

Part I

CONTEMPORARY SALVATION NARRATIVES



Chapter 1

ONLY WE CAN SAVE OURSELVES: AN ATHEISTS 'SALVATION'

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In 1973, Paul Kurtz and Edwin H. Wilson, who were humanists and non-theists, drafted the second Humanist Manifesto. It outlined a malleable but clear affirmation of guiding life aims and principals that could foster 'a secular society on a planetary scale' (Kurtz and Wilson 1973) and were not grounded with reference to, or authority vested in, any transcendent deity. Indeed, it was made clear that '*no deity will save us; we must save ourselves*' (Ibid. [emphasis added]). Ask any atheist you meet where 'salvation' lies for themselves and others, and the meaning of these words will surely be conveyed in his or her answer. For those who live life outside of a religio-spiritual framework, 'salvation', prosperity, meaning and hope lie not in an ethereal realm only to be accessed through prayer or an afterlife, but can emerge from careful reflection of the natural world that surrounds us in the present (Goodenough 1998). For the atheist, 'salvation' may be found in the here and now, and it is from this that any future realization of a secular 'salvation' must proceed. However, before 'secular salvation' can be explored, we must understand the building blocks of a traditionally theological concept of salvation. Does salvation have any relevance for those who are godless?

The traditional binaries utilized in the study of religion, such as the distinction between the sacred and the profane (Eliade 1959), have permeated the academic study of it for much of the twentieth century. This distinction situated religion as something *sui generis*, and helped to established religious studies departments as autonomous from other disciplines (McCutcheon 1997), while serving to protect the 'specialness' of religious experience as something that was only available to the religiously inclined (Taves 2009). However, the reality of lived experience is seldom reflected in such a crude either/or dichotomy (Coleman and Hood 2015; Feyerabend 1999). Therefore, is the concept of 'salvation' available only in the realm of the sacred? That is to say, can salvation be conceived of outside of its historically theological roots, and what might it look like for the atheist?¹

In this chapter, we begin by deconstructing the notion of 'salvation' utilizing a building block approach that allows us to compare *constructs* that may have

features in common (Taves 2009). Secondly, we situate the building blocks of ‘salvation’ into the pragmatic framework of horizontal and vertical transcendence (HVT) that makes it available to the believer and non-believer alike (Streib and Hood 2013; Coleman, Silver and Hood in press) and understands ‘religion’ as a natural phenomenon. Thirdly, we introduce a series of vignettes gathered from two previous studies (Silver et al. 2014; Streib and Hood, in press), in which atheists were asked about beliefs, values and commitments that were currently important to them.² Our intent is not to simply tack the label of ‘secular’ in front of ‘salvation’ and think that any concept with a theological basis must have a secular counterpart. However, there is no, *prima facie* reason why an atheist and theist might experience the natural world differently. It is only their interpretation of it that may differ. While the participants were not directly asked about ‘salvation’, these examples serve as starting points for interpreting and understanding a naturalized conception of ‘salvation’ as something available in the here and now, based on one’s beliefs and behaviours.

Pieces of Salvation: A Building Block Approach

The Building Blocks

Does ‘salvation’ denote something that falls into some inherently religious realm? Can it be understood apart from its traditionally theological and vertically transcendent *cynosure*? The answer, we argue, is: ‘absolutely’. In conceptualizing ‘salvation’ as a lived experience that is available to all – regardless of personal ontology – we embrace a building-block approach that will allow us to identify its constituent parts for the purposes of identifying these pieces in a secular, non-religious context. This framework has been elucidated best by Taves (2009) and emphasizes that, ‘rather than attempt to characterize the abstract nouns religion or spirituality, some theorists [such as Taves herself] have argued for a building block approach that conceives of religions and spiritualities as disparate wholes made up of parts, such as *beliefs and practices*’ (2013: 139 [emphasis added]). Thus, in order to avoid the presupposition that salvic experience is somehow *sui generis*, we embrace Taves’ ‘ascriptive approach’, which ‘frees us to compare things that have features in common, whether they are deemed *religious or not*’ (2009: 19 [emphasis added]). Here, the notion of ‘specialness’ is of particular importance, as Taves draws from Durkheim’s (1912/95) concept of the ‘sacred’ – things set apart – and ‘generate[s] a second-order concept of “specialness”’ (2009: 27). This analytical term, ‘specialness’, can beg the question if we cannot determine the conditions under which such specialness is acknowledged. Classic theoretical approaches allow us to identify deeply moving, important, meaningful and transcendent experiences that one may be ‘ultimately concerned’ with (Tillich 1958) as perhaps the best exemplar of specialness. Importantly, individuals need not deem these experiences religious, nor do they need to be deemed such by researchers in order to be studied.

