

CHAPTER SEVEN

SUICIDE: VIEWS THAT SELF-DESTRUCT

SOMEONE once said that if you give a man enough rope, he'll hang himself. Our next tactic is based on the tendency of many erroneous views to self-destruct. Such ideas get caught in their own noose and quickly expire.

Commonly known as self-refuting views, these ideas defeat themselves. Like the sign in the restaurant saying, "Authentic Italian food served the traditional Chinese way," or the tabloid headline that reads, "Woman gives birth to her own father," views that commit suicide are often obvious.

Here is another example from a philosophy student's T-shirt. The front sported the caption, "The statement on the back of this shirt is false." The back of the shirt read, "The statement on the front of this shirt is true."

There is no need to expend energy addressing views that are bent on destroying themselves. They die by their own hand, saving you the trouble. If an atheist tells you he knows God doesn't exist because God told him so in a vision, your work is already done.¹ All you need to do is point out the problem and quietly watch the view commit hari-kari.

IF IT'S TRUE, IT'S FALSE

Every statement is about something. For example, the sentence "Cats chase rats" is about cats. Sometimes statements include

themselves in what they refer to. The statement "All English sentences are false" is about all English sentences, including itself.

In this last case, you can immediately see a problem. The statement has within it the seeds of its own destruction. If all English sentences are false, then the English sentence declaring it so must also be false, and if false, then it is easily — and appropriately — dismissed. Because it cannot satisfy its own standard, it falls on its own sword.

When statements fail to meet their own criteria of validity, they are self-refuting. Even when they seem true at first glance (and many do), they still prove themselves false. The minute the words are uttered, they fail. Here are some conspicuous examples I have encountered over the years:

- "There is no truth." (Is this statement true?)
- "There are no absolutes." (Is this an absolute?)
- "No one can know any truth about religion." (And how, precisely, did you come to know that truth about religion?)
- "You can't know anything for sure." (Are you sure about that?)
- "Talking about God is meaningless." (What does this statement about God mean?)
- "You can only know truth through experience." (What experience taught you that truth?)
- "Never take anyone's advice on that issue." (Should I take your advice on that?)

The Suicide tactic works because of a rule of logic you are already familiar with, even if you don't know its name. It's called the law of noncontradiction. This law reflects the commonsense notion that contradictory statements cannot *both* be true at the same time.²

All suicidal views either express or entail contradictions. They make two different claims that are at odds with each other: "A" is the case and "A" is not the case. Obvious contradictions are often funny because we see the absurdity built into them:

- "I used to believe in reincarnation. But that was in a former life."³ (I don't believe in reincarnation. I do believe in reincarnation.)
- "Nobody goes there anymore. It's too crowded." (It's not crowded. It is crowded.)
- "I wish I had an answer to that, because I'm tired of answering that question." (I don't know the answer to that question. I know the answer to that question.)
- "I really didn't say everything I said."⁴ (I did not say it. I did say it.)
- "I never, never, repeat a word. Never." (I don't repeat a word. But I just did repeat a word.)
- "This page intentionally left blank." (This page is blank. This page is not blank.)
- "You're in rare form, as usual." (Your performance is rare. Your performance is not rare.)
- "These terrorists have technology we don't even know about." (We know about things we don't know about.)

When an idea or objection violates the law of noncontradiction in a straightforward fashion, I call it "Formal Suicide."

To recognize if a view has suicidal tendencies, first, pay attention to the basic idea, premise, conviction, or claim. Try to identify it. Next, ask if the claim applies to itself. If so, is there a conflict? Does the statement itself fail to live up to its own standards? Can it be stated in the form "A" is the case and "A" is not the case? If so, it commits suicide.

Here's another way of looking at it: *If exactly the same reasons in favor of another's view (or against your own) defeat the reasons themselves, then the view is self-defeating.*

The final step is easy. Simply point out the contradiction. For example, when someone says, "People should never impose their values on others," ask if those are *his* values (they are). Next ask why he's seeking to impose them on others. I have included more examples below so you can see precisely how this works.

It might have occurred to you that Columbo and Suicide work well together. If you notice that a person's viewpoint self-destructs, point it out with a question rather than a statement.

