

# RIPPING THE CURTAIN:

A CONVERSATION WITH PETER ROLLINS, PhD



ABOUT PETER ROLLINS:

Peter Rollins is a writer, philosopher, storyteller and public speaker who has gained an international reputation for overturning traditional notions of religion and forming “churches” that preach the Good News that we can’t be satisfied, that life is difficult, and that we don’t know the secret.

Challenging the idea that faith concerns questions relating to belief, Peter’s incendiary and irreligious reading of Christianity attacks the distinction between the sacred and the secular. It blurs the lines between theism and atheism and it sets aside questions regarding life after death to explore the possibility of life before death.

Peter gained his higher education from Queens University, Belfast where he earned degrees (with distinction) in Scholastic Philosophy (BA Hons), Political Theory and Social Criticism (MA) and Post-Structural thought (PhD). He’s the author of numerous books, including *Insurrection*, *The Idolatry of God*, and *The Divine Magician*. He was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland, currently lives in Los Angeles and will die somewhere as yet not known.



**Stance:** *We want to thank you for letting us interview you. We have a lot of questions that we're very excited to ask. Our first question is a very simple one: how did you get into philosophy?*

**Rollins:** I went to a school where education wasn't really valued and came out of school with basically no qualifications and no interest in anything intellectual. I had never really read a serious book in my life. I had no interest in abstraction. But, when I was seventeen, I had an experience that made my world strange—politically, religiously, and culturally. I think that's kind of where philosophy starts, even historically; it starts when the world becomes strange, and you don't have the conceptual tools to make sense of it. So, when I was seventeen, for the first time ever, I started to take an interest in the world—in my world. One could call this event a type of conversion but not in the religious sense of that term. At a fundamental level, this was not a move from one way of seeing the world to another but rather an event of subtraction—not an event of addition. It was an event that helped me experience everything in a new way.

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At seventeen, I experienced an ontic shock. In my attempt to make sense of that experience, and distance myself from it, I briefly embraced a more confessional religious view of the world. I also turned to the academic world, mostly to find ways to rationalize and justify my new worldview—to make it stick. Like so many newcomers to philosophy, I tried to use it in an apologetic way. But, thankfully, those who taught me did a great job. They helped me to see that philosophy doesn't so much justify one's world but rather makes it even more strange by challenging some of our most basic and closely held assumptions.

**S:** *It sounds like what happened with your background was very much a mixture of theology and philosophy. You speak a ton about that in your works, both in your podcasts and your writing. How do you think philosophy and religion intersect? Can you have one without the other?*

**R:** Great question. My thinking has always been connected to what happened when I was seventeen, to that event that shook my world. It was a very existential experience. I mean, I got rid of everything I owned. I disowned my family at the time. I stopped this course in computer studies I was doing. Basically,

it changed everything. Doing these things was not some kind of moral or immoral act or some statement. It was a reboot, one which gave my world a sense of depth and purpose.

My subsequent interest in philosophy was really an interest in trying to understand what was happening in that event and what universal significance—if any—it had. I turned to philosophy in order to explore existential questions. When I discovered the philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich, I resonated deeply with what he meant when he talked about Ultimate Concern. Tillich wanted to explore what it means to be grasped by an event that moves us beyond utilitarian calculation—whether it is a cause, a person, a belief. What does it mean to care so much about something that it is beyond economics? Tillich is a philosophical theologian—or a type of existentialist theologian—because he is interested in exploring what grasps him in an unconditional, absolute way.

You can believe in God and not be caught up in that belief at all, which Heidegger called the God of ontotheology. Tillich is very critical of this. For Tillich, there is a deep sense in which everyone is religious. Religion, in its widest meaning, is ontological. It's part of subjectivity. It will manifest in all manner of ways—in the lover's commitment to their lover, the logicians' fidelity to logic, the artists sacrifice to their art, and the activists' devotion to their cause. This doesn't mean absolute commitment is always good. Ultimate Concern can be seen in the fascists' willingness to die for their cause. It has divine and demonic manifestations.

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So, for me, philosophy and theology meet in the exploration of meaning. Other animals don't have this trans-utilitarian clutch to meaning in the way that humans do. They don't overvalue things. They are all perfect Utilitarians. They've all read Mill and Bentham. They all maximize pleasure and minimize pain, which is called Instinct. But humans don't; humans are terrible Utilitarians. We self-sabotage. We over-value things that we know are bad for us. Just think about making money. How damaging can that be to yourself?

