

# A God for Naturalists

## How Science and Spirituality can be Compatible

Christopher von Bülow\*

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'... I believe that Mankind's destiny lies in the stars. I believe that candy really did taste better when I was a kid, that it's aerodynamically impossible for a bumblebee to fly, that light is a wave and a particle, that there's a cat in a box somewhere who's alive and dead at the same time (although if they don't ever open the box to feed it it'll eventually just be two different kinds of dead), and that there are stars in the universe billions of years older than the universe itself. I believe in a personal god who cares about me and worries and oversees everything I do. I believe in an impersonal god who set the universe in motion and went off to hang with her girlfriends and doesn't even know that I'm alive. I believe in an empty and godless universe of causal chaos, background noise and sheer blind luck. ... I believe that life is a game, life is a cruel joke and that life is what happens when you're alive and that you might as well lie back and enjoy it.' She stopped, out of breath.

—Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*

### Abstract

If you think the scientific or naturalistic world view is correct, what is there left for you to believe in? – A rough sketch, and biased to boot. It is intended, not for believers, but for doubters who would like to believe in something but find it difficult to do so.

## 1 What is religion for?

I think religion is not for knowing how the world really is, but rather for interpreting, and dealing with, the world and your life. If you want to know what kinds of things there are, what they are made of and how they work, talk with a scientist; but if you want suggestions about how to feel in the world and what to strive for, you can turn to religions (or ideologies or *Weltanschauungen* in general). Science tells you things which are relatively certain; religion is about areas where certainty is impossible (or illusory).

What kind of questions religion aims to answer comes out clearest when you consider (your) life as a story (or a movie or a play), and yourself as a protagonist in that story. Those questions are:

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\*eMail: [Christopher.von.Buelow@uni.kn](mailto:Christopher.von.Buelow@uni.kn); Website: [www.uni.kn/FuF/Philo/Philosophie/philosophie/index.php?article\\_id=88](http://www.uni.kn/FuF/Philo/Philosophie/philosophie/index.php?article_id=88).

- What kind of a story is this? Is it a fairy-tale or an adventure story, a farce, a tragedy or a comedy? Is it absurd theatre, or a horror story? Is it beautiful or revolting? Is it surprising or foreseeable? Does it have some stringent inner logic or is it without rhyme or reason? Will it get better or will it get worse? Will it have a happy ending?
- What kind of a figure am I, what role do I play? Am I a main character or a subordinate figure? Am I a hero or a villain, a good guy or a bad guy, okay or not? Am I a winner or a loser, am I competent or am I a bungler? Am I a maker and shaker or a helpless victim of forces beyond my control? Do I deserve what I get? Do I have a special purpose in the story, do I make a difference?
- If somebody would read this story, what would he think about me, how would he feel about me? Am I loveable, likeable, admirable, or pitiful, despicable, disgusting? Am I interesting or boring? Am I special or run-of-the-mill? If I were deleted from the story, would the reader miss something?
- What's in store for me? Am I destined for happiness or suffering, for greatness or for mediocrity? Will there be any ugly surprises? Will I get what I deserve, or what I hope for?
- What kind of role do other persons, beings and things play? What are their respective relations to me? Are they allies or competitors? Are they more or less important than I am? Are they there to be exploited by me or am I here to serve them? Or are we just interlocking wheels in the machine of life, or billiard balls randomly bouncing off each other?

In some ways the story-reading metaphor is misleading because it implies that future events are already fixed, that we are just acting out preordained roles and thus have no choice. But that is just one *kind* of story that life could be described as.

Another metaphor (with other drawbacks) is to consider *yourself* as the author of the story of your life: as things happen you incorporate them into the story as you see fit, i.e., you weave a story around the accumulating facts of your life. Also, you direct the course of your story by deciding at each point what its protagonist (you) does next. In this analogy you can have a choice and influence the plot by deciding for different courses of action.

But what *are* the facts, and what is only appearance or mere illusion? Is it a fact that Anna mistreated Otto, to be faithfully recorded in his story? Or is it just one possible way of interpreting the real fact that she didn't go to the cinema with him? There may be a choice what to *consider* as the facts and, correspondingly, what *kind* of story to tell. One way for Otto of telling the story is to portray himself as a faithful chronologist who only takes account of the bare facts (and it is simply a fact that Anna mistreated him, that Jack is a nice guy and Joe is an s. o. b.). Another way of telling his story is to portray himself as a biased observer, an interested party whose impressions cannot always be relied on, but who has them anyway.

