# How God Ruins Everything, Including Zizek's Atheism

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Outro Music:
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(If you buy professor's book from the Columbia University Press website and use the promo code CUP20, you should get a 20% discount.)

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Huge thanks to CTLE for lending the studio, equipment, and their generous help.

# Introduction

**Moelle:** Welcome, everyone. After a break from a recording, we're now back with a video on atheism. It turns out Slavo Zizek recently published a book on atheism. And at least in my view, it's a little bit cringy. It's called Christian Atheism: How to Be a Real Materialist. We'll start with a critical analysis of Zizek's book, and we'll do this with the help of an expert on atheism. Brooke Seporin, Mircea Eliade Professor for Comparative Philosophy and a few other things at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago.

**Ziporyn:** Hello.

**Moelle:** As it happens, Brooke also just wrote a book on atheism titled Experiments in Mystical Atheism. It's published by University of Chicago Press. The two books share the same topic, but they are very different. While Zizek's Atheism is Christian, Brooks is decidedly un-Christian, or non-monotheist. We'll critique Zizek first, and then this critique will be followed by a conversation between Brooke and me on his Deep Atheism, recorded live and in person here at the University of Macau. To be frank, Zizek's new book is unlikely to win the Oxford Philosophy Prize for theoretical coherence. But, of course, as with Nietzsche, Zizek's ambiguities and self-contradictions are not necessarily a bad thing. Brooke and I both sympathize with his playful mix of comic cosplay and post-modernist performance art, That often makes it impossible to ascribe any rigidly fixed position to him. And yet, we'll try to summarize the key point of his Christian atheism. Zizek follows Schelling, Hegel, and Feuerbach and sees the essence of Christianity in its complete self-humanization and self-secularization. When Jesus dies on the cross, the divine other dies and becomes human. In this process, God erases Himself. Or actually, like in Hegel's Aufebung or Sublation, He raises Himself in this erasure to a higher stage. Finally, becoming fully human has always been His purpose. When God dies, He transitions, according to Zizek, into the Holy Spirit, the human community, embracing its authentic freedom. We become responsible subjects,

committing ourselves to our causes, which are thoroughly human because there is no divine command or reward for them anymore. Let's hear this from Zizek himself.

**Zizek:** You know that moment on the cross when Christ says, Eli Eli, Father, why have you forsaken me? No? It's the unique moment where God himself, Christ, no longer believes in himself, God becomes an atheist. at the end. And that's it. The freedom that is given to us as Christians is just this negative freedom. It means the core of Christianity is, for me, there is no higher force which takes care of us so that we can be sure that at the end everything will turn well. No, history is radically open. It all depends on us.

**Moelle:** This is Zizek's conclusion. Once God is dead, it all depends on us. And for us, this means an almost Kantian duty of utter moral engagement. It sounds all great. What's the problem? Well, we found three major issues, all resulting from the Christian essence of Zizek's atheism. First, a kind of Manichaean moralism.

# 1. Manichaean Moralism: The Moral Gaze

For Christian atheists, like for a regular Christian, The world, and the people in it, tend to be seen in terms of an epic conflict between good and evil. Old-style Christians saw the devil lurking everywhere. Even though Christian atheists no longer share this framework, they inherit a basic feature. Most in our life, at least that what really matters, is seen through a moral lens. We need to commit to the right thing and not to the wrong thing, to support the right person and fight the wrong person. Zizek's authentic freedom compels us to a constant moral gaze. This is especially clear in the final passage of Christian Atheism.

**Ziporyn:** Zizek quotes Alexander Bloch's poem 12 about 12 Red Army soldiers on patrol during the Bolshevik Revolution. It ends with these words, Ahead of them with bloody banner, safe from any bullets harm, ahead of them goes Jesus Christ. And Zizek then comments, This is an image of what Christian atheism means as a political practice. Christ is just a virtual shadow whose presence signals that the Twelve are not just a group of individuals pursuing their particular interests, but a group of comrades acting on behalf of a cause. There is no promise of heavenly bliss in this image. It is just a group of comrades acting out of utter emergency without an assurance of what the final outcome will be. Even if they are not aware of it, they act in their utter dedication as if Christ is at their head. We recently encountered such groups, which were inspecting locked-down areas for the victims of the pandemic, or looking for abandoned survivors of flooding and heat waves, or, why not, patrolling an area and searching for Russian mines on the Ukrainian front. And the list goes on. A group of artists engaged in a collective project, a group of programmers working on an algorithm that may help in our struggle for the environment. Without thinking about it, they were and are just doing their duty. The subjective stance of the members of such a group was as far as possible from politically correct concerns and suspicions. They

were totally foreign to the collective spirit that motivated the January 6th Trumpian mob, which attacked the Congress building, a mob just performing a media spectacle. They left behind any traces of liberal individualism. They were in hell, with no God to protect them, and Christ was there. Those are the final words of the book, Christian Atheism. So, in Gitic's conception of Christian atheism, God has been exposed as a fake. The universe has no preferences and guarantees no outcomes. God the Father dies with Christ and is resurrected as the Holy Spirit, which is really the church, the community of believers, which then morphs through history into other groups, like the Communist Party was what he mentions, and today, into those further examples, diversifying into these various groups that he just listed. He sees these groups of spontaneous do-gooders joined together in comradeship by their devotion to a cause, as the living embodiments of the Holy Spirit, the resurrected version of God, now that God has been exposed and deposed. What they have in common, these groups, is that they have pure and unconflicted motives. They think only of doing their duty without any self-interest. They have a kind of freedom, but this freedom is an existential choice that functions like falling in love, more like being chosen than choosing, and this huge conversion experience changes how they see the world, including all the past and all the future. And all of that sounds very cool. But it changes how they see the world, but how do they now see the world? Still, it would seem, in Manichean moral terms, taking us back to the old, supposedly vanquished God. The purpose-driven life is still the only thing that makes life worth living. God incarnated in the Holy Spirit is still structured like the old judgmental Father God. The change of venue from heaven to earth or from transcendent to imminent does not seem to have changed his basic character very much. In spite of the diversification of the approved groups mentioned, as we saw, you know, programmers or a group of artists, et cetera. Zizek still feels the need to distinguish the authentic ones from the false ones, the Trumpian mob or the woke inquisitors. But in reality, woke inquisitors and Trumpist insurrectionists are also devoted to their cause. They, too, have fallen in love and experienced a conversion that changes everything about how they see the world and claims to be universal. The sharp distinction between groups which really represent the Holy Spirit and those that don't implies that there is still an overriding church somewhere that alone can legitimize these congregations. This seems to be the old god again in structure and in function. dividing the sheep from the goats and the wheat from the tares. And of course, the thing is that the criteria for distinguishing the true from the false believers remain just as contested as ever.

**Moelle:** Well, the problem with this moral gaze is that the bad guys typically don't see themselves as the bad guys, but as the good guys. One's own moral gaze tends to create a reverse moral gaze in the other. In the history of religion, this conundrum has led to countless conflicts, schisms, and wars, which, in our secular age, morphed into culture wars.

## 2. A Savior Syndrome

The second issue is a sort of savior syndrome. As for many Christians, the world is, for the Christian atheists, a shitty place to begin with, a yamatad, a veil of tears. And all depends on us to turn the situation around. Zizek's atheism shares what Nietzsche called a deep-seated nihilism with its religious predecessor. Let's hear this from him.

**Zizek:** No, there are no good news. Good news are only a different shift of perspective on the bad news. We remain abandoned by God. No, it's simply God is just this absence. The empty place comes before what we fill it in through our images of God. The basic divine dimension is this void, just this void, in the sense of our reality is not, something is terribly wrong with this reality.

**Moelle:** The Christian missionary zeal returns in a secular form. God cannot save us from our rottenness. so we must do this on our own. The human condition is terribly wrong, but by our ethical engagement, we set ourselves and others straight.

## 3. Protestant Exceptionalism

The third problem is arguably the worst: a Protestant exceptionalism. For Zizek, Christianity, or more precisely Protestantism, is more advanced than any other religion.

**Zizek:** And I still think that Protestantism is the key, the greatest religious event that you can imagine.

**Moelle:** Christian Protestantism is the single greatest religion ever, because it alone includes its self-overcoming. The only way to true atheism leads through it.

**Zizek:** The moment when God himself becomes an atheist. You find this in no other religion. In other religions, you do find men who abandon God. Where do you find God who abandons himself?

**Ziporyn:** The idea that real atheism is only possible through Christianity implies that all other atheisms which are historically plentiful in other parts of the world, are deficient. This makes it impossible to seriously consider and engage them. But in fact, I think the real anomaly of Christendom is not the in-house self-destruction of God, but rather that the idea of God, in the relevant sense, was taken seriously by illiterate cultures for so long. Other cultures recognized the radical indeterminacy of the world early on, and this led to wildly different consequences. Now, to be sure, Zizek does go out of his way to cite the ways in which the West can learn from other cultures, But interestingly, what he praises in all these cases is how excellent their versions of the Enlightenment traditions of the West are. Things like Iranian protest movements or Korean art cinema, but not pre-modern Iranian or Korean cultural products. It's a little bit like the way liberal missionaries will often celebrate it when converts in exotic climes do their Christianity in their own exotic way. Things like Christ's drawn to resemble the local ethnicities, or native cuisine on feast days, and so on. So, exactly as he claims, Zizek is being faithful to the specifically Christian model of universalism,

based on a specific model of what a universal is. Everyone is welcome, as long as they renounce all other values and devote themselves to the cause. A determinate universal value, given its content, and judged as correct by the Holy Spirit, which, of course, is now us.