Arguments designed to show that a view is contradictory are always lethal if they can be sustained. The argument against God based on the existence of evil is popular precisely because it trades on a presumed contradiction. This gives it unstoppable force if it succeeds.⁵ When a view commits suicide, it cannot be revived, because there is no way to repair it. Even God cannot give life to a contradictory notion.⁶ Philosophers say such views are "necessarily false." They cannot be true in any possible way. Because they are dead on arrival, defending them is a lost cause.

You might wonder why anyone would believe self-refuting ideas. Very few people knowingly affirm contradictions (though some are so evident you wonder how they could be missed), but when contradictions are *implicit*, embedded in the larger idea, they are harder to see. This is why people are taken in by them.

For example, we know that the claim "My brother is an only child" is false because the concept of "brother" entails having a sibling. When Yogi Berra counsels, "Always go to other people's funerals, otherwise they won't go to yours," we chuckle. A person cannot pay his last respects at your funeral if he's dead.

Though these two contradictions are easy to spot, they are different from the explicit examples above. Here the contradictions are under the surface. Implicit contradictions are sometimes difficult to identify because they are hidden.

For the remainder of the chapter, I want to walk you through popular notions that are implicitly self-refuting. In each case, the problem is not immediately obvious. Each one fails, however, through contradiction. They are sunk before they ever set sail.

IS TRUTH TRUE?

I have already pointed out that the postmodern claim "There is no truth"⁷ invites an obvious question: Is the claim that there is no truth *itself* a true statement, or is it false? If false, then false. If alleged true, then false again.

This fact became painfully obvious in my debate with philosopher Marv Meyer. I defended the resolve "Objective truth exists and can be known," while Dr. Meyer took the opposing side.

I want you to notice something about formal disputes like these. To debate, Dr. Meyer must argue against one view and in favor of another. This argument takes a very particular form: The view he opposes (mine) is false; the view he promotes (his) is true.

This is precisely what happened. With grace and considerable skill, the professor pointed out the failings of my perspective. Arisotle, it turns out, was wrong; Derrida was right. Mr. Koukl is mistaken; Marv Meyer is correct.

Do you see the problem here? Dr. Meyer marshaled an array of facts, truth, and knowledge for the purpose of persuading his audience that facts, truth, and knowledge are all sophisticated fictions.

In the course of the debate, I pointed this out to the audience. I mentioned that Dr. Meyer was forced by the nature of debate itself to make use of the very thing he was denying in the debate, doing his effort to failure. Indeed, *merely by showing up*, Dr. Meyer had implicitly affirmed the resolve I was defending, effectively conceding the debate to me before it even began.

I further pointed out to the audience that every vote cast for Dr. Meyer as the winner of the debate meant the voter had been persuaded that Dr. Meyer's view was (objectively) true and mine was (objectively) false. Therefore, every vote for my opponent was really a vote for me.

The audience laughed, but the point wasn't lost on them. When the final tally came in, the good professor got only one vote (apparently someone wasn't listening). This wasn't because I was

clever. It was because the view he was defending was obviously false, a fact that couldn't be missed once the problem was carefully pointed out.

The "Christian" version of postmodernism fares no better, even though baptized with religious language. This example from a Christian college was relayed to me by a student in the class.

"Are any of you in this room God?" The professor scanned the audience slowly, looking for takers. No hands went up.

"God knows 'TRUTH,'" she continued, writing the word in all capital letters on the board. "All truth is God's truth. God is truth. But you are not God. Therefore, you only know 'truth.'" She then scrawled in lower case this secondary and substandard take on reality next to the superior version that is forever out of reach for mere humans.

She paused for a moment, letting her point sink in, then closed. "Have a nice day," she said, and dismissed the class.

It was a brilliant piece of rhetorical wizardry. Students were too busy taking notes and worrying whether or not this would be on the test to think carefully about what had been stolen from them or the ruin this foreshadowed for their faith.

The professor's assertions teemed with confusion. What does "TRUTH" mean? Omniscience? That couldn't be her meaning. That God knows everything and we do not is a trivial observation, hardly a revelation even for college freshman.

Does she mean we can't know things *in the way* God knows them, that we don't see the world the way he does? Again, not particularly profound.

No, the professor was going after the conviction in "modernist" circles that human beings can actually know something like absolute truth—knowledge they can count on. Instead, she is saying that we mortals inhabit a kind of knowledge twilight where the outlines of reality are vague and indistinct, robbing us of all confidence that anything we think we know is actually so.