Maybe Otto is to some degree responsible for what kind of story he tells: maybe it's his choice to tell his life as a tragedy, or as an eternal struggle. And then again, maybe he is not responsible and that really is the way life is. Both are further, more or less plausible kinds of story.

When you have a choice and the future is open additional questions arise:

- What should I do, what should I strive for? (And what do I get for it?) Should I help others? *Which* others? Or should I rather feather my nest? If so, which is more important: to be rich, or powerful, or cool, or beautiful, or clever, or well-liked, or healthy, or enlightened? Which goals do I have a chance to reach? And perhaps: what kind of story should I try to make my life into?
- What can I hope for? Will I ever be allowed to relax, to stop worrying and struggling, to feel safe? I want to be happy, but is it really important that I be happy?
- Should I try at all? Do my acts and my efforts make a difference or are they all in vain?

These questions do not have a strong connection to stories, but in a way they are all part of the big questions, *What kind of a story is this?* and *What is my role in it?*

I am not concerned with the truth or other qualities of these stories. My point is the following: We turn to religion because we are unsure of what story to tell about life in general and our own life in particular. We want consolation, and we want a vision. Different religions and world views make different suggestions as to how the world is to be interpreted, as to which story is best. Depending on what kind of story you believe yourself to be in you will *feel* and *act* differently. If, in your story, you are superior to other people this may nourish your self-confidence, but you may also be in for some frustration because the world won't always give you the preferential treatment you deserve. If, in your story, you are unimportant and powerless then you won't even try to achieve something extraordinary, but you will also be free from responsibility and safe from other people's expectations. And different stories are *easier* or *harder* to tell and stick to: you will have a hard time convincing yourself that you are omnipotent and able to walk through walls; whereas it is not so difficult to believe that you are as average as the next guy, or that the world is out to get you.

World views, and religions in particular, are like *tools* for the mind (whether you are conscious of using them or not). They are tools for dealing with life in general, steering your emotions in this direction or that, and helping you to attain different kinds of goals. Some of these tools are easier to handle, some harder; some work better, some less well; and they are cut out for different domains of life: communism doesn't tell you how to cope with bad feelings, Christianity doesn't tell you which economic setup works best, science doesn't tell you about good and evil, and Zen buddhism doesn't tell you what to think or do at all, except to do it consciously.

## 2 Favourite children

One popular kind of story is the one told by Christianity (and Islam and Judaism, I suppose), which goes along the following lines:

We – i.e., mankind, heathens possibly excluded – are the most important beings in the universe, we are what it is all about. God created and designed it especially for us and put the earth and us smack in the middle. He made the stones, the trees and the animals as well as us, but He doesn't by a far cry love them as much as He loves us. We are much, much dearer to His heart than everything else there is. He stops at nothing to make this a good place for us to live in. We need not be afraid; He watches over

us and it will all be for the best in the end. We won't even *really* die: after we die we will live on forever in heaven, enjoying eternal bliss.

I admit, this is a very tendentious representation; Christianity has more to offer than this. But I think that a part of every one of us craves for a story like this to be true, even though some may not know or admit it. Every small child has great needs and fears which spawn great demands and hopes: It wants to be safe from harm, from hunger, pain and solitude. And it envies its brothers and sisters for the attention they get; it would rather its parents concentrated on itself. It wants to be special in order to get special treatment.<sup>1</sup> I think the Christian story owes much of its appeal to the fact that it fulfils that universal dream. That's why I call this story the *favourite-child story*.

As time goes by we learn (at least intellectually) that we have to get along with our siblings and share our parents' love with them. Hopefully, we also learn to get along with neighbours, colleagues and other people in general, living near or far, and to share whatever resources there are to share. And then there are animals, plants, the universe and all the rest, which do not always conform to our self-centered wishes. We learn that we don't always get what we want, and that we cannot be perfectly safe and comfortable all the time. And we also learn that we can *deal* with periods of pain and privation and can fend for ourselves – to some degree.

Yet deep down inside the yearning for a naïve version of paradise remains, and it's neither stupid nor selfish to have it: it's only natural; we are just built that way. If an adult still *believes* there is something that will make him perfectly safe, comfortable and happy: that may be stupid. Or if an adult still *acts* like he was the navel of the world and the others were just means to his ends or obstacles to be brushed aside: that may be selfish. But it's not bad to have dreams and fantasies, you just shouldn't confuse them with reality.