**Moelle:** Zizek suggests that the superior quality of Protestantism as the only religion that ever overcame itself also enabled it to create the best ever type of slavery in all history. As with God, only the Protestants managed to first have slavery and then abolish it by themselves. Here's an interesting passage from the book.

> With regard to slavery, one should note that it existed throughout civilized human history in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas, and that it continues to exist in new forms...
>
> What one should add, however, is that the Western European nations ...
>
> were the only ones which gradually enforced the legal prohibition of slavery. To cut it short, slavery is universal. characterizes the West is that it set in motion the movement to prohibit it, the exact opposite of the common perception.

According to Zizek, it seems, abolition was a triumph of the Protestant spirit. So much for his proclaimed real materialism. Wouldn't an actual materialist point out that, at least to a large extent, slavery was abolished because it made less and less economic sense? for capitalist production in the industrializing world that was perhaps more decisive than the superior religion of the Protestants. In effect, Zizek's it all depends on us seems to mean it all depends on us, post-Protestant Christian atheists. Only we can save the world and not them. For instance, not the Buddhists.

**Ziporyn:** There's much more to say about the encounter between Zizek and Buddhism than we can possibly do here. We will post a link to a written point-by-point response to his delightfully irresponsible riffing and tap dancing on Buddhist themes. Some of it is very incisive and worth discussing, and we'll try to do that there. But here I just want to say that one often gets the distinct impression that the critiques of Buddhism in G.J.'s work really amount to a kind of reverse engineering. It's as if Zizek is simply turned off by the laid-back hipster person and lifestyle he associates with Buddhism, doesn't give him that devotion to a cause that he feels he needs, I guess. He's sure, therefore, there must be something wrong with it, and he attempts to figure out what that is. with increasing urgency to distinguish it from his own, often uncomfortably similar, positions. In general, though, Zizek's critique of Buddhism seems to me really almost an example of what he would call the return of the repressed, using the psychoanalytic term. It's as if he projects onto Buddhism all the aspects of really existing Christianity that he wishes were not there. I mean, things like otherworldly disengagement or collusion with militaristic powers, or escapism into fantasies to avoid antagonistic realities, asocial cultivation of individual virtue, hierarchical elitism, absolute authority claimed on the basis of moral superiority, or sham purity linked to

displays of selfless sacrifice. So there's all that kind of projection, it feels like, to me. Yet at the same time, his critique of Buddhism sometimes is so detailed and rich that it almost comes off as a sympathetic exposition and even defense of Buddhism. Maybe he's, one thinks, a kind of double agent working undercover for Buddhism, like one of those unconscious bodhisattvas that Buddhism talks about, but which Zizek never mentions, maybe he doesn't know about. So I suppose his complete unawareness of such a possibility would make him perhaps an even better unconscious bodhisattva. Who knows?

**Moelle:** Well, unconscious bodhisattva or not, in the end, Zizek's Christian atheism is not very different from Jordan Peterson's mission. Both celebrate the modern Western post-Protestant myth of human sovereignty. It All Depends on Us is the left-wing collectivist version of Peterson's right-wing individualist take your fate in your own hands. Here's Zizek once more.

> My point was to address his followers and to tell them What Jordan is telling you, don't fall into this self-pitying victim code stance, take your faith into your hands, and so on. We, authentic left, can deliver this to you better than all the conservatives, you know.

**Moelle:** Given this Zizek-Peterson alliance, Brooke's book on deep atheism is very timely and needed, a book for a second non-Christian enlightenment. Let's see us talk about this in person.

## Displeasure at God

**Moelle:** A key quote of the book is,

> "Purpose creates the disease–
> and the deification of purpose is offered as the cure."

Now, You begin your book like a novel by Joseph Conrad. You talk about a trip across the Pacific Ocean in a container ship, if I remember correctly. And you're talking to the captain about a feeling of displeasure, even about disgust, about the idea of the existence of a god. Can you explain that?

**Ziporyn:** Yeah, sure, and thank you for having me here. It's great to be on the channel, I'm a big fan. Yeah, I mean, the opening of the book gives a scene that's, broadly speaking, based on real incidents, but that's a real trip that was taken. Pavel is a real person, the T Venda is a real ship. But it is dramatized a bit to kind of find a way to frame the origins of this book for me and the way I wanted to sort of approach the problem. So, you know, what I found interesting about the way that is presented is it starts with a kind of inchoate displeasure or unease with the idea of God. So we have him saying, I've always hated the idea of God in a very sharp, non-negotiable

way that's compared to things like a cockroach in the food or something. There's no discussion to be had there. But at the same time, I wasn't quite sure why I hated it so much. He says, I kind of understand why one would object to it intellectually or something, but there's something more here it feels like to me. And so I wanted to sort of frame the book as Entertaining that idea, I understand what that means, and that's sort of how I came to this problem. In looking at a lot of different philosophical systems and religious systems from various parts of the world, these are things that interest me greatly and that are kind of generally unproblematically horizon broadening, except I started to notice, after that kind of a comment, except when the idea of God in the sense of a purposive creator of the world, in other words, above all, the idea that the world was made for a single purpose, right, and hence the key role of purposivity of teleology in this whole discussion, that that sort of shot down any resonance, any of those ideas, however different they were, however complex, however... ingenious in other ways or mind expanding in other ways even. And so that made me wonder. I thought then it's worth excavating this to see, is this just a prejudice of mine? Is this, am I just hiding from God because of my terrible sins? Am I, is it a kind of exoticism that draws me to things out because, you know, This is a shared interest of ours. There are other cultural contexts where this idea did not take on that kind of prominence and this has engaged me. It's also engaged you for many years. So, you know, I wanted to try to be honest with myself and see is there anything really to this philosophically about what exactly is lost philosophically, existentially, if you to have that idea of God into the picture, and why does that matter to me so much? So on the one hand, it's that. It's that I know it matters a lot. I can tell that just from my own reactions, but it's not obvious all the implications, what is foreclosed by.

**Moelle:** If I may expand a little bit on this introduction. When you say at the beginning that you have this deeply, personally felt displeasure and this notion of the existence of a God, that indicates also at least a hint at something pathological about this idea, doesn't it? And that there's something even kind of poisonous about it.

**Ziporyn:** About the idea of God, yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah, that's right, that sort of a reaction, right, in other words, Which you can instantly feel, right? But takes some dissecting to sort of get at what it is. Yeah, definitely, it has big effects, is the other thing. And as I'm sure we'll talk about, even huge after effects, even when it is explicitly denied in certain, in the sort of cultural aftermath, right? So it increasingly seemed tied to so many things, and so many of the key things that I, I did implicitly feel...

**Moelle:** If this is the case, Brooke, if I may interrupt. Sure. Doesn't that also indicate it's something like a hygienic function of this whole philosophical project? I mean, this kind of personal beginning indicates that what you're doing is not just, you know, a theoretical exercise, but that you're kind of going after a certain pathology that you feel inside yourself and that you thereby perceive this philosophical pursuit So as some sort of self-healing exercise.

**Ziporyn:** Yeah, or hygiene almost. Yeah, almost a feeling of contamination or something, right, that has to be purged. Yeah, so it's deeply personal in several ways, right? So initially deeply personal, which is to say, yeah, it feels like something is being harmed, right, and that gives you already a direction toward what's my implicit standard of what am I trying to protect, actually, right? There's an ideal of health, you might say, or an ideal of an expanded picture of life.

**Moelle:** Exactly, and I guess this harm or health is on various levels. It's on the existential level, but it's also on a social level, but then of course it's also on an intellectual level, on a philosophical level.

**Ziporyn:** Philosophical level, I mean, I even claim in the book sort of, you know, a little bit mischievous but quite seriously, it's harmful religiously. Yes, exactly. It's harmful to the mystical sense of self, right? Exactly, yes. But I mean, I maybe should add there that it's also very personal. Another sense, which one reason to set up the whole conversation in that way is to say, at the same time, this isn't really about, you know, the traditional arguments against the existence of God rationally, right? There's two aspects of it, one, yeah, it's a personal sort of, this creates some serious existential problems, but also noticing as one might, you know, when you say, well, I'm disgusted by a particular kind of food, it very well could be and likely is contingent upon the kind of person I am, right? So, and that has to do with where I grew up and who I knew and what the influence says, but that doesn't make it any less of a sort of non-negotiable reaction that then bears careful investigation to what the sort of total picture of life that is implicated there actually entails.

**Moelle:** Right.

**Ziporyn:** So I really wanted to strike that balance. I didn't want to say here's a book of arguments about why belief in God is bad, full stop, or wrong, or false, right? I wanted to say this blots out so many other things that are of such great importance to certain people, and I'm one of those people. So one of the jobs I have to do is to figure out what that sort of interconnected network of other things that are threatened or, you know, endangered by this idea of God might be. Right. Yeah.

## Theism vs. Atheism

**Moelle:** Can you just briefly define from your perspective what's the difference between, let's say, theism and atheism, the belief in God or...