The Building Blocks of Salvation

Historically speaking, salvation has been a theological concept that sought to free the *soul* from its inherent sinfulness through the profession of faith in a deity, and by adherence to associated rituals in the Judeo-Christian tradition and doctrinal religions of the East (Boyer 2003). In Christianity, there is a focus on one's individual relationship with, and belief in, God. Salvic notions of an afterlife and a better place begin with this self-professed belief: 'Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned' (Mk 16.16 ESV). First and foremost, salvation, at least in Christianity, begins with belief in God and his Son as the only and necessary means to salvation, which is not secular by the very claim that it is for 'eternity'. However, and as the reading demonstrated, there is a ritual-action orientated component as well, notably for this passage, the ritual of baptism. Other rituals and actions that are to be carried out extend to 'spreading the good news of God's love', and the Eucharist, to name only a few. For example, in the Christian serpent handling traditions of Appalachia, who take Mark 16:17-18 ('these signs will follow them that believe'),³ to be a literal directive from God, the ritual and tradition of handling serpents is not a direct means to salvation, but an act of obedience without which salvation is impossible (Hood and Williamson 2008). In Christianity, salvation has been variously conceived, ranging from the predestination of Calvin to the grace of Luther. However, the combination of belief in God and action signalling such sincerity of belief seems to characterize much of the diverse salvational beliefs of Christians. These components, and combined output, can be represented in the prayer of the Catholic Saint, Thomas Aquinas (Aquinas and Clark 2000: 435). He writes: 'Grant me, O Lord my God, a mind to know you, a heart to seek you, wisdom to find you, conduct pleasing to you, faithful perseverance in waiting for you, and a hope of finally embracing you.'

Using Saint Thomas' prayer as a representative heuristic for the path to salvation, we can identify two broad building blocks to salvation.

1. We can identify the *cognitive component*: belief. Belief is represented in being open to an exchange of knowledge, 'a mind to know you', a will to uncover such knowledge, 'a heart to seek you', and the ability to locate an end point for the search once it has begun, 'wisdom to find you'. Thus, salvation can be said to have, first and foremost, a cognitive component that entails being open to learning, desiring to learn, and wisdom to recognize what one seeks.
2. We can also identify a *behavioural component*: actions/deeds. The action component is represented in one's conduct and behaviour, 'conduct pleasing to you', and in the determination and steadfastness of one's behaviour, 'faithful perseverance in waiting for you'. Thus, while belief is important, the behavioural component is necessary for salvation as well. One must behave accordingly in hopes that said actions and deeds produce a positive effect in bringing salvation to fruition and in maintaining it while alive.

The two components combine to produce the possibility of ‘salvation itself’: a better place, if only held by the distinctive religious concepts of faith. Once belief has been professed, and one’s positive behaviour has been expressed, salvation is available: ‘a hope of finally embracing you’, perhaps now held onto firmly in faith that exceeds either belief or action. In this sense, faith is non-falsifiable, as is ‘salvation’ for Christians. This is quite problematic for science.

Broadly speaking, we have identified building blocks of ‘salvation’ that can be used to locate and identify a secular ‘salvation’: a belief component that holds ultimate knowledge and an action-orientated component that brings such belief and knowledge to fruition and maintains them, ultimately leading to ‘salvation’.