So, the favourite-child story is what the small child inside us would most like to be true, a fairy-tale story of happiness and wonder.

### 3 Lost in the wilderness

But along comes science and dashes our precious hopes one by one. Copernicus tells us the sun doesn't revolve around the earth and we don't occupy the center of the universe. Geology and cosmology tell us that the world hasn't been created in seven days by an intelligent Designer, and our solar system is rather the product of the random accretion of cosmic dust.

Darwin tells us we haven't been specially created by a heavenly Father; instead we are the descendants of chimpanzee-like animals and, ultimately, of simple protozoa.<sup>2</sup> We haven't even pulled ourselves up by our own bootstraps (e.g., by relentless striving for betterment, as Lamarck thought) to where we are now: we are products of random variation and 'blind' selection. Richard Dawkins<sup>3</sup> tells us our genes are not instruments chosen by our bodies for reproduction, but vice versa, our bodies are just vehicles constructed by our selfish genes for their own survival.

Freud tells us we are not masters of our own minds: there are subconscious forces inside us which move us without our even noticing it. Evolutionary psychology<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Sulloway 1997; Wright 1994

<sup>2</sup>Dennett 1995

<sup>3</sup>1989, 1991, 1997, 1999

<sup>4</sup>Wright 1994

explains our behavioral dispositions as implemented by our genes to further not our happiness or the common good but their success. And what is left over of our mental life is reduced by Susan Blackmore<sup>5</sup> to memes competing for replication and survival.<sup>6</sup>

Neurophysiology is proceeding to unravel the processes by which brains generate consciousness: so, can we as physical brains have freedom of will?<sup>7</sup> Artificial Intelligence aims to program minds in silicon: bleak prospects for immaterial souls surviving bodily death.

And even if some day we could put off death indefinitely, we would still be on a one-way road to the Big Crunch or the Heat Death of the universe.

In short, modern science shows us that the world is *not* our oyster. We are not as wonderful, special, important and great as we would like to think; no loving Father created us and destined us for eternal happiness; no supreme Ruler endowed us with a special purpose; and we are not safe from harm. Obviously we are in the soup:

Life is utterly pointless, there is no wonder, no hope and no purpose in the world. We are no different from worms and bugs crawling about mindlessly. We are only here by chance, going through the motions, deluding ourselves about our freedom and our morality while in truth we are slaves to our selfish genes and the merciless laws of nature. We are born, we muddle around for a while, and then we die. And there is no light at the end of the tunnel: everything is relentlessly going down the drain.

Instead of being favourite children of the universe we are *lost in the wilderness*, it seems.

## 4 Facing the facts

Is this really what modern science tells us? Is this the picture of the world any rational, undeluded person today is compelled to adopt? – Science certainly makes it a good deal harder to cling to the favourite-child story. You can still stick to it but you have to make a lot of argumentative contortions to reconcile it with the scientific world view: for example, you have to work hard to persuade yourself into believing that the many bad things in the world do in some way have a point, a purpose, and thus are in fact good.

Of course, you could just deny what science tells us, as, e.g., creationists do. But that is not an option I am interested in. I want to start from a position of intellectual honesty, accepting it as given that science has more or less got it right. So, if you accept this and also relinquish the favourite-child story (FACHI for short), are you stuck with the lost-in-the-wilderness story (LITWI)?

It sure is tempting to adopt the nasty extreme (LITWI) when the nice one (FACHI) has been torpedoed. Hoping for the nice extreme to be true is just what a child's logic suggests when confronted with the possibility of the nasty extreme. It hasn't yet learned that the world isn't only black and white, it cannot conceive of the lots of shades inbetween. Its world view is simple and lacks differentiations. So, when the nice extreme turns out to be wrong the child is cast back upon the nasty one because

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<sup>5</sup>1999

<sup>6</sup>see also Dennett 1991

<sup>7</sup>Yes: see Dennett 1984.

it hasn't yet envisioned any other alternatives. As adults we retain some propensity to think along these crude lines, a residue of childhood modes of thought. There isn't a strong attraction to shed this propensity since alternatives to FACHI and LITWI get comparatively little advertisement in our culture, and by ourselves we aren't very interested in other, less dramatic stories: next to heaven and hell plain old earth is rather boring.