Whether people are narrowly religious or not, we all have this drive. And for me there's two types of religious responses to this: there's religion that promises an object that can satisfy your



ultimate concern, and there's religion that can help you mobilize and weaponize your ultimate concern without trying to help you try to fulfill it. Philosophy and theology can help us parse out what that means and how to navigate it.

**S:** *In that answer you touched a little bit on Christian existentialism. You talk about Kierkegaard a fair amount, who is canonically called a Christian existentialist. Do you see your work as a part of a Christian existentialist tradition?*

**R:** The Christian existential tradition definitely made an impact in my early education. Existentialism as a whole is a part of the tradition that has informed and enriched me. I remember being very impacted by Gabriel Marcel. One of the interesting things about existentialism is that you have people who seem very different when it comes to their view on God. You have people like Nietzsche or Sartre sharing the name of existentialist with Gabriel Marcel and Søren Kierkegaard—and then you have someone like Heidegger. They all have different understandings about God, but they all agree in rejecting what Pascal called the God of the philosophers—the God before whom one does not dance, in Heidegger's words. Likewise, this idea of God is one that I have been critical of throughout my work. Personally, I am drawn to Nietzsche more than Kierkegaard, but I like them both. Do you want me to say anything more about that, or are you going to move on to the next question?

**S:** *If you'd like to expand, please do.*

**R:** Existentialism is deeply important, but I think the term “existential” is old fashioned now. The existentialists were central in opening up the idea that we should resist the turn to a one-dimensional, mechanistic view of the universe. Humanism is connected with the rejection of a transcendental dimension to reality. What you are left with are things like evolutionary psychology, behaviorism, and crude materialism. With the existentialists, you don't have this humanist, scientific reduction. Existentialism opens up the way to understand a type of transcendental real within the material world. This has many different names. The Unconscious in psychoanalysis, superposition in physics, uncertainty in mathematics, dialectics in philosophy, and freedom in the work of Sartre. This mode of thinking offers an intellectual defense against determinism by showing how the universe has a type of novelty, a type of incompleteness, and antagonism hard-baked into it, which prevents the universe from being reduced to something purely mechanistic.

**S:** *If you're a little bit itchy about the label of “existentialist,” how would you rather label yourself as a philosopher? What would you say is the specific type of philosophy you do?*

**R:** That brings us to the interesting question of definitions. I don't think most philosophers worry too much about defining themselves. The best definitions come along after you've died. Definitely existentialism, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and radical theology are some of the disciplines that have honed my thinking, and they are the types of fields that I am interested in. I do use the word “pyrotheology” to describe what I do, but in many ways that term is still quite empty. It gives the illusion of a finished position, but it is still in process and will only become truly meaningful in time.

**S:** *We find it very interesting how you integrate psychoanalytic concepts into your work. As undergraduates we don't often see a mix of psychoanalysis, theology, and philosophy. How would you say your understanding of psychoanalysis has impacted the development of your philosophical ideas?*

**R:** Psychoanalysis has become very important to me, particularly the work of Lacan. In Lacan, the insights that Freud had concerning the unconscious have significance for broader philosophical concerns. Psychoanalysis proper aims at understanding an original nothingness that explains human behavior. Psychoanalysis is a part of the tradition of non-reductive materialism.

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One of the reasons for my interest in Lacan specifically is because his work offers great insight into the nature of religion. Psychoanalysis helps us to see religion as actually related to the management of drive. We can begin to understand how religion operates as a way of trying to deal with a certain excess that arises from a lack. Psychoanalytic theory can take up the religious mantle by offering ways for us to theorize about “original sin,” while also helping us free ourselves from its negative impact. In Christianity, this is called Salvation; in analysis, the Cure.