The professor seemed blind to her point's suicidal tendencies. The following questions make this failure obvious:

Professor, I'm confused about your comments. Is this insight you've offered true or false? I don't think you'd knowingly teach us something false, so you must think it true. And that's what confuses me. What kind of "truth" would that be? It couldn't be *TRUTH*, because you're not God. So it must be *truth*. But if this is just your personal perception of reality, why should any of us take you seriously? We have our own perceptions. Since none of us has *TRUTH*, who's to say who is right and who is wrong? Can you clear this up for me?

Paul warned us not to be taken "captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ" (Colossians 2:8). Yet captivity abounds, even in places God intended to be a refuge from such error.

CAN GOD MAKE A ROCK SO BIG HE CAN'T LIFT IT?

This kind of challenge is called a "pseudo-question." It's like asking, "Can God win an arm wrestling match against himself?" or "If God beat himself up, who would win?" or "Can God's power defeat his own power?"

The question is nonsense because it treats God as if he were two instead of one. The comparative phrase "stronger than" can only be used when two subjects are in view, like when we say Bill is stronger than Bob, or my left arm is stronger than my right arm. Since God is only one, it makes no sense to ask if he is stronger than himself. The question proves nothing about any deficiency in God because the question itself—Can God's omnipotence defeat his omnipotence?—is incoherent.

"GOD DOESN'T TAKE SIDES."

This reprimand comes up every election cycle. In fact, I once saw a full-page ad in the *Los Angeles Times* lecturing one side of the

political spectrum on this very point. The assertion is self-defeating, though, as illustrated in the following conversation:

"You think God is on your side, but you're wrong. God doesn't take sides."

"Let me ask you a question. In this disagreement we're having on whether or not God takes sides, what do you think God's opinion is?"

"I just told you. God is against taking sides."

"Right. So in our dispute, God would agree with you, not me."

"That's right."

"He would *side* with you in this issue, then. I guess God does take sides after all."

Note the contradiction: God does take sides. God doesn't take sides. The assertion was self-defeating. Not surprisingly, the ad went on to campaign for its own political view as the moral high ground, compounding the error.

TO ERR IS HUMAN

A common attack on the Bible goes like this: Men wrote the Bible. People are imperfect. Therefore, the Bible is flawed and not inspired by God.

Remember our rule for discovering suicidal statements: *If exactly the same reasons in favor of another's view (or against your own) defeat the reasons themselves, then the view is self-defeating.* The presumption that if man is *capable* of error, he *will* err also applies to this very argument against inspiration.

Consider this exchange:

"You think the Bible must be flawed because people make mistakes."

"Yes, that's the way it seems to me."

"I'm curious — why do you think you are an exception to that rule?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you don't seem to think you've made a mistake in your own judgment about the Bible. But you're a flawed human being, too."

"Of course I am. But I didn't mean that people always make mistakes."

"If people don't always make mistakes, though, you can't rule out the Bible just because people wrote it, can you?"

It's not enough to dismiss the Bible simply by noting that "men wrote it." This, in itself, proves nothing. It doesn't follow that if people are **capable** of error, they always **will** err. Taken at face value, this objection is self-refuting.

C. S. Lewis cites a related example. In response to the Freudian and Marxist claim that all thoughts are tainted (either psychologically or ideologically) at their source, he writes:

if they say that all thoughts are thus tainted, then, of course, we must remind them that Freudianism and Marxism are as much systems of thought as Christian theology.... The Freudian and the Marxian are in the same boat with all the rest of us and cannot criticize us from the outside. They have sawn off the branch they are sitting on. If, on the other hand, they say that the taint need not invalidate their thinking, then neither need it invalidate ours. In which case they have saved their own branch, but also saved ours along with it.⁸

Statements like "Everyone's view is a product of his own prejudices" or "All your so-called 'facts' are only beliefs dictated by your cultural biases" falter for the same reason. Are these views

themselves merely a product of prejudice or cultural bias? If so, why take them seriously?

“ATMAN IS BRAHMAN AND BRAHMAN IS ATMAN”

Hinduism as a religious view also seems compromised by contradictory notions. The pantheistic monism at the heart of this Eastern religion teaches that “reality” as we know it is an illusion — *maya* — of which each of us is part.

If I am an illusion, how could I know it? How could I possess true knowledge that I do not exist? (I think, therefore I ain't?) Do people in a dream know they are imaginary? Does Charlie Brown know he is a cartoon character?