**Ziporyn:** Yes. not believing it. Right, so yes, very important, right? Because of course, those terms, God is notoriously susceptible, like all words, but because so much is invested in it, maybe more so than most, with very many range of meanings, right? So in different theological systems, but also in everyday use. there are even people who say, I believe in God, but not a personal God, or something like that, right? Or it's really the ground of being, or it's the ultimate concern. So I wanted to specify particularly, and that opening of the book is a way of actually pinpointing

that precisely. What the kind of meaning of God I want to give is the one that this reaction is attached to. And that basically is of a purposive, single creator of the world, right? An origin, meaning that, which, you know, so to be distinguished also from gods in the polytheistic sense, which would be sort of non-empirically verifiable, fancifully thought of mythological beings, invisible beings or something. I don't, I wouldn't say I believe in those, but they don't inspire the same reaction in me, right? And they don't, and it was interesting for me to try to... Again, excavate why that is, right? So my objection isn't, well, this isn't scientifically proven. This is obviously nonsense that someone's using to hoodwink someone else. It's not that, right? It's that the idea of God as a creator with a purpose changes the meaning of what a fact is, of every single fact, right? And means that it has one single reason for existing, and that reason is to serve a particular pre-existing purpose. And many things follow from that, right? If there's an ontological claim built in to that conception. So it's that idea of God, right? Now I will claim in the book that, you know, elaborations that develop from there. even when they try to deny like the explicit personality, that sort of crude, naive, anthropomorphic picture of God in say, you know, sophisticated theologies, negative theologies, still have the thing that is objectionable to the kind of person I'm talking about, this kind of person. So that was part of one of the more interesting things in there. I would trace it back to give it a little more context than I do in the book. You know, I call this the smoking gun. There's a passage that really goes back, not so much to the Hebrew Bible or Genesis, but to Plato's dialogue, the Phaedo, where Socrates is about to die, and he's talking about immortality and the soul and stuff, but he tells this kind of amazing story that's, to me, is sort of the ground zero of this whole problem. And in that he says, that he had gone through his life seeking the reasons and causes of things and the first cause and the pre-Socratic philosophers and so on. He was always unsatisfied and he didn't know why. It's almost the reverse of my case. He's saying there's something that just wasn't scratching the itch for me. And then I heard somebody reciting this book of Anaxagoras in the marketplace who had proclaimed that nous, the Greek word nous meaning mind or intelligence, right, is archaic, as opposed to other theories about archaic, the first principle, the beginning of things, the foundation.

**Moelle:** Basically the idea of some intelligent design.

**Ziporyn:** Some intelligent design, right? Although, you know, Anaxagoras himself doesn't really develop it, and Socrates complains about that. He says, great, that finally told me, and he says, the reason I thought that would be so great, because then that would mean, Anytime I ask why something was the way it was, you wouldn't be telling me because water and fire are mixing together for no reason, but because nous always acts purposefully, and acts toward the good, or whatever it conceives of the good. So you have your nous, I have my nous, we each are always acting according to what we think is good, but if there's one nous, at the origin of all things, then all things will be the way they are because it is good full stop. Right. Right? So purposivity now becomes the principle. I mean, I think it's important to just, you know, it's a

little misleading in English when you say mind, because we have, I think, a broader notion of mind. You know, mind can be daydreaming mind, or mind that's... a playful mind, or a joking mind, or a mind that's not dealing with a problem and not pursuing anything. But Noose is very specifically a mind engaged in problem solving, trying to arrange ends and means to coordinate, ends and means to reach a predetermined end. And so, you know, there's sort of an attempted historical reconstruction of this idea in the book, right? You know, we can go into it if you want to, but you know, that.

## Purpose/Control/Meaning

**Moelle:** Sort of starting point. This notion of purposefulness that you trace back to Plato is, as you already indicated, not just a notion of purposefulness, it's in a wider sense, a notion of meaning, that there is one particular meaning that informs everything. But in addition to that, also the notion of some form of order and some form of control, right?

**Ziporyn:** Yes.

**Moelle:** So the news is at the same time also providing, let's say, the foundation for the idea that it is possible or that it is desirable to shape the world and to shape oneself. in accordance with one basic meaning.

**Ziporyn:** Right, exactly, exactly. So control is one of the key words here, right? Meaning as primarily derivative of the notion of purpose, I would say, in that tradition. At the very end of the book, I try to, and then, you know, a conclusion that's called meaning revisited, but that's because the book has been, in a way, you know, a polemic against, I don't want to say it's actually not against Purpose or control against meaning, and one important nuance here, it's against the ultimacy of purpose, the ultimacy of meaning. That's important. And that changes everything structurally, is sort of one of the main claims of the book, right? So you have emergent purposes, plural, purposes, meanings, acts of control, sort of salting and pepper of reason and order, but rooted in the something primary, which is not itself ordered, purposeful, meaningful. And that seems to me to be what changes the way we will relate to whatever meanings do emerge and submerge, right?

**Moelle:** Well, again, the point I was trying to highlight was this connection between purpose and meaning on the one hand, and control on the other hand, that someone is in charge. The one God, the monotheistic God, is the ultimate one that is in charge of everything. And then, of course, this idea of there is someone who is being in charge of everything is somehow projected onto what it means to be a human being. That in order to be, let's say, good human being, we also have to act according to, with purpose. And we also have to be somehow in control. And the more we are in control, somehow the better that is.

**Ziporyn:** Exactly. So, I mean, there's a value judgment way when you make nous ultimate cosmically or ontologically, which is that the most valuable, the best thing

there is in the world is control, is purposivity, is you know, meaningfulness conceived in that specific kind of a way, and yeah, that then, you know, we'll talk about it, I'm sure, but I mean, this now has its microcosmic version in the notion of a human person. Right. I mean, you can look at it as sort of a two-way street, right? It's a projection of, this is really an old Nietzsche point, I'm sure you know, it's like, you know, that this sort of Socratic Fanaticism about reason in other words knowing what you're doing at all times right knowing the reasons for why you're doing what you're doing at all times doing only that one thing and Excluding anything that doesn't accord with it, right and you know this the Socrates is enthusiasm for this ideas. Oh, it's not just me right who has to I mean Nietzsche saw this as pathological right? He said that the instincts have dissolved and wanted sort of an emergency measure has to like have ultra agency control at all times, and then this now gets writ large as what the universe is like, of playing the community, right? And then once it is writ large, though, once it's locked in there, it reflects back, and now that becomes this sort of absolute value standard, and we get this, you know, this exacerbating feedback loop about control. That's why I love that quote, one of the epigraphs of the book is from William S. Burroughs, and it's just, Control never leads to anything but more control, like heroin. Right. Yes.

## Sovereignty

**Moelle:** Another way of putting the same thing is the notion of sovereignty.

**Ziporyn:** Right.

**Moelle:** Again, sovereignty combines this idea of purpose with somehow the idea of an exercise of power. And it traces it back to one source. So the whole notion of individual sovereignty or the sovereign individual of our friend Jordan Peterson is very much in the tradition of this monotheistic framework that you just outlined.

**Ziporyn:** Absolutely, right. So, and the sovereign individual, right, that particular conception, the controlling agent, you know, driving the entire, the totality of a human's behavior and as a single ultimate source. one which has justification. I mean, one thing maybe I can interpose here too, it's very interesting to me that one of the things I try to do in the book is the notion of sovereignty is one of them, the notion of power is another one, the notion of necessity is another one, right? All of those, I argue, tend to get assimilated to the notion of control. Right. And new, says Arce, all of them. And even in some of the writers that I spend a lot of time, Nietzsche was just talking about, right, there's a bit of ambiguity in his use of will to power. Is it will to control, or is power conceived in some other sense? Right. And I argue that, you know, in Nietzsche's case, there's plenty of, at least, material for us to read it as already in breaking down the notion of control, per se, single center agency, and as much in Nietzsche as you know, that critiques the notion of a unified self or of unity, per se, right? But there are ambiguities that still attach to that. And similarly, it's funny, all three of my, the main author, European authors I deal with in this book

are Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Georges Bataille. In Spinoza's case, necessity is one of his key categories. And I try to argue that necessity, one of the things that's happening in Spinoza, is breaking the connection between control and necessity. And that I think logically, necessity is different from control. In fact, in a way, is an antithesis of control. In Nietzsche's case, power. and control, and in Bataille's case, sovereignty.

**Moelle:** Right.

**Ziporyn:** So he has this notion of sovereignty, but he's trying to remove it from this sort of agent-centered means and ends, purposivity, control model. And that's one of those interesting reversals that's happening in the book. Meaning is another one. So you'll read the all part to the book as sort of like these key concepts that have been, as it were, usurped into the, I would say this, what I'm broadly calling this monotheistic framework, each gets sort of resurrected and rethought by these thinkers who have seen something beyond that horizon.

# 4 Types of Theism and Atheism

**Moelle:** I want to ask about this. monotheistic framework that you just mentioned, or generally the conceptual framework that very much informs your book, the distinction between basically two kinds of theism and two kinds of atheism.

**Ziporyn:** Yeah, I found it useful to develop certain terminology in the book. So that's one of the main categories. So I already mentioned more nous is arche, sort of. a thread that runs through a convenient way of denoting this whole conceptual move. But then looking at forms of atheism and theism, I distinguish between what I'm calling emulative theism, emulative atheism, compensatory theism, compensatory. atheism. So let me briefly, again, we don't need to get too far into the weeds, but I do think it's sort of helpful. It's a pretty simple idea, right? It's just the idea that if you have this new sasarche idea, right, there's a purposive creator who does things for the good and runs the world right in this orderly, single ordered, inordinate way. Should I try to be as much like that or as much unlike that as possible? And if the world is completely, ultimately devoid of order and purpose, an ultimate single order, single purpose, single meaning, should I try to compensate for that by providing a meaning? Or should I try to be like that, right? So the interesting thing is kind of a Venn diagram situation, right? If you have an emulative atheist, and I think the Platonists fall into this category, and of course, that sort of attitude continues through the monotheistic religions, it's always kind of a mix, but I try to sort of give the ideal types. And the ideal type would be to try to be totally in control of one's own activity because it is divine, to act rationally, to know the good and to do the good through willing the good, right, and to become as God-like as possible in that way, to be holy in that way. But there's a very strong tradition in the monotheisms of a sort of the flip side, which is what I'm calling compensatory atheism. Some of the mystical pieces fall here, which is to say, well, you know, God's will and God's will alone is what should be followed, and God