But FACHI and LITWI are just extremes on a spectrum of great diversity, and if you think that the one is wrong you don't thereby have to accept the other as true. Science doesn't tell us that life is devoid of meaning and hope, or that we are worthless and impotent. That's only one [unwarranted] interpretation of what science does tell us which some people feel compelled to adopt. – What other interpretations are there? What other stories besides LITWI are compatible with a scientific outlook and thus acceptable to a naturalist?

You might, for example, see life as more of a newscast than a thriller (and I'm not thinking of the hopped-up infotainment variety). Maybe life is more like a daily paper than like absurd theatre or tragedy. Under this *austere* or *level-headed* world view you are neither euphoric nor depressive about life or the world as a whole. You just muddle through and have your ups and downs. As Monty Python say it:

Well, it's nothing very special. Try and be nice to people, avoid eating fat, read a good book every now and then, get some walking in and try and live together in peace and harmony with people of all creeds and nations. (Monty Python 1983, antepenultimate page)

This is not a very uplifting view of life, but neither is it downcasting. It's not grandiose, but then, who says you need to lead a grandiose life? You can of course *consider* this world view as depressing, if you so choose, but in that case you are not adopting it but rather some variant of LITWI. I think most people are in this frame of mind for large stretches of time and manage quite alright with it.

There may also be an uplifting and spiritual view of life not so very far away from the austere view, namely the one Charlotte Joko Beck tells about in her Zen books.<sup>8</sup> But this is rather difficult to explain, the more so since I do not have an absolutely clear notion of what she has in mind. In a way it *is* just the austere view: things are as they are, and that's it; beyond that there are no deeper meanings in what happens.

But in some sense there is something additional: the more you *accept* things as being (for now, at least) what they are, the more you can feel well-tended, 'well-embedded', in the world, whatever happens. When you are happy you enjoy it, not worrying that your happiness might end: you *know* that it will end and you accept this as part of life. When you are in pain it is unpleasant but you can live with it, knowing that it won't last forever and accepting the pain as an integral part of life.

(Indeed the good feelings would soon become very boring and stale without the bad feelings. However much you love chocolate, if you eat nothing else for a long time, it first becomes boring and finally nauseating. This is what FACHI would be like if the dream could become reality. Whereas Zen is more like fully tasting whatever you get, chocolate or Brussels sprouts.)

What is uplifting about this view? – Of course, if you still cling to FACHI it is not uplifting. But if you have surrendered the naïve hope for a life without suffering then the more sophisticated hope for a life without suffering *about* your suffering is open to you.

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<sup>8</sup>1989, 1993

But the important thing about Zen seems to be not the world view I have tried to describe but the practice that is supposed to bring you there: awareness, paying attention not just to your thoughts about the world but to the world at large – including you and your feelings and your thoughts.

## 5 Hope, and castles in the air

Up to now I have only *claimed* that LITWI is not a consequence of what science tells us. In case you are not yet convinced I'll try to corroborate this proposition. A nice form of doing this is by staging a dialogue. In the one corner we will have *Eeyore* (the depressive donkey from A. A. Milne's *Pooh* books) as the proponent of the lost-in-the-wilderness story; in the other, *Master Yoda* (the big-eared Jedi knight from George Lucas' *Star Wars* movies), arguing that there are no good grounds on which to adopt LITWI.<sup>9</sup>

### 5.1 No god

*Eeyore*. If science is right it is not a very convincing idea that there is a god. But if there is no god, as I'm afraid I'll have to accept, then the world is an awful, depressing place.

*Yoda*. I agree about the first part but not about the second. Suppose there *is* a god. But suppose furthermore that the gods which rule the world are H. P. Lovecraft's pantheon of Ancient Ones: the blind idiot god Azathoth, Cthulhu, Yog-Sothoth, and other unspeakably evil deities. *Then* the world would be an awful place. But happily this possibility looks very improbable in the light of science. So you might as well be *relieved* by the scientific news. Alongside the nicest possibilities, science also makes the ugliest possibilities appear rather implausible. The world is not heaven, but neither is it hell. It is something inbetween. There is nothing depressing about that.

*Eeyore*. I admit that a Lovecraft world would be very *very* depressing indeed. But a god-less, materialist world is also a dreary place, compared to a world with a good, benevolent god.

