

## Review Article.

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Sacks J 2011 'The Great Partnership. God, Science and the Search for Meaning'.  
Hodder and Stoughton.

I bought Sacks' book and read it for three main reasons:

- I enjoyed his book 'The Dignity of Difference' (2002 1<sup>st</sup> edition) – indeed I wrote to tell him how much I had appreciated his inclusive and tolerant approach to other religions. But I was dismayed at the vitriolic attacks on his ideas by some of his Orthodox Rabbi colleagues who were angry at his view that other religions than Judaism had some of the truth. They had 'The Truth'. Sacks produced a 'revised' edition in 2003.
- As a humanist (and an ex Methodist Minister) I have been very interested in the history of science and contemporary science *per se* as well as various perceptions of relationships between science and religion. (See my paper: '*Has the Advance of Science made Religion Unnecessary?*' on my website: [www.bowlandpress.com](http://www.bowlandpress.com) under Seminar papers).
- For many years I have been pondering issues relating to the different meanings which we construct and the sources which we variously deem relevant to our meaning constructions.

When I read his new book I noted on pp 11, 267 and 281 that he refers to the London bus advertisement placed by the British Humanist Association: '*There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life*'. I was amused by his comment that this is '*not the most profound utterance yet devised by the wit of man*'. (p 11) It was, he says, the trigger for his new book. As a member of the said British Humanist Association I decided to produce a critique of the book, albeit in an individual capacity.

As Sacks said in 'The Dignity of Difference' (2<sup>nd</sup> ed 2003 p 151): *If we were always and only strangers to one another we would have no reason to trust one another. We can only cease to become strangers to each other when we learn how to speak freely to each other.* This response to his 2011 book is an attempt to trust him with my critical thoughts.

There were some important aspects of his recent book which I appreciated.

One was that I had never engaged directly with a Jewish Orthodox approach to the Hebrew Scriptures. My engagement in the past with Jewish Scriptures was via a Christian perspective.

A second was that I was impressed by his lucid and engaging expression of his Orthodox version of Jewish – or perhaps more accurately Abrahamic - theology and revelation.

However, I had some serious problems with his exposition of the main strands of his thesis. I will quote page references where appropriate but some of his arguments with which I have difficulty are endemic and run throughout the book.

My References give some sense of influences on my own thinking and the sources from which I draw my own flexible meanings and tentative existential position.

I shall take just four of his main views and offer a critique.

- 1 His dichotomy of reason (science) and revelation (Abrahamic monotheistic religion).
- 2 God and ‘*what the totality means*’.
- 3 The Bible and democracy.
- 4 The idea that because God is free, then our freedom as creatures is derivative - including freedom to take risks and to make mistakes.

### **1 His dichotomy of reason (science) and revelation (Abrahamic monotheistic religion).**

I will start by posing a question with which I opened a recent, draft, paper which I shall be discussing with a few friends. This question is, evidently, relevant to Sacks’ arguments but implicit within the question are assumptions with which he might disagree.

The question which I have been pondering for some time, and have not resolved – it may not be possible to resolve it – is:

*What are the boundaries/limits of scientific investigation re the human condition, and in particular issues around identity, subjectivity/qualia, beliefs, values, meanings, epistemology, aesthetics, ethics ?*

Right at the start of the book he asserts the basic distinction and dichotomy which runs throughout his argument and with which I am in fundamental disagreement. ‘*Science speaks with expertise about the future, religion with the authority of the past. Science invokes the power of reason, religion the higher power of revelation*’. (p 1).

My disagreement arises from the epistemological question: How can he know about the knowledge distinctions which he makes in order to arrive at this confident dichotomy and its religious consequences?

This asserted dichotomy between science (reason) and religion (revelation) is intrinsic to his arguments and he links this to criticisms of the limitations of *rational* Greek

philosophy as compared to the revelatory validity and authority of the *narratives* in Hebrew Scriptures. Later he also makes what I deem to be inappropriate and rather simplistic references to ‘left brain/right brain’ functions. I am not convinced that these brief references to complex neurological investigations into ways of understanding these brain structures and functions are sufficient to allow the reason/revelation conclusions which he draws. (Rose 2005). Indeed, he seems to be assuming and asserting a rational/revelation dualism which I do not think he establishes with any degree of credibility. This form of dualism is not unrelated to mind/body dualism and I, in my turn, assume that for Sacks ‘mind’ is the locus and medium both of divine revelation as well as its functioning in a rational way. From my perspective, he neither explores this complicated issue and nor, therefore, does he satisfactorily explain it. It seems that, whilst he does not use the term ‘consciousness’, it is a human brain functioning propensity which is both a defining characteristic of the human brain and also the medium through which divine revelations are (may be) accessed by humans – or at least by some humans.

Sacks’ opening dichotomy raised so many issues for me that this first of my four sections will take up a major part of my critical review.