is so far beyond my conception and my power that I should renounce my will entirely. In the New Testament, it's not my will, but thine be done, right? So I renounce what I want entirely. Then I become like will-less, and I become desireless, and I even reason, I don't ask why, I live without why, as some great mystics have said. But that's not because I think why is bad, or because I think purpose is bad, or because I think will is bad. It's because I think they're great. I think they're the best thing there is. They're too good for me, really, right? So I renounce them and I sort of surrender my will to a greater will, right? So that's compensatory theism, I call that. And then on the flip side, the sort of atheist position, again, the atheist in my sense, not that polytheism or non-polytheism or something, would be a kind of secular humanist view and the autonomous individual kind of picture. I use as a kind of slogan for that, Voltaire, you know, we must cultivate our own garden, but maybe Sartreian existentialism or the idea being, yeah, the world is chaos, has no order, has no single sense to it, has no purpose, but we must therefore make up for that, compensate for that by providing purpose. providing meaning, right, creating our own meaning, et cetera. Nietzsche also has this side to him, I would say. I try to argue there's another side beyond that in Nietzsche, but, and you know, a lot of progressive-ism, right, that we are building a utopia. Sure. Marxism has this dimension to it. So, you know, again, interestingly there, all three of the ones I've described agree on one point. They all agree purpose is the most valuable thing in the world, right? And that's why I would say all of those have sort of echoes of that new SRK impulse in them, even when they reverse, and they reverse in these sort of two different ways. But the fourth category is the one I'm mainly interested in, right? And this has, you know, the historical exemplifications are few and far between. I mean, maybe in certain areas of the world, they're more, right? And so, you know, the Taoist texts are, of course, the prime example I use in the book, Zhuangzi, but the other Western cases I talk about too, though, it's hard won, you know, there's a lot to fight through on that side, but it does happen. It is what we call emulative atheism. That's the sort of on-ramp into what I'm calling mystical atheism. Exactly. Right? And that would mean, it's not, he's very like the compensatory theist in some ways, right? The compensatory theist is saying like, give up all your plans, you know, you will go where God puts you, kind of thing, right? So, just where the wind listeth is where thou shalt go, kind of thing, right? But the amulet of atheist is also in that mindset, or he superficially resembles that in no longer clinging to some preconceived notion of how his life is going to go as what his action should be, or even that he should know what he's doing at any given time, that he should be able to give reasons for why he's engaged in a certain show, right? Both of those share that, the difference being that the emulative atheist does not think purpose is the greatest thing in the world, he thinks... you know, if it's Tao or any of the categories that come up in our other atheist thinkers, that the chaos, the purposelessness, the non-unity itself is the great sort of matrix at the source of our being, and at the source, even the valuelessness is even at the source of our values, right? We'll get back to this in a minute.

# 3 Horsemen and Feuerbach

**Moelle:** Sorry for interrupting, Ziporyn. But it's, I guess, very important that your kind of atheism, this emulative atheism, as you just said, is very different from the category that the most famous contemporary Western atheists would fall into, like the Three Horsemen in particular.

**Ziporyn:** Yes.

**Moelle:** Can you say something more about this, how you distinguish yourself, particularly from these versions of contemporary compensatory atheists?

**Ziporyn:** Definitely, definitely. I mean, and this was one of the, very early on in the book, I spent some time talking about, we're talking about Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, mainly the other ones I'm addressing there. And you know, as I say in the book, I enjoy those books. I'm sort of glad to see them. I can very much sympathize with what they're doing and why they felt the need to make this kind of intervention culturally at the moment they did, which was sort of– Yeah.

**Moelle:** So there's an important, let's say, purpose.

**Ziporyn:** Yeah, exactly. And they do a good job, within the confines of that. However, I do think, yes, first of all, you know, first of all, it's, if you're really serious philosophically about it, in my opinion, it's pretty futile. I don't think they take in... the full depth of what it means to commit to a theistic worldview, and I think their arguments are therefore easily dismissible from that point of view. And so it's kind of a fun exercise in the book. I'm kind of writing from the theistic point of view. Nothing you say, you say that like these are hallucinations of an epileptic with a brain tumor. That's fine for a really good theist thinker, right? It's not a problem at all, right? And so we can go into why that is, but you just have to think one more step down the If you believe in God, that's perfectly fine. And anything you say, cultural dominance and superstition, that can all just be the way God works. Not a problem. The problem with this argument is that it is a subset of compensatory atheism, right? So it still does, in terms of the values that it espouses, make a kind of absolute standard, yes, of purpose, yes, of meaning that we must create and protect, but above all, in the context that these guys reason. So, you know, the sovereignty of reason, you might say, right? Which ends up being, you know, in the book, I just say, this basically a preaching to the choir sort of circular argument.

**Moelle:** I mean, these three thinkers, they can be understood somehow as the contemporary Anglo-American version of Feuerbach, the 19$^{th}$ century post-Hehelian German thinker, in the sense that Feuerbach also claimed that the essence of Christianity is secular, sovereign individuality, right? This is the point of his humanism. We completely secularize, humanize the Christian idea, which kind of distills the notion of the autonomous individual out of religion and makes it something completely human. And somehow the Three Horsemen, they basically make that exact same move, but they do it in a more, let's say, artistic, pragmatic, as I just said, more like hands-on Anglo-American manner.

**Ziporyn:** Yeah, absolutely right. You take God, per se, out, as Feuerbach does, right? But you move all the God contents into man, right? And basically, you know what I mean, embrace it. I mean, this could be a conversation about scientism. itself, per se, right? I mean, they exemplify that beautifully. I mean, and, this is one of the things that's important to me in the book is, a lot of these dichotomies that we see, right, between religious faith and scientism are really two, both. byproducts of what I'm calling the theistic point of view, even when they appear to be the flip side of it. Right.

## Sam Harris

**Moelle:** You said you, to an extent, actually enjoyed, nevertheless, reading these three horsemen, but there seems to be at least one of the three horsemen that you didn't enjoy that greatly. I quote here from your book, I find Harris to be perhaps the most insufferably wrongheaded of these three authors. the least interesting, the most narrowly unimaginative about first principles, the most cluelessly preaching to the choir. Yes. Can you expand a little bit on this?

**Ziporyn:** Yeah, sure, sure. Now that's a comparative statement. And if Sam's watching, you know, I'd be happy to go on his podcast and talk about it more. Right. But, and I'll say it again, I I actually, I enjoy, I have listened to Sam, and I find it very interesting, and I find myself often very much in sympathy with him. I mean, the spirit and the direction of the work he's doing, I think, is good, is important, and I like the fact that he, I say this in the book, he distinguishes... sharply, unlike the other two, between monotheist religion and religion more generally. He wants to kind of strip mine some things from, you know, some contemplative practices, right?

**Moelle:** So you share some– We.

**Ziporyn:** Share that, yeah, we share that, and I think that's right, and I think that's super important, okay? But, look, Christopher Hitchens was a brilliant writer, a very fascinating guy, you know, a kind of an aesthete, who, you know, exemplified a way of engaging the world in his work that really went much beyond the scientism we were talking about, kind of a bon vivant. And his atheism, his sort of village atheist kind of atheism is a part of that, and I think works very well, I find that very enjoyable, his arguments are not always strong, but there's more to life than arguments, right? For sure. Dawkins, on the other hand, is a serious scientist, I learned things from Dawkins' books that I didn't know. you know, like actual information and you know, the meme theory comes out of that. That's like, you know, substantive real contributions. What I don't like about Harris is, and I know this is something you have spoken about on this channel before, and I couldn't agree more. It's in a way the most egregious version of what we were just talking about. He wants somehow to be a moral realist. And he thinks that his atheism will actually contribute to that. Whereas for me, moral realism is sort of the worst thing about theism. If you're going to move that piece in, you might

as well just keep the whole kit and caboodle, right? So the idea that there would be an objective moral standard, a single one, a single thing that value is sort of a type of fact, right? And therefore, it has the same kind of convergence patterns that facts might have. That's a big problem for me, right? Right. Okay, but I mean, more than that, in the quote, you quote it. I mean, it's also that, you know, Dawkins has scientific data to refer to, okay? Hitchens has, you know, a kind of aesthetic engagement with the world and a facility with language that he's bringing to the table. But Harris just has this very kind of narrowly conceived notion of reason. Okay, I mean, I don't mean he's narrow-minded, you know, that he doesn't recognize these other areas of life, but he sees it all through this very, you know, sort of tunnel vision way, and he evaluates things that way, right? And a lot of his arguments are very good from the point of view of that rational criterion, but, you know, you sort of see where that leads when you get to his sort of argument about objective morality.

## Morality and Goodness

**Moelle:** Right. Moving away a little bit from Harris, but remaining on the topic of objective morality, what happens when this notion of purposivity and goodness, one goodness and one purpose, becomes secular and is applied in a purely humanist context? What happens then is that still something is retained, namely a strong emphasis on responsibility and guilt, if you somehow, in one way or another, violate the purpose or the purpose or the good.

**Ziporyn:** Yeah.

**Moelle:** And that, of course, leads to what Nietzsche identified as the metaphysics of the hangman. So this metaphysics of an ultimate purpose, of an ultimate order, of ultimate sovereignty, doesn't really tolerate opposition against it. Yes. And it easily turns, more or less literally, to violence.

**Ziporyn:** Yes.

**Moelle:** Can you speak about that as well?

**Ziporyn:** Absolutely, no. This is like the real central thing, right? So there's a structure that goes with making purpose ultimate, and it's the one you just mentioned. It's this black and white, yes and no dichotomization, right? You're either doing what the purpose, something that contributes to that purpose, or you are not. There's an either or structure that's built into this that... And when made ultimate, so wherever it's applied, right? It can be applied just to my own personal good, but if I'm thinking purpose on this model, right, where there's nothing beyond it, there's no purposelessness that saturates it or supports it. then I feel that way about myself, right? Anything that I don't do that's serving that purpose is now anathema, that's right. If I think socially, even a secular, utopians, whether it's sort of just liberal progressivism or a socialist utopia, we have an overriding notion of the good. And that's, I'm not even saying we can't have notions of the good, but when they are structured according to

this monotheist, i.e. nous as archae structure, they become dichotomists, and as you say, therefore violent. Exclusionary.