**S:** *We're going to continue with some questions about some ideas that are individualistic to you. Could you give a quick overview for our readers of what pyrotheology is and why it's significant to you?*



**PYROTHEOLOGY IS NOT JUST A THEORY OF LIFE. IT'S ABOUT EMBRACING THE STRUGGLE OF LIFE, ENJOYING OUR LACK, FINDING FREEDOM FROM THE TYRANNY OF HAPPINESS. IT'S ALSO A SET OF PRACTICES DESIGNED TO HELP PEOPLE LIVE INTO THIS THEORY.**

**R:** In a way, pyrotheology is nothing. It's just an invented word. Sometimes in order to corral your work, it's good to use a phrase or a word. A psychoanalyst friend of mine, Chris Fry, invented the term. We used it initially to describe an event we were running in Belfast, but I started to use it to describe the particular style of radical theology I was developing. What I love about theology is that it is not simply an intellectual discipline. It's also got a practical component. When I talk about liking theology, I'm not referring to confessional theology. I'm talking about a type of radical theology that is both a theory and a technology—the two wings that allow it to take off. Most disciplines have a practice. Biology takes form in surgery. Chemistry feeds the creation of medications. You've got physics which can help in the creation of new technologies. Pyrotheology is not just a theory of life. It's about embracing the struggle of life, enjoying our lack, finding freedom from the tyranny of happiness. It's also a set of practices designed to help people live into this theory.

If I wanted to put it in a nutshell, I might say that pyrotheology is designed to help people move from the idea that God is an object that you love to the idea that God is a name that we give to the depth we experience when we love. God is not, then, a sacred object but a name for the sacred experienced in objects. By "sacred," I mean to name a transcendental, or non-reductive, element within life. The technology of pyrotheology is split into two elements called Transformance Art and Decentering practices. Together they are designed to move people into a joyful embrace of the struggle of life, finding enjoyment and depth in the act of love.

**S:** You talk about that in your book, *Insurrection*. You state that trying to reach God through rituals objectifies God and ultimately won't fulfill our true desires. You further explain that we may experience God through acts of love, as you just said. In what ways would you say are acts of love distinct from rituals?

**R:** I'm a big believer in rituals. We all have liturgical elements of our life, practices that we live by, whether it's as simple as a

coffee and cigarette every morning before the rest of the family wake or poker once a month with friends. Actually, most religious rituals, the best ones, are designed to keep you at a *distance* from God. They are designed to help you experience what's called the death of God. For example, the role of a covenant is to get you distance from God. When you think of a contract, a contract is designed to protect you from the desire of the other, to give you distance from them. With a contract, you don't want your business partner to screw you over. It's designed to protect you from their desire. When we see the covenants in the Hebrew scriptures, they are designed to create a distance between the people and God, just like a child has to gain a distance from their parents to avoid psychosis. In scriptural terms, God might decide to destroy the world in a flood.

**TAKE THE EXAMPLE OF THE LAST SUPPER. IT IS A RITUAL BASED AROUND THE SHARED DEATH OF GOD. IT'S A WAKE.**

This goes even further in Christianity, because here some of the rituals are designed not simply to separate you from God but to enact the death of God. Take the example of the Last Supper. It is a ritual based around the shared death of God. It's a wake. It's a time for people to gather around a shared loss and find a way to live with it. In this act we enter into what is called the epoch of the Holy Ghost, the time in which the supernatural transcendental is emptied into a type of material transcendental. The community becomes the site of change in the world.

A lot of my work is designed to help people ritualistically enact this separation and loss. The rituals do not help us escape the world but to enter more fully into it. One of the interesting things about Christianity is that it takes seriously our desire to be like God—to lack the lack. But it then offers us the story of God becoming human and entering into the world. So, to become like God, we are put on a journey in which we are to become fully human. It takes us back to the place where we started but enables us to embrace that place rather than avoid it.

**S:** It sounds like you're hinting at this idea of incompleteness that we have in our relationship with God. You talk about this briefly in one of your episodes in your *Archive* podcast, an episode called "God Of This World." You discuss accepting our incompleteness in general. Why do we need to accept our incompleteness, and how do you feel accepting our incompleteness makes us a better person?



**R:** Great question. First of all, on a very superficial level, people think, “Okay, there’s a certain incompleteness,” right? We don’t know everything. We are lost in the world. We find ourselves with a particular language, in a particular era, with a particular intelligence, with particular interests and moods. Saying that there’s a certain sense in which we are incomplete is not a very radical statement. It’s one of the least radical statements you could make, really.