This Hindu concept that the world is an illusion contradicts the idea that I can know that I am a player in the illusion. Implicitly, it claims that I am not a real self and that I am a real self at the same time. Thus, this central doctrine of Hinduism self-destructs.

The most common escape route from this problem is the claim that the law of contradiction is a Western notion that doesn't apply in Eastern thought like Hinduism. Eastern thinkers are comfortable with contradiction, so they say.

This problem, though, has nothing to do with what people are “comfortable” with. It has to do with how reality is structured. People may be comfortable with all sorts of unusual things. This may tell you something about *psychology*, but not about *reality*.

Computers work on a binary system of 0s and 1s. The law of noncontradiction functions to keep these two distinct. It doesn't matter if the computer is in the Eastern Hemisphere or the Western Hemisphere or if the person at the keyboard is Christian, Hindu, Taoist, animist, or atheist. The computer works regardless because reality is still structured according to the law of non-contradiction,

even if people from other cultures are psychologically confused about this point.

THEISTIC EVOLUTION: DESIGNED BY CHANCE?

Some people suggest that God used evolution to design the world. They are motivated, I think, by two impulses. The first is a desire to affirm the Bible. The second is a suspicion Darwinism might have merit. Thus, they declare both true.

These two notions, however, seem incompatible to me. It may sound reasonable for God to “use” evolution, but if you look closer I think you will see the problem.

Suppose I wanted a straight flush for a hand of poker. I could either pull the cards out of the deck individually and “design” the hand, or I could shuffle the cards randomly and see if the flush is dealt to me. It would not make any sense, though, to “design” the hand by shuffling the deck and dealing. There's no way to ensure the results. (I guess if I were really clever I could make it *look* like I was shuffling the deck when in reality I was stacking it, but that would be a deceitful kind of design called “cheating.”)

In the same way, either God designs the details of the biological world, or nature shuffles the deck and natural selection chooses the winning hand. The mechanism is either conscious and intentional (design), or unconscious and unintentional (natural selection). Creation has a purpose, a goal. Evolution is accidental, like a straight flush dealt to a poker rookie.

The idea that something is designed by chance is contradictory. Like trying to put a square peg in a round hole, this just doesn't fit.

“ONLY SCIENCE GIVES RELIABLE TRUTH”

This modern slogan seems reasonable at first glance. Many people think knowledge begins and ends with the scientific method. Anything else is mere opinion and unsubstantiated belief,

a view that is sometimes called "scientism." However, those who hold this view will be surprised to know that it commits suicide. Consider this dialog:

"I don't believe in religion."

"Why not?"

"There is no scientific evidence for it."

"Then you shouldn't believe in science either."

"Why not?"

"Because there is no scientific evidence for it."

This was a terse exchange, so let me expand a bit. I noticed first that the slogan "Only science gives reliable truth" is a statement *about* truth that also purports to be true, so it includes itself in what it refers to (in the same way that the statement "All English sentences are false" includes itself). Next, I simply applied our basic test for Suicide by asking, "Can the statement satisfy its own requirement?"

I quickly realized it could not. Since there is no scientific evidence proving that science is the only way to know truth, the view self-destructs. I then used Columbo to point out the flaw.⁹

The next time someone dismisses you with the "Only science gives reliable truth" canard, ask if he wants you to take his statement as fact or simply as unsubstantiated opinion. If fact, ask what testable scientific evidence led him to his conclusion. As it turns out, this claim is not a fact of science. It is a philosophical assertion *about* science that itself cannot be proven by the scientific method and would therefore be unreliable, according to this approach.

RELIGIOUS "SUICIDE"

The notion of religious pluralism, that all religions are equally true or valid, is also self-refuting. There are two different ways to demonstrate this.

First, if all religions are true, then Christianity is true. Yet a central claim of classical Christianity is that other religions are false when taken as a whole. Clearly, Jesus was not a pluralist. Either Christianity is correct that Jesus is God's Messiah for the world and other religions are deceptions, as Scripture teaches, or Christianity is false and some other view is true. In no case, though, can all religions be true and valid.

Second, when you think about it, religions have very diverse pictures of what the spiritual realm is like. Most forms of Hinduism teach that God is an impersonal force. Islam, Judaism, and Christianity teach that God is a personal being. In Buddhism, the question of God is irrelevant.