**Moelle:** Who's not for me is against me.

**Ziporyn:** Yeah, who's not for me is against me, as the New Testament says, as Jesus says in the New Testament. So, you know, an exclusive oneness. This is the odd thing about monotheism, right? It's a dual, a Chinese writer actually put it right, you know, it's a dualistic monism.

**Moelle:** A monism that creates– It includes like they're saying. any room for ambiguity?

**Ziporyn:** Exactly, for multiple purposes, or for non-purpose, or for the way in which two purposes might interpose.

**Moelle:** There's a strong orientation towards eliminating all ambiguity. Absolutely. There is kind of a desire of getting rid of all ambiguity, and that can become a political desire, that can become a sociological desire, a social desire. It also can become a psychological desire directed against yourself.

**Ziporyn:** Exactly, exactly, and there's all kinds of consequences.

**Moelle:** And this brings us maybe back to the beginning of the book, why you find this kind of, to an extent, disgusting, or why you find it not very palpable, if that's the right way.

**Ziporyn:** Well, because it highlights what it is that's excluded, right? Ambiguity is excluded, right? And so all these systems of what I'm calling mystical atheisms are ones that forefront or even elevate ambiguity or multiplicity or unresolvable complexity, right? Non-monolithic or non-dichotomous connectivity of a kind. And so, a lot changes structurally, psychologically, existentially when that is put, it's just reversing the structure, right? You put the chaos at the ultimate position as something which inevitably also produces orders, right, plural. then you're going to feel those orders very differently. And one of the key notes is they will always be ambiguous, they will always be kind of open-ended, they will always be in interchange. We can talk about specific thinkers on those points. And you talked about responsibility and accountability and things like that, and the way that that attitude towards oneself, like the sort of guilt or the attempt to exclude everything that doesn't serve your preconceived purpose from oneself, right?

**Moelle:** The pursuit of purity, the German thing.

**Ziporyn:** Yeah, yeah, exactly. So we don't have any good German beard here to illustrate that today. But yeah, you know, it then has interesting and horrible sort of psychological effects and social effects because it gets projected outward, right? It gets You know, it's another Nietzsche quote, right? The sting of conscience teaches one to sting, right? There's this sort of projecting function, right? And self-distancing, you distance from a part of yourself, and then you put the whole piece on the other, and it reflects back and forth. There are escalating, maybe irresolvable problems.

## The Big Asymmetry

**Moelle:** Just to play not the advocate of the devil, but the advocate of God for a minute. Isn't there a danger that while on the one that you're arguing against these dualisms, against these oppositions, you nevertheless come up with like another dualism, right? You defend purposelessness instead of purpose. You defend ambiguity instead of its opposite. What is its opposite?

**Ziporyn:** Disambiguation, I suppose.

**Moelle:** You defend plurality instead of a monist approach.

**Ziporyn:** Okay, so here's where maybe I can invoke another one of the little catchphrases that come up in the book, which is what I call the great asymmetry. The asymmetry, so... You know, if you have new ses arche, if you have purpose as ultimate, as the ultimate value and the ultimate ontological source, there will still be things that don't suit that purpose, right? They still occur. There are gonna be patches of chaos or of things not responding. When you get a full-blown monotheist theology, of course, you'll say, well, those were part of the plan, and those are tests, or those are, you know, momentary, indirect means of reaching the goal. So it actually forecloses the act, the final existence of any purposelessness anywhere, 100%. So there can be apparent, there can be instrumental use, but beginning and end, eschaton and genesis, it's all-purpose all the way down. And that goes for, you know, if you take the God out of it and you just say there are like fixed laws of nature or something, and then you say like, Well, the chaos, the ambiguity is only apparent. You have epistemological ambiguity, you don't have ontological ambiguity. If you reverse those, you still have both, okay? I mean, you have still, if you put purposelessness first, from which, since purposes exist here, we are having them, we have desires. Exactly. So if they came from somewhere, that's where they came from.

**Moelle:** Exactly. So you don't deny, to make this clear again, you said it before, you don't deny purpose, you don't deny intention. But you just argue against ultimate purpose.

**Ziporyn:** Exactly.

**Moelle:** And you basically say that purpose is somehow enabled through purposelessness and not the other way around.

**Ziporyn:** That's right. So right, simply said, purpose excludes purposelessness. That's the whole point of purpose. That's what purpose is, what it's for, right? Whereas purposelessness does not exclude, it includes purpose, it includes purposes, you could say more purpose than purpose. And it enables, more than just allows, enables purpose. So the dichotomy, right? So it's not a question of excluding that. You could ask me that same question on a meta level and say, well, you're still arguing against one thing, right? I'm arguing against the ultimacy of purpose. I'm not arguing against purpose. In fact, I want to include as much purpose as possible. You could say many, many purposes. But, sure, I am taking a position, and that's where we get back to the beginning of the book. Yeah, it's a contingent position.

## Ambiguity and Switch of Perspective

**Moelle:** I also go back to the beginning of the book regarding another thing that I find very important. And I think that's directly relevant to what you just said. You say at the beginning of the book, and I can relate to this personally very well, that you could have easily written the opposite book. And I think that has a lot to do with what you just said. Namely, let's say that seeing, acknowledging the ultimate purposelessness that underlies purpose, and seeing the ambiguity that underlies any disambiguation, always kind of pushes you to engage with a different perspective. And this brings us back to what we said at the beginning, let's say, of the existential consequence of your a theology, of the hygiene aspect to it, of, let's say, the practice of thinking that it enables, and the practice of writing. Can you say a little bit more about that?

**Ziporyn:** Yes, thanks. This is super important to me and you're right, it segues perfectly with what we were just talking about, right? So yeah, I mean, that was again a bit of reportage on sort of observing. A strange thing about my own feelings about writing this book.

**Moelle:** Actually, I think it's not strange. I mean, as I said, I experience the same thing all the time. And I think basically most people experience it all the time. But the certain kind of disciplines, the disciplines, both the institutional disciplines that impose on you to identify with a profile, with an academic profile, but also, of course, the more kind of existential disciplines that kind of tie you to a specific meaning, they make us not just not go that way. And they preclude this kind of attitude.

**Ziporyn:** I would like to think you're right about that, most people actually feel, but this would go to... you know, that it's so suppressed that they are maybe not even aware of it, right? We try not to be aware of it. We try not to be aware of it that, you know, and it would go to some of the things we were talking about yesterday, right? Like that even to perceive the other's position is actually already to sort of embody it, the stuff about, you know, mimesis and so on what you're talking about. Duongzi obviously has much on this topic, but I think you're right, just as a matter of direct observation, How can you not, right? Unless you have some ideology that says you must be one thing or the other. And that's exactly the thing I'm talking about in this book. Where would we get such an idea that one must be just one thing, right? It's modeled on a certain picture of God of Nus and Zarke. But I said that because there were readers of the early manuscript who found that section not only like inexplicable, but kind of harmful to the argument. We didn't explain what it was, so let's just say it. Early on, I'd just say, I've been writing this, this is like a screed, an atheist screed. I'm being very harsh in certain parts, and these very impolite sort of critiques of a lot of sacred cows, right?

**Moelle:** Yeah, so there is a strong, social and psychological and institutional pressure to strongly identify with one purpose, with one meaning. And it becomes difficult in the long run to resist that.

**Ziporyn:** Yeah, exactly. But I mean, but so because of that, because of the sort of shrillness of some of the critiques, some of the readers thought, why do you say, as you do, I could just as easily have written the opposite book, defending theism and sort of developing through all the arguments for it, and I somehow can sense that I would feel just as strongly about that, and I would still feel like me in a way. I would still feel stylistically like myself, right? It's just like the faintest, it's not even. a hair of difference. It's like just an alternate way of reading the exact same feeling. And even with all the intellectual apparatus that might go with it, I think I would have a blast as a theologian.

**Moelle:** But again, it's not a complete symmetry because from your position, you can, so to speak, sympathize with your other self. Whereas if you entertain the other position, it becomes more difficult to identify with the other contingent self.

**Ziporyn:** That's the point, right? you can realize, I mean, and those two things don't preclude each other, right? You can be very committed to what it is, and also know I could be just as committed to the other thing. And when I see you committed to that way, yeah, that changes the way I see you.

## Language of Monotheism

**Moelle:** So in relation to this difficulty that we just talked about to, let's say, embrace purposelessness and to embrace ambiguity, contributing to this difficulty is, I think, the language that we are using. Because we don't really have a positive vocabulary to speak about these things, to express these things, and even your atheology uses the negative term atheology. Yes. So I think that is probably a substantial problem, that at least we in the West who have inherited this monotheist, very strong tradition, that it deprives us of a vocabulary, of a positive vocabulary, to express an a theology. And that's also why I think your book is so important, because it provides like a first step towards developing such positive vocabulary that can hopefully, at least to an extent, enrich the current metaphysical vocabulary that we have and that we are kind of stuck with.