There are two types of incompleteness, broadly speaking. One is the idea that we are incomplete because of our lack of knowledge but that if we had the mind of God, everything would make sense. If we knew the location of every atom in the universe, and the direction they were going, and the speed they were going, and if we had an infinite mind to be able to calculate the results of that, then we would know the future, and we would know the past. Basically, the universe is a closed system. There is a blueprint; we just don’t have it.

**OUR EXPERIENCE OF BEING INCOMPLETE AND OUR EXPERIENCE OF LACK IS ACTUALLY A PRIVILEGED EXPERIENCE OF TRUTH, THAT THERE IS SOMETHING INHERENTLY LACKING IN REALITY ITSELF.**

That’s not what I’m saying. The other position is that our experience of being incomplete and our experience of lack is actually a privileged experience of truth, that there is something inherently lacking in reality itself. Lack does not simply come from ignorance. There is a lack that actually reflects the truth. Now, of course, the simple way of describing that is by looking at a field like quantum mechanics, where we see undecidability hard baked into its very development. Something that was discovered in the early experiments with light was a strange phenomenon in which light would act as a wave or a particle depending on how it was observed. Insights such as these do not arise from a lack of understanding; they actually arise from deep understanding.

To apply this to the area of religion, we might say there are two types of religious expression. One type of religion says, “You can be made complete in this life or the next. Your incompleteness is partial, and reflective of the human condition, immorality, or illusion;” and, of course, there are secular versions of this. For instance, I live in Los Angeles and find it to be one of the most religious places in the world. On every street corner there

are prophets promising that they can bring wholeness and completeness if you just do the right yoga moves, if you just do cross-fit, if you just have enough money, look the right way. That promise is everywhere. That’s why I don’t think we’re less religious today. I think we’re as religious as ever; we just don’t go to church for it.

But there is another type of religion, something that the philosopher John Caputo would call religion without religion—or I would label, after Bonhoeffer, Religionless Christianity or pyrotheology. In this approach one says, “No, your lack is not something that is contingent, that can be gotten rid of. It is actually the very site of truth.”

This gets to the heart of the main difference between Kant and Hegel. For Kant, we do not know everything, but there is an Everything that is beyond our reach. But, for Hegel, there is an inherent incompleteness in reality itself. Our sense of incompleteness is not a contingent historical experience. It connects us with the very nature of reality itself. Our existential incompleteness connects us with an *ontological* incompleteness.

This is expressed in the very project of dialectics, which could claim to be the greatest invention/discovery in history. It works from the insight that there is an antagonism in reality that is irresolvable. To embrace your incompleteness means to go with the flow of the universe, rather than against its grain. Basically, when you’re able to experience and accept that incompleteness, you are in sync with a fundamental truth about reality itself.

This is beautifully expressed in the Christian tradition when Christ cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” on the cross. In most religions, when you experience the loss of God, it’s because of something bad you’ve done or because of your inherent limitations. But Christianity has this wonderful claim that God experiences the loss of God, which means that there is something incomplete within the Absolute itself. The lack you feel is an expression of the lack in reality. In theological terms, when you feel yourself separated from God, you are one with God, because God is not one with God.

**S:** To go off of discussing the lack that we have, you talk a lot about embracing doubt also, particularly in the talk that you give called “Material Faith.” You say that there are times when you might know that something has a good chance of being false, but you choose to believe it anyway. We’re wondering, would you say that there are useful false beliefs?



**R:** Yes, in my work, doubt is important. How I approach doubt has changed over the years. From my first book to my more recent work, I've deepened and shifted my understanding. I'm very interested in what people are certain about. I want people to doubt their conscious way of seeing the world so that they might come into contact with their disavowed beliefs. We have lots of useful false beliefs, something that is particularly easy to see in people suffering a psychotic break. Just think about someone at night who thinks that there's a murderer in their cupboard or sharks under the bed. These are false beliefs, empirically, and most people who are having them even know that they are, but they have them anyway. One of the reasons for having these false beliefs is that they are useful to the individual, even when they cause the person a certain suffering. The "killer in the cupboard" belief protects from something worse, perhaps from the truth that they feel a murderous intent inside. We prefer to have these weird fantasies than to actually discover what lies beneath. This is a version of the old idea about the "noble lie." We often embrace false beliefs because they help us get through life. They keep our inner life in check.