At this point, one might ask, ‘But where is God in your salvation?’ The French Emperor, Napoléon, posed a similar question in the eighteenth century to the mathematician Laplace when he presented his model of the planetary orbits to the emperor (de Morgan 2008). Upon Laplace detailing his model, Napoléon asked him why he had not factored the Creator into his equation, to which he famously responded, ‘I had no need of that hypothesis.’ Laplace’s point wasn’t that there was no God, only that the postulation of such a thing did not contribute to his scientific investigation. Similarly, and for our present purposes, we have no need to situate ‘salvation’ as something that can be only experienced at the hand of the divine. A building block approach that embraces the category of ‘specialness’ over notions of *sui generis* will do just fine. However, and as the next section will briefly detail, God is not ruled out of the equation, He is only an option.

Horizontal and Vertical Transcendence: A Framework for Religious Studies

One approach that led the sociology of religion for much of the twentieth century was that of methodological atheism. This idea, most noticeably taken up by Peter Berger in *The Sacred Canopy* (1967), called for ruling out the possibility of the Transcendent a priori in social scientific explanation (Hood 2012). However, one important question in the social scientific study of religion is what one may be responding to (Ibid.). The methodological atheism of the twentieth century denied the investigation into a ‘what’ before it could even be asked. Conversely, many religious studies, psychological, and cognitive approaches merely affirm the notion that religion is inherently special, easily defined (although each scholar has a different definition!), and assign the label of ‘religion’ not only to the self-professed believer, but most unfortunately, the non-believer as well (e.g. Barrett and Lanman 2008; Streib and Hood 2013). Thus, two ways of approaching human experience in general, and ‘religious’ experience in particular, have been at war, both within, and across disciplines. One merely affirms the category of religion (and belief in god/spirits/the Transcendent) applying it to almost

anything, while the other simply denies that such an object could ever exist. What is a scholar to do?

One approach that has sought to embrace this problem (between affirming and rejecting the Transcendent), and not sidestep it, has been the framework of horizontal and vertical transcendence (HVT). Here, HVT is best suited for inquiry into domains of religious and/or 'special' experiences as it is methodologically agnostic (Coleman, Silver and Hood in press). In short, this approach allows for human experience to function along a continuum: epistemologically speaking, any experience that can be had can be had by anyone.⁴ However, what is unique about HVT is that it is based on taking seriously the personal ontological framework of the individual(s). Is the worldview of the subject framed with reference to a vertically Transcendent reality (God, Ahura Mazda, Allah) or does the individual find all the meaningful, special and awe-inspiring experiences in the here and now, having no need for a point of reference that posits a 'culturally postulated superhuman agent' (McCauley and Lawson 2002: x)? By positioning the acceptance or rejection of a superhuman deity-agent at the centre of our inquiry, and allowing for the possibility that experiences can be had by anyone and that it is only the label 'religion' that is traded in public discourse, we can ask meaningful questions that do not rule out the possibility that one group can have experiences that the other can't. The framing of experience is important, and the terms we use to do so matter. Just as James (1902/85: 33) saw the dispute over what he called 'personal religion' as a 'dispute about names' and even subtitled his *Varieties of Religious Experience* as 'a study of human nature', applying the label of 'religion' – implicitly or explicitly – was merely a decision bounded by language. However, even with this essentialist claim, the interpretation of experience as 'religious' is largely a political decision and, as such, deserves to be politicized as any other social institution (Guevara 2000). 'Salvation' can surely be had by the atheist, but the terms used to denote 'salvation' (the very term itself) and the baggage those terms may carry must be put aside in order for the experience to be realized in non-religious populations. While a typical response from the theist might be 'anyone can have salvation, but only after they have been "saved"', this is a theological statement, and not an empirical one. Given the prevalence of religious language used by theists to characterize important experiences throughout history, the secularists confrontation with this language may be necessary in order to express experiences that are 'special', however not in a specifically religious sense in a world inhabited by gods or God.