**Ziporyn:** Yeah, I mean, it touches on several things. I mean, sure, it's an uphill battle, right? 'Cause we inherit a language with a lot of cultural entailments, and you know, this has come up before that another Nietzsche line, we quote Nietzsche line here, right? Not getting rid of God because we didn't get rid of grammar. He connected that to certain structures in Indo-European languages especially, but of course these are further ramified by centuries of cultural elaboration. And so both you and I think it is useful to have stepped outside of the Indo-European systems, linguistic and cultural and conceptual systems, to sort of see where those sort of prejudicial structures actually have an impact, right? That's helpful in starting to think about this sort of thing. And again, I said it the other day, but I'll just repeat it, that doesn't mean we have a cultural determinism necessarily at all. It does mean that certain things are harder

to express in one way. Yeah, and as you say, they will get expressed negatively or they will be expressed in this sort of less forceful way and sometimes in a much more complicated way that makes them hard to transmit and communicate and to endure in the cultural system. for this piece of writing, I mean, I suppose one thing that's connected to that, I hadn't thought of it in just those terms, but to call it mystical atheism, right? In other words, to associate atheism with mysticism maybe is a step in that direction, or even, I think what will annoy some readers perhaps, is the use of the term religious. here. And again, like the term God, I'm trying to define that in a very specific way, but it's, in a way, an attempt to address this kind of problem. There are terms, and I mean, you can't simply use a word any way you like, but there are ambiguities and there are multiple meanings and implications of terms that we inherit, and we can forefront some of those. And so, there's a specific meaning of the term religious, which I think is plausibly in use, but which I think I'm trying to show is actually better served by atheism of the kind I'm describing here, and in a certain way is even blocked and foreclosed by monotheism. Exactly. And so I mean, it puts me in a weird position of saying monotheism is failed religion, right, or is an obstruction to real religion, right? But of course I have to define religion in a specific way, and I try to make a case, we can talk about it or not.

## Free Will and Determinism

**Moelle:** — Another example for the language and thought problem that comes from the monotheistic tradition is, I think, the obsession with the dualism or with a conceptual pair, free will and determinism. which is still very much haunting debates about theology and atheism. Now, I think it's pretty clear that both notions, both free will and determinism, are... are derived out of a certain paradox, if you want, of the notion of the purposeful God of the news. Because on the one hand, the purposeful, intelligent designer, creator God, obviously somehow was free to do what he wanted. So the notion of free will follows, let's say, from an emulative theism. But at the same time, and also the controlling, intelligent designer has determined everything, right? So that also leads into some form of theism where we think, yeah, everything is determined and there's not much left for us to do. Exactly. So I think it's also super important, both conceptually and existentially, And also socially and politically to move beyond this unhealthy dichotomy of free will and determinism. And again, I think your a theology is very important because it does precisely this.

**Ziporyn:** This is one of the main sort of on the sort of high theoretical level for me, one of the most, it was one of the most challenging, but to me one of the most important things about this book for me, you know. in the case studies, right, whether it was Spinoza or Nietzsche, or less so Bataille, but Spinoza very explicitly, and Nietzsche avowedly, both deny free will, of course, and they tend to be sort of assimilated, especially Spinoza, over into some sort of determinism, into determinism,

even mechanistic determinism. I try to argue in a sort of close reading of Spinoza that that is a misrepresentation of his position, and more so, more obviously so, at least in the case of Nietzsche. But you kind of put your finger on the key issue here, which is an argument that actually Bataille makes most explicitly, which is that both mechanism and teleology are byproducts, again, of the ultimacy of teleology, giving it an ultimate metaphysical or ontological position in our account of what the world is. And I mean, the two sides of that that you just laid out sort of illustrate that quite well, right? Which is to say, it's the idea that there is a single unambiguous cause and a single unambiguous stream of causes, right? You don't get a single cause, you don't get the either/or ontologically without the ontological ultimacy of purpose, actually, right? So, even the existence of separate entities, non-ambiguous entities. I mean, when we say ambiguity, I talk in some other words about ontological ambiguity. If you want to say what freedom would be without free will, it would be ambiguity itself in the sense that it simply means everything is is potentially relevant to anything else. Right. So any two things that come into juxtaposition will change them both. There isn't any single narrative that can describe. what things are, what they must be. And I'd say another thing, it's very well put there about, on the one hand, God is free, and then we emulatively are there, but then the compensatory side is we're determined by God. And there's another wrinkle to that, of course. I mean, another thing you note when you do intercultural work is that free will as a topic of philosophical interest is not really in evidence outside of monotheistic cultures. In other words, and I think that does have to do, again, with the question of responsibility, because free will means there's this sort of first cause of a chain of events, and it's a single thing, and there's nothing before it.

**Moelle:** The isolation of the cause.

**Ziporyn:** Exactly. That means you're accountable. You have to do that, because if you spread it out, the whole idea of guilt disappears. And it's a special problem in monotheism because God's supposed to be all good and all powerful. And yet, in at least the two biggest monotheisms, he also says he's going to punish. So either God's unjust or there has to be some way in which he isn't responsible for your actions. Right. And then you get this sort of mirroring structure, right? Yeah.

**Moelle:** So all kinds of problems resulting from this luma would call it paradoxia, the unfolding of a paradox. It gives rise to a whole theology.

## Robert Sapolsky

**Moelle:** In relation to this, I want to give another example. As I mentioned earlier, I had the honor to talk to Robert Sapolsky about his book Determined, which I think is an excellent book, which from a scientific perspective, I think, perfectly complements your atheism project. However, even more than you, he grapples with the vocabulary problem that we've inherited, which is, I think, why his book is very misleadingly called

Determined. He's not really actually advocating any determinism. And this is again like an example for how we are suffering from the heritage of the vocabulary of the monotheistic tradition that we're part of. And he uses nevertheless, I think, another vocabulary that would express both his but also your ideas better. And so he talks about such things as emergence, complexity, the multiplicity of perspectives and so forth. Can you say a little bit about potential alignment between such views, views that focus on emergence and complexity, and that come from contemporary natural science perspectives with your a theology?

**Ziporyn:** No, I mean, I agree in the basic thrust of that comparison, which is to say we're talking about, we're talking about orders emerging from chaos or unities emerging from multiplicities, right, as sort of temporary alliances that are discernibly coherent, but not definitively coherent, right, and not closed off in that way, and are continually evolving and changing, and yet are identifiable. So I think that basic intuition is very close. The worries I always have about it when, is that there's usually, just as what you said about determined, right? Because there are sort of metaphysical background issues that remain part of the framework and the way the discussion sometimes can go. I can't say this about Sapolsky's book, which I haven't read. I've seen your interview with him though. Is that, you know, you sometimes get like a second order disavowal of ambiguity. You see what I mean? Right, so there's, this is an event, and this is the way that is now, full stop. Right. You know? So even though it's composed of this sort of, sort of temporary alignment of ambiguous and irreducibly multiple sources, we can sort of make a final judgment about what it is. Right. Right? Full stop. And I worry about that a little bit. I mean, this is similar to things in, for example, process philosophy, the metaphysics of process philosophy, right? Still has a teleological bent about things disambiguating to a point, and then that, there's a kind of baseline of facticity to that, where there's a God's eye perspective sort of implied, right, a single vision This is the scientific story. So this is the way in which scientism, and I wouldn't accuse him of this, but I mean, that's kind of a background structure, we're just talking about objective truth, that will eliminate perspectivism entirely. It's rather challenging to start talking about multi-perspectivism as sort of hardcore, you can go way down a Zhuangzi tunnel or some of these Buddhist tunnels, into how do we talk intelligibly and communicably without committing to sort of, a final vocabulary of any kind, right? so if you bracket it and you say, within the vocabulary of this, we can speak of this, and I think it's a very powerful way to speak in terms of emergence, evolution, I think, sort of this self-forming of

**Moelle:** I mean, I would call it following Maturana and Luman autopoetic rather than allopoetic. Yes, autopoetic. Self-reproducing, evolving, emerging, rather than creation and creationist. Creationist? Creationist, yeah. Or intentional.

**Ziporyn:** I mean, I mean, and I think that's, yes, that's absolutely right. I mean, the term autopoiesis It's a little bit, now I will bring in a little Chinese thing, right? Which is, it's a similar problem that comes up in, say, the so-called neo-Daoist thinker, Kua Xiang, right? Uses a term like Zhiran.

**Moelle:** Exactly. I think Zhiran is very close. He is very close. And Zhiran is perhaps even more complex. Can you just explain very briefly the complexity of this?

## Ziran ☒☒

**Ziporyn:** Yeah, so yes, I mean, it is a notion, it literally means self-so, right? And so, you know, it is used to deny a creator or even an intelligible single story about the origin, the causal origin of things. To me, it's a fascinatingly powerful concept, actually in terms of my own trajectory here, a great, really interest of mine that sort of pointed me toward these kinds of questions, right? It's seeing that, you know, he's also a very outspoken critic of the idea of a creator, even of Tao, as any kind of a substantive sort of source. But Zuran, I found when I was working on that topic, is a fascinating concept because it kind of combines convergence of things that seem to be dichotomous, not just to us, like necessity, freedom, and contingency, right? Things happen, there's no reason you can give for them, that's the sort of contingency side. They cannot be otherwise, right? There's no possible way to change them, so no attempt thing you can do to them can change them, that's a necessity. And they are self, there is no extrinsic source to them, that's the sort of freedom side, not free will. So I mean, I bring it up actually not just because it's an interesting and relevant thing to this, but because like autopoiesis, it can and it has, and has among readers and scholars sometimes, in my opinion, misinterpret the self part of that, like the auto in autopoiesis, right? And again, because they read it through the lens, of either a direct or an indirect sort of new says arcade model, which is to say self-creation would mean I create me, right? Or if you take the indirect route, it would be, okay, I don't do it consciously, but there's this thing called my nature, right? And that forces me to do this one thing. So that's the only reason I kind of back away from that language sometimes.