In classical theism, death is final, followed by either eternal reward or eternal punishment. In Eastern religions, death is a door the soul passes through many times as it works out its karma in reincarnation. Some religions teach that reprobates are destroyed while the righteous live on.

Can you see the problem? When someone dies, they *might* go to Heaven or Hell, or they *might* be reincarnated, or they *might* simply turn to dust, but they *can't do them all at the same time*.

Some religions are clearly mistaken on details central to their worldview. In fact, every one of them could be wrong on every single point, in principle, but they cannot all be right. Taken at face value, religious pluralism commits suicide.

YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT?

I once saw a sign in a restaurant that read, "You are what you eat." I pointed out to the waitress that if we are what we eat, then we couldn't be something until we have eaten something. But we can't eat something unless we are something. Therefore, it's not true that we are what we eat.

The waitress, unschooled in the finer points of self-refuting arguments, looked at me and said, "You'll have to talk to the manager."

WHAT WE LEARNED IN THIS CHAPTER

First, we learned that we do not have to do all the work dealing with an argument or a challenge. Sometimes a view defeats itself. The tactic we use to expose this tendency is called *Suicide*.

Suicidal views have within them the seeds of their own destruction because they express contradictory concepts. They refute themselves. That's why they are called *self-refuting*.

Views that violate the law of noncontradiction are necessarily false. This means that nothing can be done to fix them. They are beyond repair in this world or any possible world. If a view entails contradiction — for example, "All English sentences are false" — there is no hope of reviving it. For this reason, the presence of contradiction is a decisive defeater of any argument or point of view.

We also learned how to recognize and respond to self-destructive statements. First, pay attention to the basic premise, conviction, or claim. Next, ask if the claim applies to itself. If so, does it satisfy its own criteria, or is there an internal contradiction? If the exact same reasons in favor of another's view (or against your own) defeat the reasons themselves, then the view is self-refuting. If you discover a problem, use a question (Columbo) rather than a statement to point it out.

Finally, we learned how to respond to popular examples of ideas or objections that violate the law of noncontradiction in a straightforward fashion (Formal Suicide). Remember, many formal contradictions are not immediately obvious. Instead, they are implicit, embedded in the larger idea. This makes them easy to miss. Even intelligent and educated people sometimes hold contradictory views without realizing it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

PRACTICAL SUICIDE

IN the last chapter, we learned that once in a while defending against an opposing view takes almost no work at all. Sometimes the easiest way to deal with another's objection is not to feed him more information, but rather to show him that his point commits suicide.

We have already explored the concept I called Formal Suicide, when an idea or objection violates the law of noncontradiction in a straightforward fashion. However, some views that are not internally contradictory can be self-defeating in other ways. "Practical Suicide," "Infanticide," and "Sibling Rivalry" are terms I use to describe three other ways statements or arguments self-destruct. I will take up Practical Suicide in this chapter, and discuss the other two in chapter 9.

PRACTICAL SUICIDE

Some points of view fail the pragmatic test. They simply cannot work in real-life application. There is no logical contradiction, strictly speaking, just a practical one. In this type of suicide, you can hold the view, but you can't promote it.

You see the conflict immediately in the claim, "It's wrong to say people are wrong." Holding that it is wrong to find fault with others is not itself incoherent. I know that sounds odd, considering the wording. But when you think about it, the problem occurs only when you

say the statement. You would be doing the very thing you say should not be done. This kind of inconsistency is self-defeating because the person who voices this view contradicts his own convictions.

For example, like most two-year-olds, my little girl adopted a philosophy of “no” for a season. It was her answer to everything. I’d sometimes hear her alone playing in her room, absentmindedly stringing denials together with varying force and inflection, perfecting her technique like a piano virtuoso prepping for her next performance.

She was easy to trap, though. After a series of negatives I’d simply ask, “Are you going to answer ‘no’ again?” No matter what she answered, she’d be sunk. The philosophical subtlety was lost on her, but it should not escape you. There is no internal contradiction in a philosophy of “No.” Once my daughter tried to practice her conviction consistently, though, she ran into trouble. This happens all the time, even with those old enough to know better.

During a radio broadcast, I took exception to the theology of some televangelists. I was immediately challenged by a caller who said, “You shouldn’t be correcting Christian teachers publicly on the radio.”

“Then why are you calling to correct me publicly on my radio show?” I asked.