Chalmers (2010) is a leading figure in the study of consciousness, philosophy and cognitive sciences and his book is a thorough discussion of contemporary and future ways in which consciousness might be investigated by carefully designed scientific methods. I assume, although Sacks does not make clear the medium through which revelation takes place, that his view of God as the source of divine revelation must include human consciousness as a crucial medium by which such revelation might take place. Just because, at this time, we do not have a detailed understanding of the ways in which brains produce consciousness does not mean that we should resort to mystification by relying on assumed mediated monotheistic metaphysics. Nor do we yet have a clear idea of the ways in which human consciousness is a major medium by which we try to make sense of the multiplicity of physical reality. On this broad issue Chalmers says: *We have good reason to believe that subjective experiences are systematically correlated with brain processes and behaviour. It remains plausible that whenever subjects have an appropriate sort of brain process, they will have an associated sort of subjective experience. We simply need to distinguish correlation from explanation. . . It follows that a science of consciousness remains entirely possible. It is just that we should expect this science to take a nonreductive form.* (p 40).

Chalmers is making serious and sustained attempts to address the complex question which I posed above.

I suggest that Sacks overdoes the left/right brain structural/functional differentiation in order to make his wider point about the duality of reason and revelation. The structure and function of the *corpus callosum* should not be ignored merely to make a dichotomous rational/religious point. I agree with Sacks that Jay Gould (1999) also made this science/religion distinction between what he terms non-overlapping magisteria (NOMA) and I disagreed with Gould as well. I have problems with dichotomised dualistic models, particularly if used for ideological/religious purposes.

If Sacks couched his rational/religious dichotomy in terms of a Venn diagram it is not clear to me the extent of the overlap or gap between his view of the scientific/rational and religious/revealed components. For me this is one of the ongoing problems which I had with his basic notion of 'Partnership'.

From my point of view, what scientific discoveries do *indirectly* is to enable us to review and reconstruct the meanings which we give to our existence by the knowledge which scientists produce. Evolution, cosmology, quantum mechanics, microbiology, DNA and genetics, cognitive sciences, geophysics, carbon dating, neurobiology are examples of scientific study which, at least for me, influence my sense of my own meanings for life and living. Of course we use other sources of meaning, but I suggest that for those who take the outcomes of scientific investigations seriously, science does play a significant part in meaning-making. Freeman Dyson (NYRB 5 April 2012, p39) makes the following observation:

*We gain knowledge of our place in the universe not only from science but also from history, art, and literature. Science is a creative interaction of observation with imagination.*

In this context of science indirectly informing our, or at least my, meanings, I enjoyed reading Lisa Randall's (2011) book intriguingly titled: 'Knocking on Heaven's Door. How Physics and Scientific Thinking Illuminate the Universe and the Modern World'. She is a leading theoretical and particle physicist at Harvard. I will provide some quotations from her book which are relevant to the way in which Sacks seems to dismiss science as a source of meaning in human experience.

*The material phenomena that interest us won't always be sufficient to explain them, but the physical correlates are instrumental to their existence. (p 51).*

My comment is that it is not necessary to involve the idea of a metaphysical source of transcendent Being in order to 'explain' the existence and meaning of the 'material phenomena'. The idea of God merely adds further complexity to the situation without providing any evidential basis for his inclusion.

She quotes(pp 46-47) from Dictionary.com where religion is defined as: *A set of beliefs concerning the causes, nature, and purpose of the universe, especially when considered as the creation of a superhuman agency or agencies, usually involving devotional and ritual observations, and of constructing a moral code governing the morality of human affairs.* Her comment is: *Religion in these definitions is not only about people's relationship to the world – be it moral or emotional or spiritual – but it's about the world itself. This leaves religion open to falsification. When science encroaches on domains of knowledge that religion attempts to explain, disagreements are bound to arise.*

*Life is an emergent phenomenon that goes beyond the basic ingredients. This material view is essential but not necessarily sufficient for understanding all the phenomena in our world. (p 53). (Her emphasis).*

Randall is suitably sceptical about any scientific attempt to produce universal and totalising assumptions about morality and meanings. *Science's purpose, broadly speaking, is not to resolve the status of humans' moral standing.* (p 45).

However, morality and meaning are not thereby assumed to be the result of revelation by a metaphysical 'higher power of revelation' but arise from ways in which humans relate to each other and develop beliefs, norms, values which are constructed in order to make meanings within the specific group and sometimes projected into the universe. Hauser (2006) explores morality from evolutionary and psychological perspectives.

I actually agree with Sacks' criticism of the scientism espoused by E O Wilson (1998). I have often quoted from p 5 of Wilson's book: *When we have unified enough certain knowledge, we will understand who we are and why we are here.* This statement seems to me to be seriously epistemologically flawed – how could we possibly *know* when we have enough 'certain knowledge' and how could this scientific knowledge definitively address the famous 'why?' question? I think that Wilson is expressing a wildly optimistic view of scientism – and I strongly disagree with him. Just because we have the linguistic ability to pose questions should not imply either that they are sensible questions or that they are capable of being answered. I suggest that the 'Why?' question can be posed but not answered. Religious belief systems represent a determined assumption that 'why?' has an answer.