**Moelle:** I see. Clearly, Also, with regard to the notion of Ziran or autopoiesis, your aetheology bridges physical, metaphysical, and then even, as you said yourself, religious elements. And in the context of this, And also in the context of trying to come up with a kind of new positive vocabulary, you introduced the notion of the oceanic. Can you talk a little bit about that?

## The Oceanic

**Ziporyn:** Yeah, yes. So, I mean, that is a term that has some historical roots. You know, one of them, we were just talking about some Taoist sources, the water type of metaphors, are they prominent in both the Tao Te Ching and in the Zhuangzi, and really, you know, Huai knows all sorts of things. But also, it comes up in Freud, Civilization in Discontent, as a marker of mystical religion, right? Where this sort of encompassing totality that you can't fall out of, which a friend of Freud suggests that's

really, you talk about the father image in religion, but there's a deeper core, it's this thing. So, I know there's a lot of other water bits and pieces we could get into in a lot of our writers, actually. But what's interesting to me about it, and then Bataille is one of my main figures in this book, has this image of water in water to talk about. Yes, it's a great image. Can you explain a little bit about it? Well, I mean, the idea there is that there is, he's talking about animal existence, and he's even talking about seemingly conflict among animals, that one animal eating another, as a kind of continuity with this kind of very vaguely separated out pieces, like a swirl of water or a wave within water, where there may be resistances and crashes and things like that, but it's quite a different kind of an encounter than you would have between 2 distinct beings, which with their own purposes, clashing, right, with their plans or something. And when we move to that level, to Bataille's use of it, the interesting thing is that, going back to our discussion of oneness, I kind of try to distinguish an exclusive oneness from an inclusive oneness, and even more so in this case, sort of an ordered oneness and a chaos oneness, right? It also has Taoist implications. So the thing about the oceanic, I'm sort of borrowing that term, And so it has this one meaning of like the eternal, tranquil oneness, right? But actually the ocean, per se, like the eating each other animals, is this mass of microcurrents and crosscurrents and contracurrents and up and down, and there's no stillness anywhere in the ocean, and there's no unity in the ocean. It's a kind of unity, right, which means it's everything was interconnected and affects everything else, but it doesn't settle into any one shape. Right. It's the lubricity, the liquidity of water, that kind of a oneness. Right. So I often, I made a little, sometimes use that as a stand-in for it's oneness, which is also extreme multiplicity, right?

## William James

**Moelle:** To expand a little bit on this sort of religious theme on the book, I had the impression that somehow you're making an argument that is similar to an argument made by William James about religion, but somehow also it's reverse. James basically says, in his essay, Will to Believe, that if you don't believe in God, you kind of close yourself off from a certain... intellectual, existential, spiritual dimension of life. But you seem to make the opposite argument, that if you don't entertain an atheist atheology, then you actually close yourself off of a certain spiritual, existential dimension.

**Ziporyn:** Yes, so, okay, so this may be a little bit of a digression on the term Religion in a moment, but I mean that that that that maybe is an easy way to get at it openness, right? so Yes, I that's why I sort of insist on using the term religious It's exactly to sort of piggyback on while also kind of subverting Things like the suggestion in Freud about mystical religion is Oceanic or something like this right that and there is this idea right the idea there Is that okay? We're stuck in our secular world with its ends and means and its social purposes and our social roles, and we're kind of locked into these roles. And what religion does is sort of this Archimedean point outside the

world opens that up, right? Because you're sort of getting this alternate narrative. You're getting this alternate story, right? And so, you know, whatever you thought was true, I am a slave, but it turns out I'm one of the saints, right? There's this other thing going on, there's another system of values, an alternate view that opens out things. So basically what I'm trying to claim in using religion in this way is that this is kind of a false dawn type of religion, and that idea in James that you just sort of summarized Yeah, that is the essence of religious experience as people use that term, which is this sort of sudden shift of perspective where I'm freed of exactly the kind of thing that maybe Bataille talks about and exactly what is problematic about the purposive ultimacy, which is I'm a link in a chain. Anything I do is for the purpose of something outside of it, which will also be for something outside of it. Even if God is autotelic, we're all still locked in this thing aimed toward this single purpose, right? And suddenly this alternate purpose comes in. That's religion. Somebody comes up with some wacko idea, right? Like, no, the world is made out of green cheese, and the purpose of life is to roll on the ground as much, or whatever it is, and if I accept it or even entertain it, my horizons instantly They expand, right? And that feeling of the expanded horizons and suddenly the contingency of my prior commitments, right? And the ambiguity of them, like, Oh, I'm doing everything I was doing before, but now it is ambiguous. The ambiguity is restored because I see that, okay, on the one hand, I'm... this thing that the world thinks I am, but on the other hand, the way God sees me is this totally other way, right? And so I want to identify that what's truly the religious sort of moment as that transition, the moment of the kind of disclosure of the ambiguity. But the reason that theism therefore would fail on its own terms is because the second meaning it gives swallows the first meaning so completely that the whole point was to unlock you from a single meaning. So we give this wedge in that opens that up to this alternate meaning, but now alternate meaning itself becomes outlawed. So you get even more locked in. Right, I mean that is,

**Moelle:** I think, a serious problem of, let's say, vulgar monotheism as it is preached and propagated. that, you see God in everything. You see God in whatever you look at, whatever you read, you see God in your relationship.

**Ziporyn:** Yes.

**Moelle:** And everything is somehow reduced to... being somehow meant by, in the service of, connected with God. And that is clearly highly reductive.

**Ziporyn:** Yes, and restricting, right? And the opposite of openness, right? In other words, that it's the... I mean,

## Donald Trump

**Moelle:** we see it very strongly also in American politics. I saw last night, Your president, former president, Mr. Trump, claiming that, you know, he is also basically an instrument of God. And so his campaign, too, is– Of course.

**Ziporyn:** You believe you have more to do. You weren't done. You were spared for a reason. Well, God believes that, I guess.

**Moelle:** You know, of course.

## Back to Purpose and Meaning

**Ziporyn:** Don't you know AC from the bullet and everything. Oh, I mean, this is right, the key thing, right? And interestingly, you know, so the more determinate a notion you have of God, the more narrow and fixed that connection to God is going to be, right? If I have anything I know about God, every single piece of information I have about God means when I'm relating everything to it, I'm strangling my meaning down more and more.

**Moelle:** And I think– And this is kind of the second order dimension that I said, whatever you do, whatever you whatever you encounter, all your emotions, on a second level, they're all kind of being translated into something that was... somehow, as I said, either in the service or thought by or in line with what God would think or do.

**Ziporyn:** That's right, that's right. And I mean, now I'll play God's advocate for a second. I mean, you know, I think a legitimate theistic response to that line of critique is to say, but because God is so vast and transcendent of any finite category, connection to God is not a single narrowing, right? It's an opening. Sure. And this is where we get to things like the mystical theology, negative theology type of problems in the book. And sometimes it doesn't even have to go that far. It has to be, well, one of those compensatory theist positions is to say there is a purpose but we can't know it. Sure. So I'm connecting it to this unknown purpose. And as I said, that comes quite, to some degree, phenomenologically has a lot of overlap with what I call emilative atheism, mystical atheism, but I still contend, and I argue in the book, you know, the sting is in the tail there, right? That the purposivity per se, and at least the knowledge that it's a single, consistent purposivity, continues to rule Even that, seemingly expansive trade-off, you locked it back down, right?

## Spinoza and Beatitude

**Moelle:** Yeah, but in that same vein, you use another term. to kind of show why monotheism is bad religion. The term Beatitude. Oh yeah. Can you talk a little bit about that?

**Ziporyn:** Well, right, I mean, okay, so the Beatitudes, right, it's the Latin for the thing in the Sermon on the Mount, but means, you know, the vision of, the blissful vision of God, right? And Spinoza uses the term, so that's really where I'm picking that up from. Yes, I use this religious language a bit, and You know, in discussing Spinoza, of course, I mean, it's in him. But, you know, Nietzsche uses some of this religious

language, too. He will use the word, not only health type of language, as you talked about, but he will say, you know, by denying God, we redeem the world. Only thus do we redeem the world. The redemption of the world, or, you know, liberations, willing liberates, that sort of language. I'm basically tracking the way, you know, Spinoza has, He talks about rational life, right? And partially that has to do with dispelling the notion of free will. But then there's kind of another thing that happens that's maybe is a little more grandiose, as I think your word, has more resonance with what traditional mystical religion tended to celebrate. And it does have something to do with, and again, the other sort of more traditional religious category I'll bring in, is that this notion of ambiguity as ultimate will accomplish that elusive unity of finitude and infinity that has been the sort of stated goal of ways of linking these two things as part of what religion is all about, and especially what mystical religion's all about, right? The instantiation of the infinite and the finite.

## Daoism and Buddhism

**Moelle:** Somewhat ambiguously, or perhaps even ironically, you're using this vocabulary that comes from the Christian tradition, like Beatitude, to make your points about atheism, atheology. But of course, primarily, your sources are Taoist and Buddhist sources. Can you just say a little bit about how your position is grounded in both Taoist and Buddhist positions?