**IN TERMS OF A USEFUL FALSE BELIEF, WE HAVE LOTS OF THEM, BUT THEY ALSO SPEAK A TRUTH, A TRUTH THAT WE ARE UNABLE OR UNWILLING TO HEAR.**

In terms of a useful false belief, we have lots of them, but they also speak a truth, a truth that we are unable or unwilling to hear. Psychoanalysts are trained to listen to our noble lies, to hear the truth that they speak. In a very important sense, psychoanalysts are literalists. This is why I'm a literalist. When a literalist reads the Bible, they take it as truth, just like how an analyst, when they hear a dream, takes it as truth. It might be empirically false, but they don't ask, "Oh, you dreamt about a red bus, and you're running for this red bus, and you couldn't catch it. Have you ever run for a red bus?" That's not really of interest to them. They take the dream as subjectively true, and they want to decipher it and bring the truth to the surface.

In the same way, I take a religious text as true; that's the literalist side of it. It's one of the reasons why I'm not a progressive. I bracket out the historical question, because I'm interested in what it means symbolically, what it means in terms of the subjective truth of the experience of the people who wrote it or the people who relate to it. In this way, the analyst ultimately wants to help us dissipate the noble lie, but they also respect it.

They respect why we need false beliefs. While a belief can be empirically false, it can hold a person together.

**S:** You're talking about the weight of subjective truths and objective truths that we have, specifically with beliefs. Are you implying that subjective and objective truths have equal weight in our human experience, or is one more weighted than the other?

**I'M PRIMARILY INTERESTED IN HOW AND WHY CERTAIN EVENTS CEMENT THEMSELVES IN OUR LIVES AND HOW WE CAN MOVE BEYOND THE DESTRUCTIVE RESULTS OF SOME OF THESE.**

**R:** I actually was having a discussion about this with a friend recently, because he feels that psychoanalytic theory doesn't take objective truth seriously. If someone is talking about an abusive past, the question the analyst always asks is not so much "Did it happen?" but rather the subjective dimension to it. That's a difficult one, but what I would say is that the same event can happen to two people and that for one person it's traumatic and that for the other person it isn't. Two children might hear their parents argue—something small like that—and for one of them, this objective, empirical reality has a deep impact on their subjectivity, while for the other it is irrelevant. I'm primarily interested in how and why certain events cement themselves in our lives and how we can move beyond the destructive results of some of these.

**S:** I want to jump back a little bit to your answer before that, when you were talking about disillusion. You talked about how false or subjective beliefs that we have sometimes get us to the truth efficiently. In the video that you call "Transformance Art," you talk about how Christianity needs to rupture systems in general, which is almost to say that we need to disillusion ourselves from those false beliefs. In "Zombie Drive," one of your podcasts, you mention consumerism explicitly. What other systems do you think need to be ruptured, that Christianity can rupture, and how are they different than the beliefs that we need to maintain to get closer to the truth?

**R:** I would argue that Christianity has primarily a main goal in what is called Salvation. Namely, not freedom to grasp the Lost Object or the Sacred Thing that will make us whole and complete, but freedom from the idea that there is a Lost Object or Sacred Thing out there that will make us whole and complete. That's the "zombie drive" I was talking about, and I would argue



**I THINK CAPITALISM IS PRIMARILY A MODE OF DESIRE, AND I THINK THAT IT'S THE MOST OBVIOUS EXAMPLE OF THIS DRIVE TO ESCAPE FACING THE LACK.**

I think it is the core, actually, of capitalism. I think capitalism is primarily a mode of desire, and I think that it's the most obvious example of this drive to escape facing the lack. Capitalism is about the drive to accumulate capital without end. At its core, it's not about getting money to buy a nicer car or a nicer house. When you give yourself over to capitalism, you give yourself over to frenetic drive for the abstract increase of capital. All the things you can buy are kind of secondary to that, and the problem with that is that we end up killing ourselves and hurting people around us.

One of the defenses of capitalism is that it is, for better or worse, natural. But, one of Freud's insights is to show how unnatural it is. Other animals don't engage in this type of activity. When an instinct is met, it is satisfied. Drive is not satisfied in the same way as Instinct. The more we get, the more we want. If our drive focuses on shelter, for example, we want to always have a bigger house, or two houses, or a different house. This is a type of perverse selflessness in that we actually engage in an activity that we know is destructive.