*Yoda*. A world with a benevolent god would not necessarily be a better place for you. Suppose there is a benevolent god, but suppose further that the Catholics got it right, and He casts the sinners down to hell for eternal damnation. Have you ever sinned? Probably you have, and probably you will sin some more in the future. You try not to, but you aren't always successful. Do you really try as hard as you can? Let's say you pray for forgiveness, and you more or less believe the things God wants you to believe. But do you pray, and believe, hard enough? Maybe you don't? Maybe it's hell for you in the end? A terrifying possibility.

If you *do* trust that God will make it alright for you then belief can strengthen you; but if you're afraid God might condemn you then belief in God can weaken you just as easily. It's the same for a world without god: if you *do* trust that it'll

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<sup>9</sup>I apologize for my inability to make them speak in their true voices. – Thanks to Anne Mone Sahnwaldt for suggesting Yoda.

work out alright in the end then that belief can strengthen you; but if you rather feel that things will go badly then that belief can weaken you. Trust doesn't come for free, even with God; and defeatism isn't compelling in the absence of a god. So the real difference between a world with and one without a god is that, whether you see the world as a good or a bad place, *with* a god it will be more so.

## 5.2 No creator

*Eeyore.* Science tells us the world has not been created in six days as it is written in the bible. Who knows, maybe God still made the Big Bang happen; but it seems the more is explained by science, the farther God recedes and the more bloodless He becomes. It rather looks like the world hasn't been created by any god. It's just sitting there, perhaps for no reason at all. What a bleak view.

*Yoda.* Why do you consider that depressing? After all, whether the world was created or not, now it is in just the state it is in now. Whatever explanation of its origin you accept doesn't change the actual state of the world.

*Eeyore.* A god-created world is somehow more magical, more wonderful.

*Yoda.* There is beauty and love either way. And you can be hit by a truck either way.

*Eeyore.* If the world was created by God then everything we see would be a manifestation of His will!

*Yoda.* You are saying that it would be comforting for you if, e. g., people murdering each other were a manifestation of God's will? What kind of a god would that be?

*Eeyore.* I suppose the comforting thing would be to know that everything is the manifestation of a *benevolent* god's will.

*Yoda.* But if God just benevolently created the world, warts and all, how would that make murder any less appalling?

## 5.3 No purpose

*Eeyore.* I guess what I really hoped for was that it is all a manifestation of an ingenious master plan aiming at some worthy supreme goal; that even the things we consider bad do have a point, a function, a meaning, even if we can't fathom it.

*Yoda.* What's so great about there being a purpose to everything? After all, it might be a bad purpose. Even if it's a very laudable one it doesn't automatically make the world a better place.

Imagine a similar constellation on a smaller scale: Mr Nice is an immensely rich and powerful but eccentric philanthropist. He wants to invest his money and influence to make a lot of people very happy. The best way he sees of doing this is to build and populate something like a secluded artificial 'world' in which everything is under his control and everything is optimized such as to ensure the maximum possible amount of happiness in the population.

This 'world', Niceland, is a stretch of land enclosed by an impenetrable barrier to prevent unwanted outside interference. The original inhabitants of Niceland are orphans, raised from infancy by friendly androids. Every Nicelander is watched round the clock by closed-circuit TV cameras, and hordes of psychologists are busy evaluating everyone's welfare and general development. A specially programmed super-computer calculates how best to further each person, and coordinates the innumerable great and small remote-controlled interventions in the Nicelanders' lives.

Mr Nice and his scientists are very successful at what they are trying to achieve: the Nicelanders all lead fulfilled lives and are much happier than any other people in the world.

Now compare Niceland to another hypothetical country: Ordinaria is very similar to Niceland in all respects, except that there is no supervising and guiding agency like Mr Nice. About the same amount, respectively, of agreeable and distressing things happen, *just by chance*, and about the same amount of fulfilment and happiness ensue.

Who would you say leads a better life, Nicelanders or Ordinarians?

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*Eeyore.* But the scientific account makes it look like there is no purpose to life. And a pointless life is a worthless life, not worth living, don't you agree?

*Yoda.* Well, a pointless life might still be fun to live, or interesting... But that your life doesn't have a preordained meaning, no purpose forced on you from 'outside', so to speak, doesn't imply that it *can't* have meaning or purpose. It just implies that if you want your life to have a meaning, you will have to choose or find one for yourself; you can (and must) decide for yourself what to do with your life.