**Ziporyn:** Sure. Yeah, well, it's certainly true that, you know, I mean, for many years, I've been mainly occupied working in, particularly in Chinese classical philosophical texts. And we mentioned Guoxiang already, but I would say that was maybe the point when I first read, and Guoxiang, commentator on the Zhuangzi, an indication that this way of reading the early Taoist text, which I knew in English translation, but that that wasn't a crazy way to read it, but actually had some legs in that, in the tradition itself, in fact, wrapped up a lot of things in the position. So this sort of atheist, I wouldn't have called it that at the time, but this sort of anti-foundationalist, but yet, quote unquote, mystical consciousness, or some kind of expansive opening up That was different to me from secular philosophy in a way at that time I wouldn't have been able to identify, but now I would maybe say it has to do with this, you know, emulative or compensatory atheism that we don't have. many examples of the amulet of atheist position, but that in the Chinese tradition, particularly in the, I would say in the Confucian tradition already there's a pushback. It's basically the idea of wuwei, non-doing, non-deliberative action, right? This is the, it's a Taoist, the Taoists run with that, and it really reaches a high point in Guoxiang, things like that, but it really informs the whole tradition with the exception of the Moists, right, that we have an ultimately wu-wei cosmos, and that this is profoundly important for human life and for ethics and even the ultimate ideal. Wu-wei meaning non-deliberate, non-purposes, as against yu-wei meaning for a purpose and with deliberate intent. So that was the

thing about the Chinese tradition that both inspired and attracted me, but also made me see that, wow, this is weird. We don't have this on the other side, yeah.

**Moelle:** I think purposeless action is better and deeper. translation for Wu Wei than effortless, actually.

**Ziporyn:** I do too, I do too. And I mean, and I expect pushback on that, but come on, it's Wei and it's Wei, right? So, yeah. And so, you know, so there it is. It starts in this sort of idea of ritual opposed to the Mohist proto-theism, which is also kind of a, you know, the Mohists, It's not to get to technical, but they have a yo-wei cosmos, right? And I mean, there's heaven's will, and there's reward and punishment, and there's deliberative action, and there's acting for reasons, and so on. So it was amazing to me that there was such early pushback, and that it kind of won out. It kind of became the dominant trend there. And then, of course, the Taoists take that to new heights. And then when the Buddhists come in, they really transform Indian Buddhism in ways that I think are deeply, you know, this idea of ontological ambiguity as sort of how they interpret what was maybe a purely apophatic notion of emptiness in Indian Buddhism, now really comes to mean ambiguity, is the language that is used. And this has developed, you know, I have great interest in Tiantai Buddhism, which I think really runs with that idea. especially in sort of its ethical implications. So, and really is willing to think it through to the last final consequence. So, that was not only greatly interesting to me in its own right, but also shed light. So, that nuisance arcade passage is really maybe, this is what is lacking, and there's no equivalent of in the Chinese tradition, unless it be the most sort of groping attempt at that. So, you know, the idea is not that there isn't a notion of heaven or a notion of God. I think most cultures have that at some point, at some level of their cultural development, but that the platonic piece is sort of special in that it gave it sort of intellectual respectability and credence, connected it to these other issues that a kind of elite intellectual class took up. And so when you see the opposite thing happen, or the absence of that, where you have the sort of philosophical elaborations coming from the wu-wei side, right? Even though, of course, there's a lot of space for yu-wei that allowed for deliberate action, but ultimate dimension's always the non-purposuit in the Chinese cases. Right. And I have a long appendix, which is online, the book where I go through all those kind of tools.

## You ☒, Playfulness and Humor

**Moelle:** One thing, one last thing maybe, as you're already hinted at, you seem to have, at least in my view, a certain, let's say, tendency to pick on the more grandiose notion from Buddhism and Taoism, which are definitely very strongly present there. And also on the somewhat grandiose notions from the Western tradition, right? We talked about Beatitude. But I think in both Chinese Buddhism and particularly in Taoism, there is actually also a very strong emphasis on the mundane and on the, let's

say, experience of ambiguity in a very everyday level. And one core notion in Taoism that you also actually talk a lot about in your translation of the Zhuangzi, is the notion of yo and this idea of playfulness, which would be probably the most simple translation of yo. So isn't it also possible to reconnect the oceanic and beatitude and oneness to, let's say, a very simple, mundane, everyday playfulness?

**Ziporyn:** Yeah, absolutely. And I don't know, It's a question in my mind whether this is just a stylistic preference in our, you and me, in terms of the way we approach this kind of issue. I would totally cop to the grandiosity claim. That's really true, but I would also, so much so that I almost want to say, Nietzsche said, Mother Nietzsche quote, early Nietzsche, art is the true metaphysical activity of man, right? This was birth of tragedy, time Nietzsche. I almost want to say humor, play, wandering is the true metaphysical activity of man, which is the grandiose version of just saying. But, you know, I have argued, going back to the Tentai question, that this structure of a joke really is the sort of ultimate structure of reality. That's a reading of Tentai. And I mean, the emphasis on the mundane, it's absolutely right, right? That's another one of the sort of distinguishing features of these Chinese schools, actually, is that all three are actually Confucianism too. Right, of course. They really are kind of allergic to highfalutin metaphysical speculation in the kind of almost like Neoplatonic type of style. And it's always back down to the earth and down to the particular and to the moment and to a sweeping and pouring water and things like that, right? I mean, so it's, when we talk about the unity of the finite and the infinite and the sort of big sounding turns like that, I mean, yeah, I think where this ends up is, Yeah, all you need is, it's all the finite, right? I mean, everything is the finite, including the infinite. I just want to say, or you could say the other way too, right? But you're never getting away from the, from the infinite is just.

**Moelle:** A word that we always use on the basis of our affinity.

**Ziporyn:** That's right. So there's never going beyond the finite. It's just that the finite is already beyond the finite in that it's ambiguous. That's all, right? I mean, it's just not any one thing. It's already more than any one claim about what it is, right? So, but that's not found by moving away from it. It's found by going deeper into it or just settling, you know. You know, another thing, you know, a technical thing in Tanta, right, that you get, it's by narrowing it in a way that the ambiguity of it blossoms, right? So, I don't know, you know, but nevertheless, you're still right that, I mean, you know, we have a lot of common ground in the way we read these things, you know, for many, many years, really. But there is a different style, and it's true that I don't know what makes me, I mean, want to dialogue in that particular direction. And part of it is that, you know, yeah, as you said, Spinoza goes there, right? Nietzsche goes there, Petai goes there. They have that dimension to them. But it's still another one of those contingent personality things, right? I mean, you need something, a little stronger drug to–.

**Moelle:** No, no, maybe you just invested more time and effort to actually read these difficult passages.

**Ziporyn:** But I think it amounts to, right, the playful, there's a different way of being playful in the horizon of, the absence of an ultimate purpose. And that would be, and probably all Beatitude, maybe that's what it amounts to.

**Moelle:** All right, let's end here with an emphasis on the finitude of all things. All right, sounds good. Thank you very much, Chris.

**Ziporyn:** Thanks.

# Epilogue

**Moelle:** So, Brooke, I think what we should have made more clearly in the interview, in the conversation, is kind of to really emphasize that this hypothesis of the monotheist purposeful God, that there's basically no evidence for it, that it... You know, it's very clear, for me it's at least, it's probably even more clear that global warming is man-made. That obviously there is no purposeful creator God, no intentional design. That seems to me completely evident. And secondly, it also seems to me completely evident that this notion that we are, you know, even capable of following an ultimate purpose, that we are in control of ourselves, or should be in control of ourselves.

**Moelle:** That this is equally, has nothing to do with the actual empirical reality that constitutes our life. I mean, we are subject to all kinds of factors that condition, what we do, what we think, what we feel, what we are talking right now, how we move right now, and so forth. We're not the masters of our fate. We are like miles away from sovereign, hundreds of thousands of miles away from this ideal of sovereign individuality that follows the monotheistic idea. And there's no reason for us to, you know, try to reach that idea.

**Ziporyn:** Yeah. Yeah, I mean, and certainly if you have any commitment to, you know, trying to make the most reasonable hypothesis on the basis of facts, that's sort of a non-starter, I think most would agree. What really, you know, sort of is maybe odd or just so persistent a tendency is that in spite of that, there is such a kind of, almost a psychological need to somehow posit, even if we're willing to admit, okay, maybe we don't know for sure, but it's the best hypothesis. So many dodges like that through the history of Western philosophy, but also ways of talking about religious faith. But I think it's more than that, it's more what you're getting at in the second point. is you will hear philosophers talking about the human as if the human just means the agential. Exactly. The purposive, right? So we have to look at things in terms of the human perspective. We can't really escape it. We just are purposive and that's sort of you know, conditions how we should think about everything, right, without maybe, it tends to not notice that to be a person already is not just to be purposive or in control, right? It's just not what even our control is shot through with, maybe even just is a way of, you know, is at the same time a kind of total contingency itself, right?

**Moelle:** I mean, this, Resonates directly with what Sapolsky is saying in his book, right? I mean from a scientific perspective It's completely evident hundred percent

that there is no free will right and then he talks to analytic philosophers your Anglo-American colleagues and they basically say yeah There is no empirical evidence for it, but it must be the case, right? We as humans nevertheless must insist on free will which is basically the same thing purposefulness and agency and sovereign individual.

**Ziporyn:** Exactly, and isn't it interesting that sort of a replay of, not just sort of the sophisticated version of that in Kant, right? Where you make a place for these regulative ideals that even though, in fact because there is no empirical evidence for them and can be none. But just the whole way that the notion of faith comes into religious discussions, right? I mean, that's sort of granting the point, sure. Yes, on the basis of rationality, no, but this is why I talk about Tertullian and people like that in the book, right? Which is fair enough, right? Okay, I believe because it's absurd, if you're going to go there, We can't have this conversation. But then the question is, then why, because it's the same instinct as those philosophers you're referencing, which is to say, if we lose this, we lose everything, right? 'Cause the only thing of value, the meaning, value, control– We gain everything. That's supposed to be the point, as we're trying to make, right? That's why we got to have, you know, work through alternatives and some of these figures that we're talking about today, they have done that beautifully. Yeah.

Hans-Georg Moelle & Brook Ziporyn
How God Ruins Everything, Including Zizek's Atheism
Oct 2, 2024

Carefree Wandering. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a09z_HH549o>