We see this beautifully expressed in the Hebrew scriptures, which introduce humans by way of a type of Oedipal complex. In the Oedipal story you have Oedipus, who wants to sleep with his mum, right? And then his father gets in the way, and he kills the father and sleeps with his mother. He thinks it's going to be a blessing, but it's a curse. To understand this in a very basic sense, the mother is a symbol of completeness, wholeness, oceanic oneness, the return to the womb, the pre-subject-object divide. The father is the symbol of what gets in the way of that, what stops us from getting what we want. Oedipus breaks through that prohibition to get the blessing, and it's actually an utter disaster. In the very act of fulfilling your dreams, you will experience a type of subjective destitution. Only when you fulfill your dreams are you directly confronted with the truth that your dreams will not fulfill you.

This is exactly what plays out in Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve want a piece of fruit, then there's a prohibition that says, "You

can't eat of it." They start to really want to eat of it. It appears as something that will make them like God, which will make them complete or bring them to a state where they lack the lack. But it's the very prohibition that creates the lack that they think will be filled by transgressing the prohibition. They break the prohibition, they get the blessing, and it's a disaster.

The entire Judeo-Christian tradition starts off with a very clear example of the birth of human subjectivity that maps onto the theory of the subject we find in psychoanalysis. We're either unhappy because we don't get what we want or unhappy because we do, right? We're either depressed, which is the sadness of not getting what you want, or we're melancholic, which is the sadness of *getting* what you want.

**IN CHRISTIANITY, THE CURTAIN RIPS, AND YOU REALIZE THERE'S NOTHING IN THERE. THERE'S NOTHING ON THE OTHER SIDE—THAT THE MAGICAL FRUIT WAS ONLY AN ILLUSION CREATED BY ITS VERY INACCESSIBILITY.**

The whole Biblical tradition starts with this, and then Christianity replays this dilemma and offers a solution in the Crucifixion. To understand this, you just need to see that the Temple of Jerusalem has the same structure as the Garden of Eden. It's split into three. You've got a court of Gentiles where people can hang out. You've got a massive curtain, and behind the curtain is a Holy of Holies. This corresponds to the garden, the prohibition and the magical fruit that lies on the other side of the prohibition—the fruit that gains its magic precisely by being prohibited. In Christianity, the curtain rips, and you realize there's nothing in there. There's nothing on the other side. That the magical fruit was only an illusion created by its very inaccessibility.

Capitalism is the expression of a form of Oedipal desire. The very framing of my work is to argue that Christianity—rather than being about some belief in gods—is a counter cultural subversive collective of people who are freed from this frenetic drive who have done this by passing through nihilism—the Crucifixion, the death of God—and found a way of living that is freed from the *negative dimension* of Drive. For me, Christianity isn't about being nice to your neighbor. That's just being human, right? It's not about morality any more than it's about belief. Rather, Christianity is designed to free us from a certain form of political, cultural, and religious life that is premised on the



drive for completeness, a pursuit that actually makes us feel all the more incomplete. In a nutshell, I'm saying the good news of Christianity is not you can be whole and complete: that's the promise of the serpent, which is the Superego. Rather, I'm saying that the good news of Christianity is that you can't be whole or complete. When you can embrace that and come to the altar and kneel, you will find freedom, joy, and a new form of life unimaginable to you before that event. This is exorcism. It is the removal of that serpentine voice that promises happiness while only ever delivering sadness.

**S:** *It sounds like what you're describing is a lot of what you attribute to the word grace—this existential tension of how, when we realize that the curtain is ripped and when we see that there's nothing behind, we're still freed in spite of the expectation of something behind it. With your concept of grace, you also talk about forgiveness—forgiving yourself and forgiving others. In what ways do you think that grace differs from forgiveness?*

**R:** I really like that question. Maybe they are two lights on the same thing. Grace is the experience of radical acceptance, and forgiveness is what flows from that radical acceptance. I'm using these words in a technical sense here. Forgiveness doesn't mean that you say to someone who punches you in the stomach, "It's okay, whatever."

