolf Carnap

Translated by
Rolf A. George

Open Court
Classics

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Empirical Claims of DCT

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Food for thought...

Question:
Why would some religions proliferate despite not being true, at least not obviously so?

Some theorists believe that the success of some religions is more accidental.

For example, Harper (2017, Ch. 8) discusses the role that epidemic disease played in the rise of Christianity and Islam.

CLIMATE, DISEASE, & THE END OF AN EMPIRE

THE FATE OF ROME

KYLE HARPER
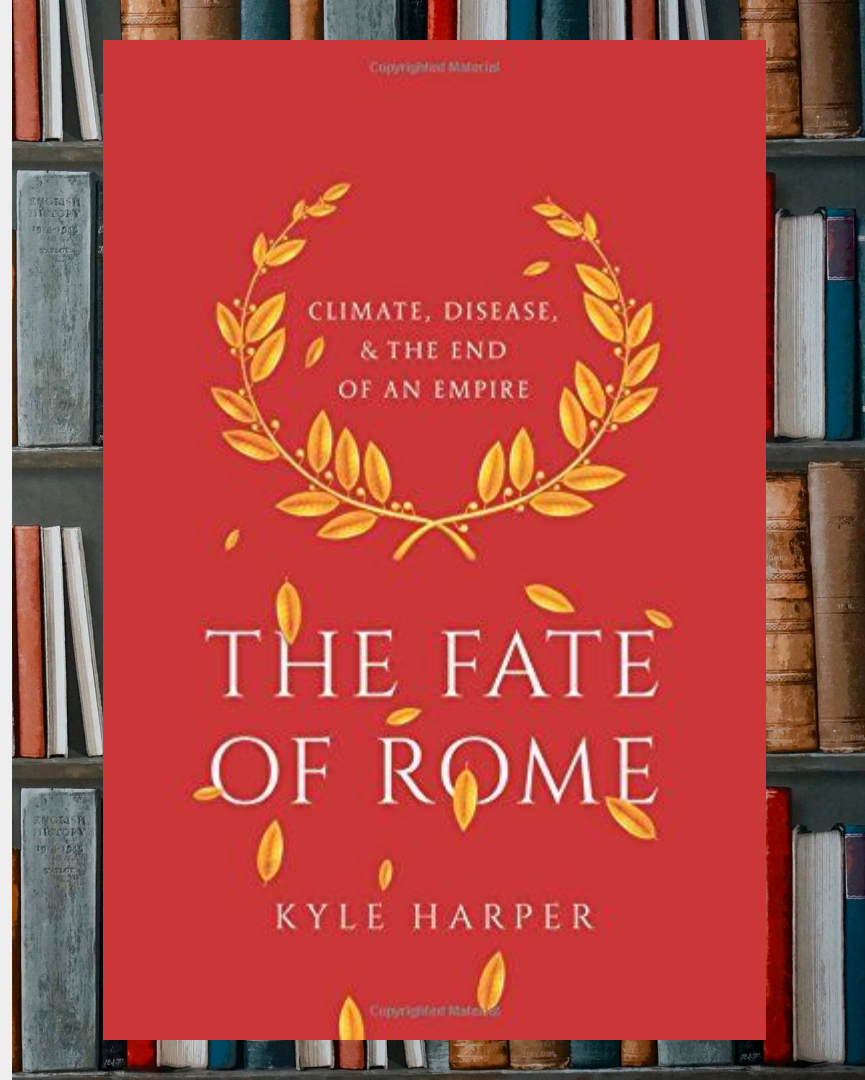
He reminds us that, although this is forgotten today, these are eschatological (apocalyptic) religions.
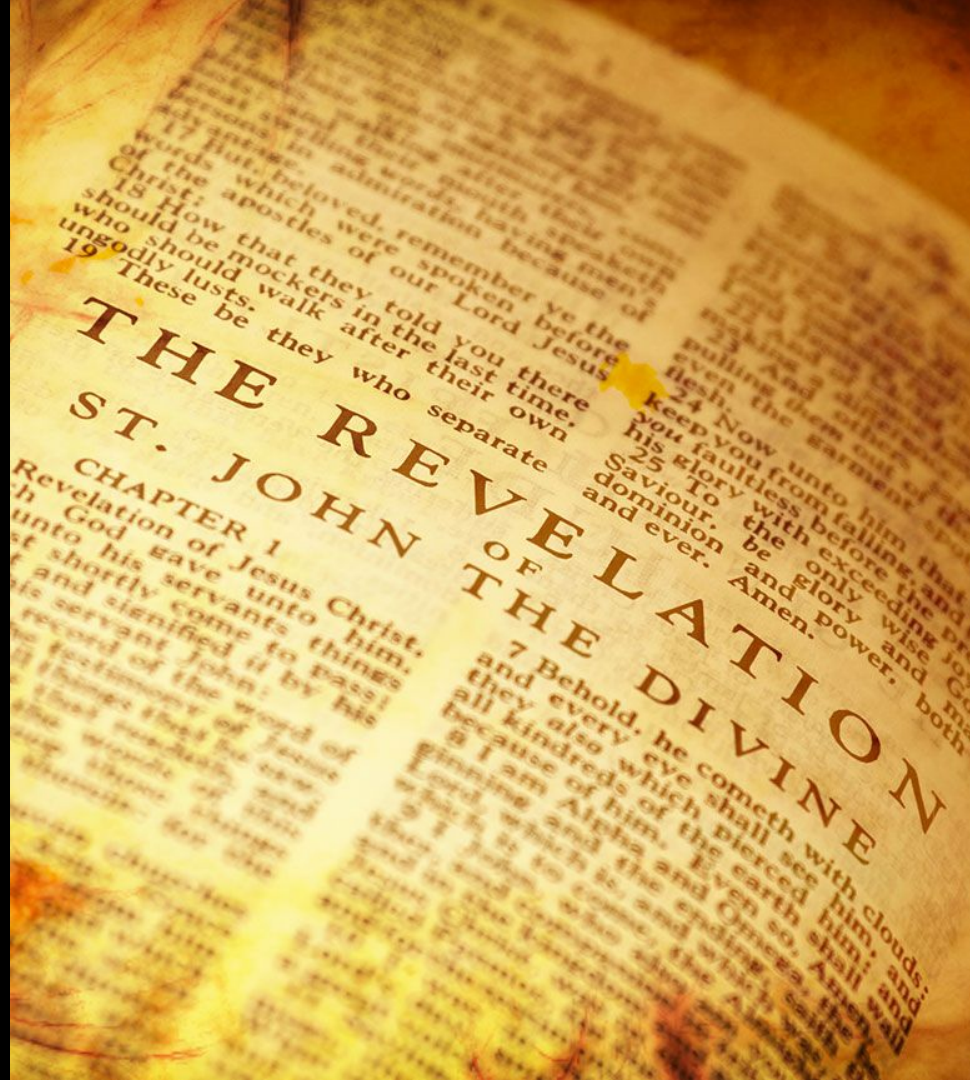
In the midst of a plague, like the Antonine plague (165-180 CE), it seemed like the end of times. This added credibility to the early Christians' religious claims.