Some people, convinced that arguing is prohibited by Scripture, argue tenaciously that I am being disobedient to biblical commands by taking contrary positions on the radio with my callers. Some reject the whole task of apologetics because they think reason is never adequate to discover truth. Then they painstakingly list the reasons they think their opinion is true (e.g., “I’ll give you three good reasons why you can’t use logic to find truth”).

This is precisely the problem when people make the blanket statement that it is wrong to judge. Maybe it is wrong to make

moral judgments, but using this rule to condemn a judgmental person is itself a breach of the principle.

When a caller to my radio show took me to task for condemning homosexuality, he soon found himself caught in his own net. The following conversation could be titled “Condemning Condemnation.”

Lee: I’m not a homosexual, but I think it’s wrong to condemn anybody for anything.

Greg: Why are you condemning me, then?

Lee: What?

Greg: I said, why are you condemning me if you think it’s wrong to condemn people?

Lee: I’m responding to the fact that a lot of Christians condemn people.

Greg: I understand. And it sounds like you’re condemning me because I just condemned homosexuality as wrong.

Lee: Yes, I am. You are supposed to love everybody.

Greg: Wait a minute. You’re not listening to yourself. You just said it’s wrong to condemn people. And now you admit you’re condemning me. So I’m asking, why are you doing the very same thing that you say is wrong when I do it? [*Notice how I am narrating the argument here.*]

Lee: No, I’m not. [Lee pauses as the light slowly begins to dawn.] Okay, let’s put it this way. I’m not condemning you, I’m reprimanding you. Is that better?

Greg: Then my comments about homosexuals are simple reprimands as well!

I want you to notice two things about this exchange. First, it took Lee a few moments before he realized his error. This is not uncommon. Amazingly, some people never see it. When Lee

finally came to his senses, his attempts at correcting his blunder were not helpful.

Second, since I saw the problem immediately, it wasn't difficult to come up with questions to press the issue from a number of different angles until Lee caught on.

Philosopher Alvin Plantinga calls this suicidal tendency the "philosophical tar baby." If you get close enough to use the idea on someone else, he says, you're likely to get stuck fast to it yourself.²

MORAL RELATIVISM SELF-DESTRUCTS

Moral relativists — those who deny objective morality — are especially vulnerable to Practical Suicide. For example, whenever a relativist says, "You shouldn't force your morality on other people," I always ask, "Why not?"

What will he be able to say? He certainly can't respond by saying, "It's wrong." That option is no longer open to him. It is a contradiction, like saying, "There are no moral rules; here's one." This response commits suicide.

If a relativist does say it's wrong, I ask, "If you think it's wrong, then why are you doing it yourself? Why are you pushing your morality on me right now?"

The only consistent response for a relativist is, "Pushing morality is wrong for me, but that's just my personal opinion and has nothing to do with you. Please ignore me."

C. S. Lewis observes:

Whenever you find a man who says he does not believe in a real Right and Wrong, you will find the same man going back on this a moment later. He may break his promise to you, but if you try breaking one to him he will be complaining "It's not fair" A nation may say treaties do not matter; but then, next minute,

they spoil their case by saying that the particular treaty they want to break was an unfair one. But if . . . there is no such thing as Right and Wrong . . . what is the difference between a fair treaty and an unfair one?³

As I have written elsewhere, "A person can wax eloquent with you in a discussion on moral relativism, but he will complain when somebody cuts in front of him in line. He'll object to the unfair treatment he gets at work and denounce injustice in the legal system. He'll criticize crooked politicians who betray the public trust and condemn intolerant fundamentalists who force their moral views on others."⁴

I think this was Paul's point in Romans 2:1 when he wrote, "Therefore you are without excuse, every [one] of you who passes judgment, for in that you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things." Paul argued that those who set up their own morality are still faulted by their own code. Their "excuse" commits suicide.

Usually a person cannot deny moral truth without immediately affirming it. The minute they say, "and it's wrong to push your morality on me," they have sunk their own ship.

TO RUSSIA, WITH LOVE

In 1976, a decade before the Iron Curtain came down, I spent five weeks with three others in a clandestine mission operation in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. There I encountered a memorable example of Practical Suicide.

When we crossed the border from Romania into Moldavia, we were stopped on the Soviet side and searched. Once the border guards found Bibles, they took our car apart, checking everywhere for contraband. Then the questioning began. Where did we get the Bibles? Why were we bringing them across the border? Who

She nodded in agreement to each point. I was surprised she couldn't see what was coming. "Then apparently your government is printing anti-communist propaganda right in your own country."
 "No, you don't understand," she replied. "We have separation of church and state."