#### 5.4 No morals

*Eeyore.* But how can I decide what to do when there is no god telling me what's good? I can't just throw dice!

*Yoda.* Maybe you have chosen already. For example, how about devoting your life to hurting people?

*Eeyore.* You are making fun of me. I'd never choose *that* as my goal in life. I don't want to hurt people.

*Yoda.* Then let's try something else. You do like reading, watching movies, eating good meals. How about spending your life doing that, as much as possible?

*Eeyore.* But that doesn't seem good enough to make it my life's purpose.

*Yoda.* How do you know?

*Eeyore.* I don't know, but it just doesn't feel right. If my life is to have a purpose, I suppose it would have to have something to do with making the world a better place, or making people's lives happier, corny as that may sound.

*Yoda.* But how can you be so sure about that, without a god telling you so?

*Eeyore.* I guess I already have a strong attitude about which kinds of thing are good and right, and which aren't. So, you are probably right: I am already decided about many issues of good and bad. For example, I simply can't imagine that hurting or killing people could be good. There might conceivably be situations in which it would be forgivable, e.g., when dealing with a mass-murdering dictator; but in general it's just bad.

So I've got some deeply rooted moral intuitions and feelings. But can I really trust those feelings, when science tells me that they are hardwired in me by my selfish genes? Or else they have been programmed into me by my upbringing, or something. How can I be certain that my moral intuitions are good ones?

*Yoda.* Well, are there any other intuitions you would prefer to have? Can you imagine a set of moral intuitions that would be better than the ones you have? Suppose there is a neuroscientist who, by a revolutionary neurosurgical procedure, can replace the moral wiring you have now with one that truly is better, even one that is as good and right as can be. This procedure will otherwise leave you just the person you were; and a philanthropic billionaire is prepared to bear the costs. Would you accept this offer?

*Eeyore.* That's hard to say – your scenario is quite far-fetched. But, for the sake of the argument ... maybe I would. Of course I would have to be absolutely sure that the procedure works, and that those 'replacement morals' really are as good as you say.

*Yoda.* And on which basis would you judge the value of the replacement morals?

*Eeyore.* Ah, I see, you got me. I would judge any possible moral system on the basis of the one I've got. So, any new system I could accept would probably just be a cleaned-up version of my old system.

*Yoda.* Yes, I think so. Your desire for certainty about the goodness of your moral convictions is, in an unobvious way, misguided. Maybe there is a moral system which is both substantially different from yours and in some reasonable sense better than yours. But it couldn't be better by *your own* lights, because, necessarily, your judgements about moral systems are based on the moral system you have.

*Eeyore.* Hm. That certainly sounds very logical. Yet somehow I can't shake the nagging suspicion I have been cheated. Your argument seems like some dirty philosopher's trick.

Suppose Dawkins is right and my altruistic tendencies have been installed by my genes in order to further their own selfish ends. Then it's conceivable that at times, when I do something – *X* – because I believe it's a good thing to do, it's actually my genes making me *think X* is good, while really *X* is *bad* for people and good only for the propagation of those genes. Is this scenario misguided too?

*Yoda.* Has this ever happened to you?

*Eeyore.* No ... at least not to my knowledge. But that's just the point: if it were to happen to me I wouldn't know.

*Yoda.* You mean, you might find yourself hurting, robbing or killing other people without knowing that you were doing something bad, and instead actually believing you were doing good?

*Eeyore.* Well, clearly not. But, couldn't it happen with some less salient evil?

*Yoda.* Lots of things could happen: you might act counter to your own good intentions because of acute anger or depression, or you might err about what would make people happier, or you might have misjudged the consequences of your well-intentioned acts, or you might fuck things up due to inattention or to plain bad luck. However, nothing of that is what you are thinking of. If ever you felt an urge creeping up on you to harm people in some way, which tried to masquerade as a moral impulse, you would soon *notice* that you were on the point of committing some evil and would accordingly bridle that urge. If, on the other hand, the impending evil is so deeply hidden in the future that you can't anticipate it despite your best efforts, no one could hold it against you.

Even though part of your morals has been installed by nature (or nurture, or both in tandem), you can still counteract whichever of your impulses seem bad to you. You may not always succeed, but that's not because of where your morals come from.

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