Moreover, basic care (e.g. feeding and cleaning) made it more likely that an infected person would survive.
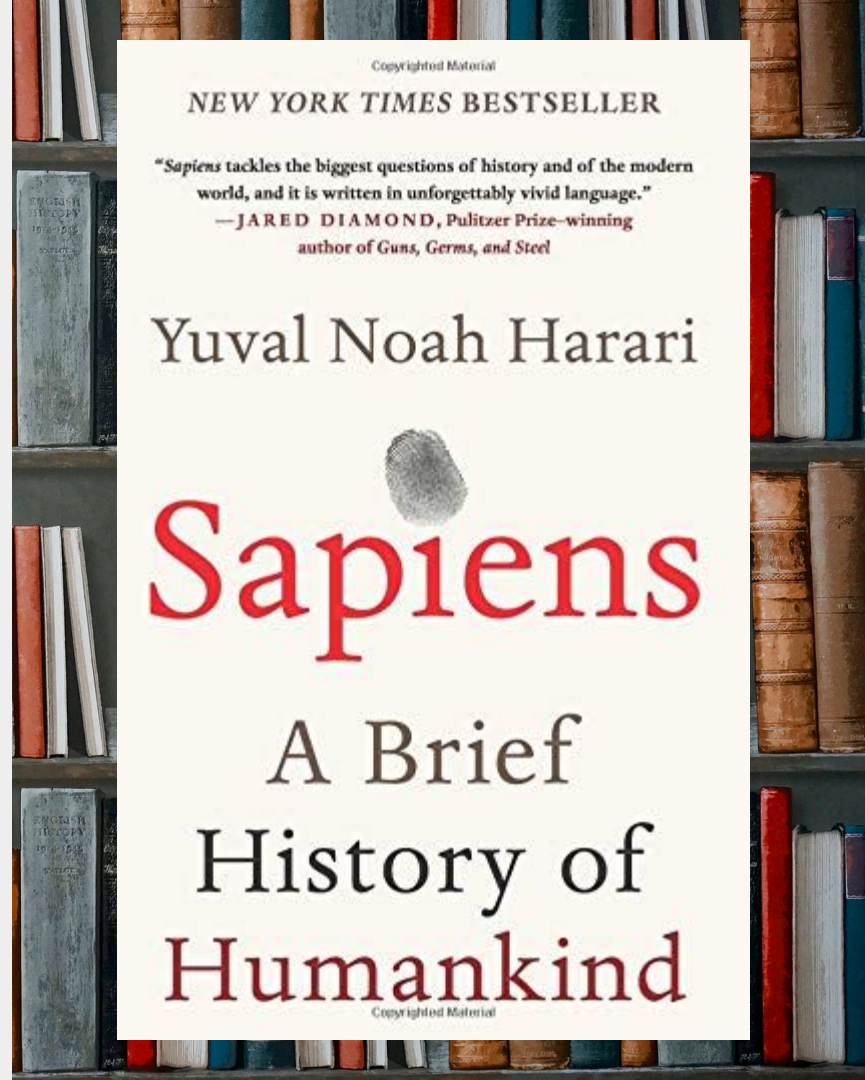
This is, of course, exactly what Christian ethics prescribes that we do of others. So people would flock to the churches for this reason.