PROSELYTIZING PROHIBITED

Some years ago, the Southern Baptist Convention publicized its plans to direct its annual summer evangelistic outreach to Jews living in Chicago. It then encouraged Baptists to "pray each day for Jewish individuals you know by name that they will find the spiritual wholeness available through the Messiah."

The public reaction was immediate and severe. The director of the Jewish Anti-Defamation League said the campaign "projects a message of spiritual narrowness that invites theological hatred."⁵ A consortium of religious groups in Chicago, including Christian denominations, issued a statement condemning the SBC, warning that the Baptists' evangelism in the Windy City would encourage hate crimes.

The grievances were aired on a national TV talk show, where two enraged rabbis from New York and Chicago confronted two Baptists. The substance of their complaint was this: Proselytizing should be reserved for people with no spiritual convictions. Jews already have a religion. It's the height of arrogance to suggest that they need a new one. Therefore, Christians should make their appeal elsewhere. Essentially, the rabbis were saying, "Keep your spiritual opinions to yourself. Stop trying to change other people's religious views."

Do you see the problem here? The rabbis were incensed that Christians were trying to change the religious convictions of Jews. Yet their antidote was for the Christians to abandon their own religious view of evangelism and adopt the rabbis' view.

In the heat of the moment, it probably did not occur to the Christians to simply ask, "If that's what you believe, then I don't

were they for? Didn't we know such activity was illegal? It went on for hours.

We knew that the Soviets claimed they had religious freedom. They also claimed to print Bibles for their own people. We also knew that both claims were false, which gave us an advantage in the conversation.

"Don't you have freedom of religion in the Soviet Union?" we asked, parroting the propaganda.

"Yes, of course we have religious freedom," the interpreter shot back with some indignation, "but we have separation of church and state."

Now, it wasn't clear to us how bringing Bibles across the border actually interfered with that principle. Yet it was the interpreter's stock reply to just about every objection we raised.

"It is forbidden to bring Bibles and other religious material into the Soviet Union," she continued. "In schools we teach the children that there is no God. Only old people believe that. Our people are taught Marxist-Leninism. We don't allow any other propaganda. We have separation of church and state."

"But you print Bibles in the Soviet Union, right?" I asked.
 "Yes, we do," she answered. "Our believers get all the Bibles they need."

"And you have religious freedom?"
 "Yes, we have religious freedom, but we have separation of church and state."

"But we can't bring Bibles across the border?"

"No, we don't allow that propaganda in our country."

"The Bible is propaganda?"

"Yes."

"But you print Bibles in your own country."

"Yes."

"Now I'm confused," I remarked. "You say you have religious freedom, but we are not allowed to bring Bibles into your country because they are propaganda. Then you tell me you print Bibles in the Soviet Union."

understand why you are trying to change my religious beliefs right now. Why do you interfere when I'm trying to obey Jesus' command to preach the gospel? Why don't you keep your own religious views to yourself?"

Oddly, the Baptists were branded intolerant merely for planning to engage others in voluntary, thoughtful conversation about religion. Yet the rabbis who viciously condemned them on national television were considered "tolerant" and "open-minded."

The claim "it's wrong to try to change other people's religious beliefs" is usually an example of Practical Suicide. The idea itself is not incoherent. However, a person risks contradiction simply by trying to promote this conviction.

FREEDOM, REASON, AND KNOWLEDGE

It always strikes me as odd when people try to advance arguments for determinism. Let me tell you why.

Determinists claim that freedom is an illusion. Each of our choices is fixed, determined beforehand by the circumstances that precede it. All of our "choices" are inevitable results of blind physical forces beyond our control.

The problem with this view is that without freedom, rationality would have no room to operate. Arguments would not matter, since no one would be able to base beliefs on adequate reasons. One could never judge between a good idea and a bad one. One would only hold beliefs because he had been predetermined to do so.

That's why it is odd when someone tries to *argue* for determinism. If determinism were true, the person would have been "determined" to believe in it (with others just as "determined" to disagree). He would have to admit that reasons don't matter and that trying to think the issue through is a waste of time.