**FOR ME, ORIGINAL SIN IS JUST A WAY OF REFERRING TO ORIGINAL LACK. IT IS THE NAMING OF AN ONTOLOGICAL INCOMPLETENESS IN THE WORLD THAT IS INSCRIBED IN SUBJECTIVITY.**

For me, Original Sin is just a way of referring to original lack. It is the naming of an ontological incompleteness in the world that is inscribed in subjectivity. That's why I dislike the liberal idea of Original Blessing. The sense of an original blessing is the fantasy generated by the ontological lack. To understand how this relates to the notion of forgiveness, think about money. If you have no money, you have no money; that's nothing. If you have a debt, you don't just have no money; you have a *felt* nothingness. It's a nothingness that is something. It's a nothingness that binds you to institutions you despise. It makes you work in jobs you hate. Debt is like this ontological lack. To pay a debt means to fill it, so if I owe a hundred dollars, I give a hundred dollars. To forgive a debt means you don't pay it. You don't fill the lack. Instead you render it nothing.

**TO EXPERIENCE GRACE IS TO ACCEPT THE INCOMPLETENESS, TO NOT BE STUNG BY IT. FORGIVENESS IS THE EVENT OF THIS GRACE.**

You render it into a nothingness that is nothing. So, forgiveness of debt means not that you try to fill the lack in your life but that you're able to accept that lack and, in doing so, rob it of its sting.

The main problem with debt is not the lack but the demand to fill the lack. For example, after the housing bubble burst in the early 2000s, some of my friends got into financial trouble. The stress they faced wasn't connected to the debt as such. The problem was connected to the demands they were receiving to pay the debt. The problem was all of the phone calls, telling you that you have to pay it back. In economic terms, bankruptcy is as close to the theological idea of forgiveness that we can get. Bankruptcy means that you don't have to pay the debt, but rather the debt is wiped clean. To experience Grace is to accept the incompleteness, to not be stung by it. Forgiveness is the event of this Grace.

**S:** *To shift gears a little bit, as undergraduates in philosophy we are often told "If you're going to do that, you're going to have to teach at the university level." However, you haven't chosen to teach at a university level. How did you get to where you are and what do you think is the role of public philosophy?*

**R:** I'm very passionate about this, although, I don't want to tell too many people the secret or otherwise I'm going to have some competition. But here's the thing: we are re-entering a golden age of public intellectualism. In the old days, if you were driving a forklift truck for eight hours of the day, that's all you did; you drove a forklift truck. Now, you can put in headphones, and you can listen to some of the best teachers around the world for free. If you're driving a car all day, you can be listening to top-quality podcasts as you go. You can be listening to philosophers on YouTube while you do household chores. You can basically self-educate in ways that we couldn't have dreamed of twenty years ago, even ten years ago. With this there's a new range of possibilities for those who work in intellectual fields.

It allows for the possibility of philosophy returning to its roots. There have always been great philosophers who have had very ambivalent relationship with the academy, thinkers who have found themselves more at home doing philosophy in





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the streets. They've always inspired me. Whenever I studied philosophy, I never once thought about becoming a university teacher, but I always wanted to do philosophy in the commons. If someone wants to get rich, they shouldn't choose to become a public intellectual. People choose this life because of what it does for us, because it enriches and deepens our lives and can potentially do good in the world. However, it is possible to use the new technologies in order to reach people and to make a living doing it.

**S:** *You produce content in a variety of mediums. You have the Fundamentalist podcast that you do with Elliot Morgan, who's a comedian. You also write books, do seminars, and release YouTube videos. In what ways do you think academic disciplines—like philosophy, maybe other ones—can work to be more accessible to the general public, to somebody who might not have access to all of these different sources?*

**R:** I think that what we have to do is repeat the founding gesture of philosophy in creative ways that resonate with people. To go back to what I mentioned at the beginning of this interview, we need to make the world strange again. When people realize how weird our world is, when we understand that what we take for granted is bizarre—whether it's religiously, politically, or individually—we are open to new possibilities, new ways of remaking the world. Once you spark off the strangeness of the world, all you have to do is lay some breadcrumbs and say, "Oh, here are interesting people who have thought about these questions."

I'm really excited about the possibility that there can be philosophy podcasts and YouTube channels dedicated to serious thinking and popular speakers out there who are not trying to make someone like Heidegger fun, which would be impossible, but who are able to ask, "What's the question that animated Heidegger? What's the question that animated Camus? What's the strangeness that animated Freud?" and who try to help people experience that.