If 'salvation' can be broadly considered to relate to ultimately meaningful beliefs and behaviours, then we must look to atheists themselves to tell us what beliefs, values and commitments are meaningful to them. In the next section, we present several vignettes that centre on the idea that the world can be a better place and that it is one's responsibility to make it so through one's actions. Madeline and Lily's vignettes embody the Enlightenment ideal of contributing to and bettering humanity through participation in scientific and

educational endeavours. Harold and Joey's vignettes further contribute to this ideal, suggesting that the limiting of pain and the promotion of flourishing of all conscious creatures is a 'basic belief'. Finally, Jill's excerpt draws attention to the role of responsibility in effectuating this ideal, which some atheists may see as an imperative once we realize that only we can save ourselves.

Secular 'Salvation': Beliefs in Action

Madeline's Symbolic Immortality as 'Salvation'

One central notion of 'salvation' is that it traditionally implies an afterlife – a 'better place' beyond our current world where such a 'salvation' and improvement of the human condition (the individual) can be located, and which can be reached only after a bodily death. For the non-theist, who typically believes that an 'afterlife' rests beyond the current borders of our present knowledge and sensibility, the only way to know about whether an afterlife exists is to die. It might appear that secular salvation is limited to these same restraints. Specifically, if 'salvation' must occur after death, and the non-theist believes that nothing happens after you die (or that what does or does not occur after death is at least unknowable), can salvation still be found? That depends on whether or not one believes that the actions one has taken while alive have the ability to effectuate change long after one's death. What happens to us after we die? As 27-year-old 'Madeline', who was in a PhD science programme, says:

Uhm well the person is just gone but uhm the idea of the person like lives with those who lived with them, remember them; are affected by their decisions or affected by their lives many, many years later and that's amazing their impression lives is in our thoughts and our thoughts in thoughts; thoughts within thoughts. So it would be; we do in fact carry memories with us and how real and how actual those memories are depends but if I were to die right now the memory of me would carry with the people who know me and if I had any impact on science and later on the scientist, they might have a memory of not me, but my contribution to science.

Here we can see that even after death, regardless of whether there is an afterlife, one's very actions (or inactions) while one is alive – that is, in the here and now – have great power to 'live on' and affect change long after the individual is gone. This is certainly not a new idea by any stretch; the notion of symbolic immortality (Hood and Morris 1983), and generativity has been around for a long time. Madeline wants to be remembered not merely as an individual, but as someone who contributed to knowledge that will benefit humanity. What is important to note is that she sees the possibility that the very actions she takes in the here and now have great potential to cause positive change long after she is gone and is no longer 'here', in the 'now'. If 'salvation' is thought of as a better place that can be

had by positive beliefs that are put into action, and Madeline is able to make an impact on the world around her through the production of scientific knowledge, she might have 'salvation' – a secular version.

Knowledge as 'Salvation'

To the Christian, salvation *cannot* occur with the explicit rejection of God once revealed to the knower. While grace is always a theological option, for the person to find his or her place in God's presence, one has to value and seek knowledge of transcendence that is vertically connected with a belief in God or gods. However, for the atheist, with a natural ontological worldview, knowledge of God is not only misdirected, but also fails to cultivate a 'better place' in the here and now. Just as Madeline's vignette above alluded to, one way to make 'salvation' in the here and now is by valuing knowledge and education.

Thirty-two-year-old Lily is a happily married practising psychologist with two children. She cites the 'American Psychological Association, the National Association of School Psychologists, and other groups promoting education' as key groups that she identifies with, and belongs to. These groups participate in producing scientific and applied knowledge that makes the world a better place, and Lily is a part of that mission. Education is important to her. She says that 'knowledge is power', in fact 'it's more powerful than ... it's more powerful than money'. To further emphasize the importance and value she places on knowledge: 'Education is not something that you can have taken away from you. ... I think that it's as essential as food.' Lily believes 'children are precious and deserve to be put first in our lives. I believe in education, especially public education and I also firmly believe in science.' To fit the previous motif again, children can also be viewed as a way to achieve immortality; by instilling in them the essence of who you are (Baumeister 1991; Arrowood and Pope 2014) would help us in achieving this. In line with the idea that if 'salvation' is the emancipation from one's current state of suffering, thus leading to a better place, Lily values education because 'education sets you free'.