Harari argues that "religion has been the third great unifier of humankind, alongside money and empires.

Since all social orders and hierarchies are imagined, they're all fragile, and the larger the society, the more fragile it is.

The crucial historical role of religion has been to give superhuman legitimacy to these fragile structures" (Harari 2015, Ch. 12,).

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

"*Sapiens* tackles the biggest questions of history and of the modern world, and it is written in unforgettably vivid language."
—JARED DIAMOND, Pulitzer Prize–winning author of *Guns, Germs, and Steel*

Yuval Noah Harari

Sapiens

A Brief History of Humankind

Wright (2009, Ch. 10) argues that the real historical Jesus was surprisingly traditional at least according to the earliest Gospel accounts, when compared to the later, embellished accounts.

He didn't preach universal love and he wasn't very divine. He was just another apocalyptic prophet.

As time passed and the people who might actually remember Jesus' time died, the accounts of his life became more moral and divine.
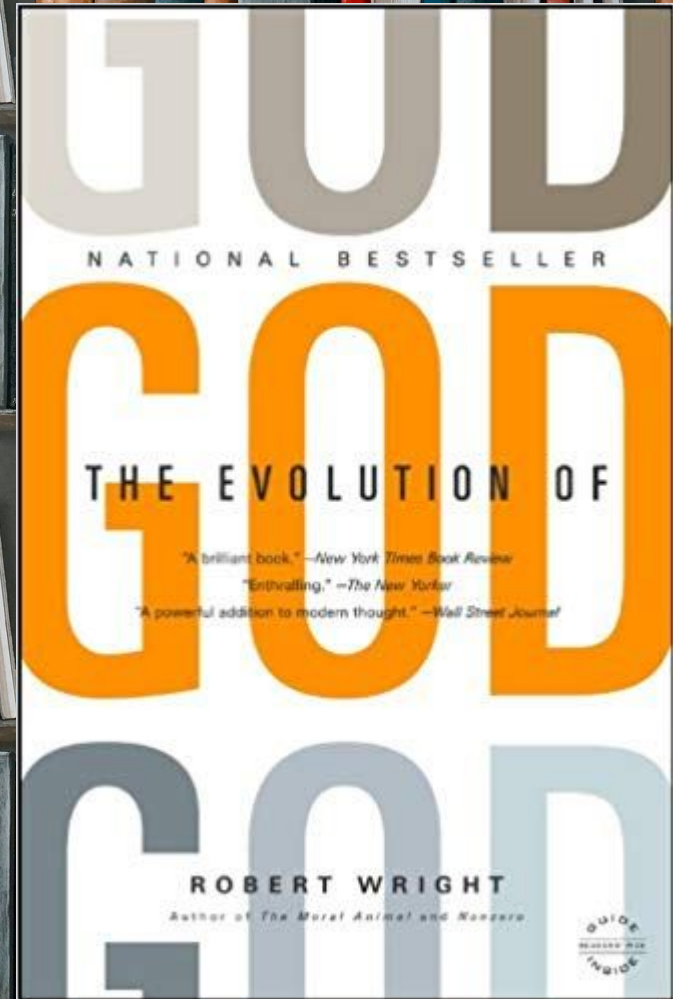
For an in-depth analysis of this view, see Ehrman 2015.
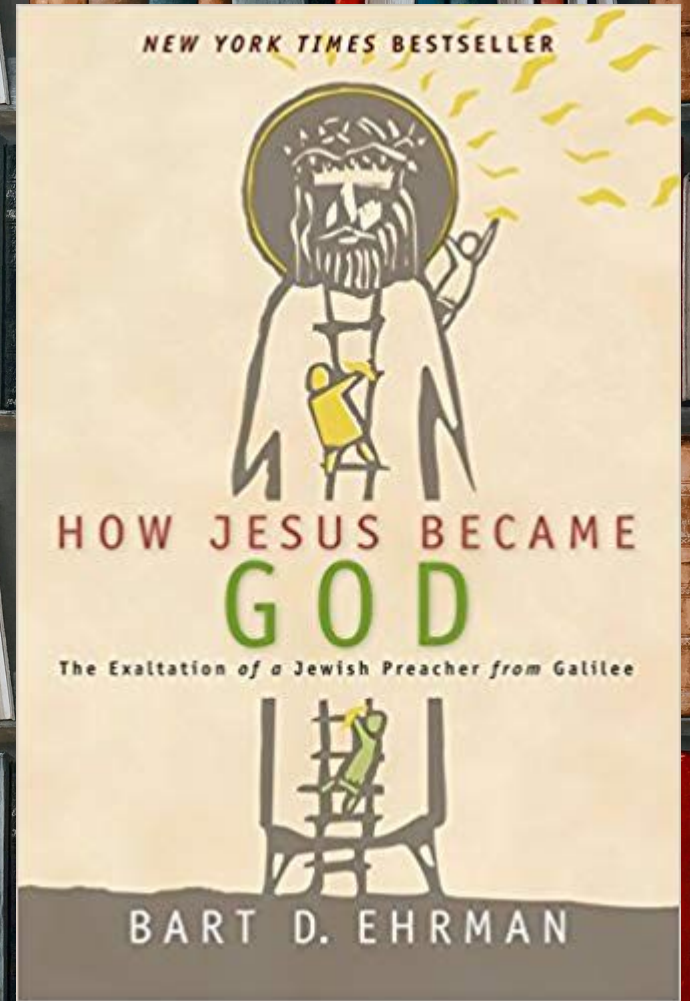
Empirical Claims of DCT

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Displaying eye images has been associated with:

- Increased generosity in a "dictator game" where people decide how much money they will share with another person (Haley and Fessler 2005);
- Increased donations to a shared pot in a "public goods game" (Burnham and Hare 2007);
- Decreased littering in a self-service cafeteria, where patrons bus their own tables (Ernest-Jones et al. 2011); and
- contributions to an honesty box used to collect money for drinks in a university coffee room (Bateson et al. 2006).

Religious priming decreases the likelihood of one cheating (Mazar et al. 2008), even if the primes are subliminal (Randolph-Seng and Nielsen 2007).

It also increases generosity and cooperation (Shariff and Norenzayan 2007, Ahmed and Salas 2009), as well as increases the likelihood of costly punishment to noncooperators (McKay et al. 2011).

It's even the case that "those who attend religious services [Sundays] shift their consumption of adult entertainment to other days of the week, despite on average consuming the same amount of adult entertainment as others" (Edelman 2009: 217-8).

Empirical Claims of DCT

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To be continued...