I'm not saying that's the main role of a public intellectual or philosopher, but it's a great start: to somehow show the world's strangeness. That's what they do in first-year philosophy. You do these funny thought experiments, which are kind of designed

to make you starting thinking about how strange your ways of engaging with the world really are. Today there's a real hunger for public intellectuals, but with the possibilities, there are always dangers. You've got so many pseudo-intellectuals on the internet at the moment.

**S:** *You said that giving philosophy to people is just one of the jobs of the public intellectual. What other jobs do you think an intellectual would have?*

**R:** There are so many roles. In the US, one of the roles of a public intellectual today might be to help people reflect more and react less, to help lower defense mechanisms that prevent us from listening to alternative views and listening to people we disagree with. The public intellectual needs to model healthy ways of engaging serious issues in a productive way.

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At different historical moments, public intellectuals will have different roles, but at the moment one of the roles for a public intellectual might be to try to find ways to get past us-and-them politics to bring novelty and the possibility of change back into political and intellectual debate. This is what happened in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. Two sides were split and could not find agreement. Eventually, the suffering of the community got so bad that we all had to say, "We have to try to listen to the other person and see what happens." What happened is we just got into a room together—Loyalists and Republicans—and tried to find a novel set of solutions, because the old ones weren't working.

**S:** *It sounds like a public intellectual needs to be a necessarily generous person, because you are giving and you are doing for people in general. At the same time, it sounds like, when people start philosophy, it might be richer if it's a personal thing that hurts for you—to be uncomfortable and then go out to try to do philosophy. I'm wondering what the dynamic is between philosophy being a very personal thing or being a very public thing.*

**R:** Yes. You can only hope to use philosophy in a positive way for others if you have allowed it break into your own life and change you—only if you are continually open to practicing that humility every time you approach a new work. In my own life, I started philosophy as a personal endeavor. Then that kind of bled out into a more public arena. For me, philosophy began as a



way to justify my own positions. Heidegger once said something to the effect that the differences between students and lecturers isn't that the students don't know anything, and the lecturers do. It's the other way around: the students know everything, and the lecturers know nothing. First-year student often come to philosophy already knowing the answers and just wanting the evidence to back it up. Gradually, my teachers, through a learned unknowing, showed me that there are many different views and perspectives. They helped me dive into the massive conversation that philosophy is.

What's funny—this is one of the dangers about being a public intellectual—is that people try and ask you on Twitter whether God exists or something equally as strange, because they think it's a question you can put into a hundred and eighty characters. Actually, the progress in philosophy really comes from this very deep dive into the conversation itself.

If you dive in, it breaks you open. It helps you become uncomfortable with your ideas. It helps you interrogate them and develop them. It's not that your current view of life needs to be thrown out. Not at all. That's your starting point. All ways of thinking have something to them, but you want to see how they are woven in to the whole tapestry of thought and then add something to that tapestry.

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Philosophy is a very personal endeavor in many ways, but the more personal it is, the more it can speak to others. The great thing is that I get to think about things that matter to me, so I always reach my audience. Every time I write a book, I saturate my market because the market is me. I think I'm writing for other people, but I'm writing for myself. Perhaps a few other people will read it as well. That also goes with payment. If I write a book, I've already been paid for it because the payment is the writing.

It's like when Kierkegaard said, "When a poet sings, they cry in agony, but when they sing, beautiful music is formed." So, all a poet is doing is crying about how their one true beloved died of tuberculosis, and they'll never love again, right? They're just moaners, but they're moaners whose lips are so formed that when they scream, it's beautiful, and it helps other people. So yeah, the personal and the public intertwine in a good singer-

songwriter, in a good philosopher, and even perhaps in a good mathematician.

**S:** *That was such a beautiful answer that I want to end it there. So, before we officially sign off, we're wondering if you have any questions for us after the interview?*

**R:** Not really. I just want to say that I'm so excited about the possibilities open to people who are studying philosophy today, because I think there are new technologies and new ways to do philosophy in public. There are new ways to make a living as a philosopher, using YouTube, podcasting, Patreon; I think students today should be looking seriously at that. They may want to do academic philosophy in a university, but they may also want to find a way to be a freelance philosopher, and there are ways to do that. So, I just want to encourage students today by saying that there are lots of options out there for you.

**S:** *Alright. We thank you sincerely and wholeheartedly for doing this interview with us. We truly appreciate it.*