'Salvation' as Human Flourishing

One of the limitations with most theistic conceptualizations of 'salvation' is that they are primarily concerned with the individual and not concerned with humans in general in the here and now. If a god can only offer salvation, then one's actions and beliefs that do take place in the here and now are largely directed only at that deity, and for a purpose that can only be realized after death. However, for the atheist, the focus on beliefs and action are purposeful purely in this life, and if 'this life' is to continue to exist, and is all one knows, then the greatest good can be found in supporting the flourishing of all sentient creatures and in the limiting of pain. Such a theme has been expanded upon from the Enlightenment onwards and in the present-day by the book, *The Moral Landscape* (Harris 2010). However, such an idea is not merely the popularized product of 'New Atheist' discourse, and is

alive and well in the ‘average’ atheist who doesn’t make the headlines for speaking out against religion. As Harold, age fifty-four, explains:

I think the primary belief that I’ve come up with, actually thinking about this for some years, is the basic belief I think is that suffering is something that should be avoided in oneself, and to what extent you can in other ‘*feeling*’ [conscious] beings. That’s kind of the basis of everything I try to *believe in*. Other than that, I would think, and of course the converse of that is that pleasure is a good to be pursued in yourself, and for others when possible.

If ‘salvation’ is the antithesis of suffering, then Harold is clearly ‘seeking’ it for not only himself, but others as well. Important to note is that he considers this idea of human flourishing as a ‘basic belief’. This is to say that he conceives making the world a better place and easing the pain that accompanies our existence as something that is rather straightforward. After careful reflection over a number of years, Harold believes that not only is human flourishing the greatest good, but also that it is extended to all conscious beings.

Joey, a 27-year-old college student living in southern United States, also shares Harold’s belief that all sentient creatures have the right to flourish. As a social activist involved in advocating for the rights of minority religious groups and atheists, Joey *believes* that he can make the world a better place through his actions. He understands belief as ‘a certain position ... something you hold, feel, or many times know’. He identifies himself as a ‘secular humanist’, and Joey’s core set of beliefs, as they relate to his self-identification, highlight something of ultimate concern for him: ‘pro-human flourishing ... pro flourishing of all conscious creatures, and a limiting of pain, struggle, and suffering’ in the world. Joey believes that ‘we should naturally be concerned with the human condition’, and pleads for all religious and non-religious people to ‘concern ourselves with making things better’.

Once a person either deconverts from belief in god (Fazzino 2014), or simply realizes their own lack of belief from a young age (Coleman, Silver and Hood, in press), the realization that there is no God or gods to make things better entails then, perhaps, that it is up to us and us alone. This was precisely the sentiment expressed by 37-year-old Jill. She states: ‘I don’t believe there’s any ... I don’t think anything happens for any reason, just [you know, no God guiding] things. ... *I think it’s our responsibility to make the world the way we want it to be* and I don’t think the way the world is now is a very good picture.’ She expresses commitments to ‘environmental causes, environmental activism and ... feminist causes’, and declares that ‘social-economic ... equality is a big issue for’ her. Interestingly, Jill seems to view some religious frameworks as providing an excuse for not taking action to make the world a better place – this criticism is quite understandable if most theistic notions of salvation are understood as being primarily concerned with an eternal ‘real’ life beyond the very short one we know. As she says, ‘One of the objections I have to faith is, I think it’s the way people lie to themselves to escape responsibility.’ However, she goes on to add that someone with ‘mature

faith I suppose would ... try not to do that, try not to lie to yourself about your responsibilities'. This is a very telling statement as it can elucidate the concept of a naturalized, horizontal 'salvation'. In understanding Jill's words, we can see that one's responsibility to make the world a better place and ease suffering is a concept and goal that is *god optional*. It can be believed in, and acted out by all individuals, if they choose, regardless of their ontological stance.

Eschatology: The End is Near, or is it?