Although it is theoretically possible that determinism is true—there is no internal contradiction, as far as I can tell—no one could ever *know* it if it were. Every one of our thoughts,

dispositions, and opinions would have been decided for us by factors completely out of our control. Therefore, in practice, arguments for determinism are self-defeating.

WHAT WE LEARNED IN THIS CHAPTER

In this chapter we discovered that there is more than one way for an argument to self-destruct. Though some views are not internally contradictory—that is, they do not fail through Formal Suicide—still, in practice they are self-defeating. The view can be believed, but not acted on or promoted. Anyone advancing the opinion cannot avoid violating his own convictions, for example, "it's wrong to say people are wrong."

We call this tendency "Practical Suicide." Moral relativists are especially vulnerable to this problem, as are those who believe it is wrong to try to change another person's religious views.

unborn? As I have argued elsewhere (e.g., in *Precious Unborn Human Persons*), if the unborn is not a human being, no justification for abortion is necessary. However, if the unborn is a human being, no justification for elective abortion is adequate, because we do not take the lives of valuable human beings for the reasons people give to justify their abortions. My theoretical question to the actor's wife trades on that strategy.

CHAPTER 7: SUICIDE: VIEWS THAT SELF-DESTRUCT

1. I heard this line from my friend, philosopher David Horner.
2. More precisely, "A" cannot be "non-A" at the same time, in the same way or, in Aristotle's words, "One cannot say of something that it is and that it is not in the same respect and at the same time."
3. This quip came from my clever friend Frank Beckwith.
4. These last three are memorable malaprops of Yogi Berra.
5. The argument fails, though, as many have shown. There is no inherent contradiction between God's goodness and power and the existence of evil.
6. This is not a meaningful limitation on the Divine, however. God's omnipotence ensures that he can do anything power is capable of doing. Yet no amount of power can make a square circle. It would be a limit, though, if God's rational nature were compromised by contradiction.
7. According to postmodern thinking, truth does not exist in the sense most of us use the word. There are no claims about the way the world really is that we can know to be accurate. Instead, there are many socially constructed accounts of reality, and each one is literally "true" for those who believe it.
8. C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 272.
9. Empiricism, the claim that knowledge is restricted to that which can be perceived by the senses, self-destructs in the same way. The truth of empiricism itself cannot be perceived with the senses.

CHAPTER 8: PRACTICAL SUICIDE

1. For the full transcript, see "A Conversation with Lee" at www.str.org. It's a delightful lesson in the use of the Suicide Tactic.
2. Alvin Plantinga, "Pluralism," in *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity*, ed. Philip Quinn and Kevin Meeker (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 177.
3. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 5.

4. Gregory Koukl and Francis Beckwith, *Relativism — Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 143.
5. Jeffery L. Sheler, "Unwelcome Prayers," *U.S. News & World Report*, 20 September 1999.

CHAPTER 9: SIBLING RIVALRY AND INFANTICIDE

1. Incidentally, in the Christian view the conflict is resolved because God's love is not sentimental, but sacrificial. He can execute justice while also making provision for mercy and forgiveness.
2. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 31.
3. G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959), 41, as quoted in Ravi Zacharias, *Deliver Us from Evil* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1996), 95–96.
4. I don't think this is a sound way of reasoning because it commits the is/ought fallacy. I am only adopting this claim for the sake of argument (see chapter 10, "Taking the Roof Off").
5. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 31.
6. Richard Taylor, *Ethics, Faith, and Reason* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1985), 83–84.
7. *The Quarrel*, directed by Eli Cohen, distributed by Honey and Apple Film Corporation, Canada, 1991.
8. This problem could also be stated as a Sibling Rivalry: (1) God does not exist as moral lawmaker. Therefore, there are no moral laws to break. Therefore, evil does not exist. (2) Evil exists. Therefore, transcendent moral laws exist. Therefore, a transcendent moral lawmaker exists. Therefore, God exists. Either there is no God and no evil, or evil exists and so does God. The option that does not seem possible is that evil exists, but God does not. These notions are in conflict, victims of Sibling Rivalry.
9. If the atheist does not affirm the existence of objective evil, but is merely pointing out what appears to be a contradiction in the theist's worldview, he escapes this particular dilemma. Usually, however, the atheist raising this objection actually believes in genuine evil.
10. J. P. Moreland, *Christianity and the Nature of Science* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 104.

CHAPTER 10: TAKING THE ROOF OFF

1. Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, in *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1982), 1:138.