A secular, naturalized 'salvation' *naturally* has implications for the direction of humanity as a whole. Post Enlightenment, and with the rise of natural epistemologies, a theistic understanding of humans and their environment was no longer needed to navigate within it. Science supplanted religious frameworks and understandings and elevated a focus on the human condition in the here and now (whether or not science chooses to recognize this is a separate matter [Feyerabend 2011]). It would appear, based on the brief narrative segments presented in this chapter speaking to what *we might* term an 'atheist's salvation', that if a common element of theistic 'salvations' begins with a belief in the ultimate, and that it is the individual's behaviour that leads to the experience or realization of a union with this ultimate, then an atheist salvation is not only possible, but has been underway since the Enlightenment. However, and to the extent that we are bound by the limits of language, it does little good to attach any 'religious' or Transcendent significance to this 'salvation'. Thus, this is where viewing these vignettes through the framework of horizontal transcendence is of particular importance. The ideals and beliefs presented here may take on a 'religious-like' significance, or perhaps an even greater significance; however, the category of religion does not control the discourse. There is no 'implicit religion' to be discussed as secular experience can be realized and understood on its own terms. Pragmatically speaking, what is of particular interest here – the idea of an ultimate better place, and the actions to get there – is ill suited to a very limited understanding of 'salvation' as something purely religious.

The polar ice caps are melting, deforestation is occurring on a global level, children and adults suffer from poverty not only in 'undeveloped' nations, but also in 'developed' nations. This list could go on and on, but the picture should be clear that there is a lot worth *saving* that can be located in the here and now, and this is precisely what the presented narratives demonstrate. While such a concern for improving the human condition appears almost an imperative for the atheist, it is also available to the theist. For example, Hood, Hill and Spilka write that 'S. M. Taylor (2007) has demonstrated in her study of Catholic nuns involved in the environmental movement [that] there can be a simultaneous affirmation of both vertical and horizontal transcendence' (2009: 282). Clearly, a secularized 'salvation' can be realized by individuals regardless of an individual's ontological worldview, and can be identified by scholars for further exploration. However, a conceptualization of 'salvation' that purely limits itself to a distant realm beyond

the clouds contributes little to the shifting religious and non-religious landscape the world over.

From the position of the atheist, the mantra ‘only we can save ourselves’ is a normative one that may form an imperative for those who do not believe in a God. This mantra is often *believed in* by atheists, and many times *acted upon* as they take to the task of making the world a better place through social and humanitarian action (Silver et al. 2014). Therefore, some simple building blocks that can guide further investigation and comparison between competing ontologies in the study of ‘salvation’ can be found to have cognitive (ultimate beliefs) and behavioural (acting on beliefs) components that combine to produce the effect (one hopes) of a ‘better place’. This better place is comparable to theistic ‘salvations’ and deserves continued study.

One way to further this endeavour is to take a ‘building block’ or ‘ascriptive’ approach (Taves 2009) in order to locate shared commonalties of the atheist and theist in order to begin exploration. However, such an approach is still in need of an overall theoretical framework that takes ontology seriously, and avoids affirming theism over atheism and vice versa. Here, the distinction between a frame of meaning that operates on a horizontal level and one that operates on a vertical level has much to offer (Coleman, Silver and Hood in press; Streib and Hood 2013). A ‘salvation’ that is available to the theist and atheist alike can be found by utilizing this framework.

‘The End’ may or may not be near; however, if a secular ‘salvation’ can be sustained, it will only be sustained by the belief in a better place and by the belief that such a place is, at least in principal, attainable through one’s actions. This belief-action trajectory of a ‘secular salvation’ is embodied in the words of social justice activist, poet and front man for the popular 1990s’ rap-metal band Rage Against the Machine, Zach De la Rocha (1999/2014), who captures the notion of a ‘secular salvation’ when he writes, ‘It has to start somewhere It has to start sometime, what better place than here, what better time than now?’ A ‘secular salvation’ has been growing since the Enlightenment, and is available to the believer and non-believer alike.