Whereas human understandings, which result from scientific discoveries, help some people to construct meanings *indirectly* by informing them about the nature of the world and of human beings, religions purport to describe and prescribe meanings *directly* on the basis of revelation. The revelations in which they believe, by assertion and on the basis of ancient scriptures, seek to establish meaning, purpose and morality as pre-ordained by a God who has not only created the universe but its ethical and spiritual goals as well. Some religions also believe that revelation is a source of scientific knowledge. Christian creationists are an example of this, as are those who assert the Genesis description of creation and its chronology. Whether or not a particular view of divine revelation includes the revelation of 'scientific' facts the notion of revelation is endemic in religious belief systems. I suppose that an assumption here might be a version of Descartes' dualism. Sacks sees the problem on p 256 where he asserts: *As its name implies, dualism is not monotheism.* I'm not quite clear as to which version of dualism he is referring but I do not think that he addresses the monotheistic consequences of the dualism between God and the creatures to whom revelations are made. Dualism does not disappear merely by the assertion of monotheism.

What I have never come across is a careful elucidation of precisely how that which is not human (God) connects with human beings in ways which apparently convey ethical, religious, creedal, 'truths'. So, for me, not only is there the serious problem of the *medium* of revelation but also issues around how I might critique that concept and content of revelation if reason is deemed to be offside as Sacks seems to imply. It also makes it difficult or impossible for me to engage with a critique of that Being and 'his' (male gendered) revelations given that he is asserted to be to be 'a higher power'.

Critical, rational scrutiny of revelation seems to be a non-starter based on his asserted dichotomised premise.

It seems that I am simply left with the option to believe or not to believe the narratives of the Hebrew scriptures. I find that difficult. Perhaps that is what he, and other religionists, might mean by 'faith'. The act of believing in beliefs.

His opening assertion also gave me another problem. I suggest that it is not the case that science speaks about the 'future' in the rather categorical way in which he frames his statement above. Indeed, Sacks himself makes frequent references to the past of various sciences and especially he refers to Darwin's extensively researched, evidence based and currently supported theory of evolution. Evolution of all scientific projects is primarily about the past – almost by definition – so I do not see how he can sustain the emphasis of the opening dichotomy. Taking evolution seriously as a firmly evidenced theory relating to human origins, its tenets shape not only our understanding of the past but also our present meanings and the potential futures of our and other species. Further, any future predictions made by the various sciences can only be tentative until validated by both theoretical and experimental verification. I suggest that the sciences engage in constant and necessary shifts of focus between the past, present theory/experiment and future predictions. A constant cycle of rigorous, reviewed, publicised, theoretical, evidence based and experimental curiosity the results of which are always deemed to be capable of being challenged and *falsified*.

When he says that '*religion speaks with the authority of the past*' I am puzzled. Sacks' assumption seems to be, and this applies to the other two Abrahamic faiths, that this particular ancient, scriptural and creedal past, for reasons unclear to me, was a distant locus of valid divine revelations to the chosen few which contain existential, ethical, spiritual and religious truths for *all time* and for *all people*. Again I pose the epistemological question: How can this authority be *known* as distinct from merely *believed*? I am also puzzled by his use of the definite article - 'the' authority. He seems to make an inappropriate philosophical shift which other religionists also make, from the tentative uncertainty inherent in believing to an apparently more confident authority derived from revelatory ethical epistemology.

That assumption as to historical, personalised, scriptural sources of authority is the bedrock of his religious position. From my perspective it has all the marks of the myths of which, in other contexts, he is critical. I sense a lack of consistency.

I will not go into fine epistemological detail as to my problems with this but I will mention what seem to me to be crucial problems.

I immediately have problems with 'authority'. Two aspects create difficulties for me. One is that I find it difficult to accept 'authority' merely on the say so of the authority of an individual 'authority' or by an ancient tradition or by the norms of a religious organisation. Einstein made a well known observation on this point: *Unthinking respect for authority is the greatest enemy of truth*. Second, I cannot understand how or why divine revelations are made to a few Big Name individuals who are believed to be the purveyors of an 'authorised narrative'. To pose my puzzlement concisely: what is the source of the authority of the authorities? I can't help but conclude that

Sacks' answer to this is a rather circular argument, namely that the scriptural authorities (Abraham, Moses *et al*) speak with the authority of the revelation which they claim to have received.

Why does it appear that divine revelatory activity was so specifically focussed on the past of a particular people? The God in whom he believes seems to have been particularly involved in revelatory activities in a small part of the world and with a small group of people in a brief instant of cosmic time. Given my limited understanding of the vast and complex history of the evolution of *homo sapiens* it does not make sense to me that God left it so late to make his revelation to Abraham and Moses – and to so few. To put it bluntly from my humanist perspective: the revelation is exclusive and excluding and simply doesn't seem fair. It fails any 'equality of opportunity' test.

Sacks seems to reify religion as in: *religion speaks* . . . I suggest that this is misleading. It is more accurate to state that religious people, who assume that they have a representative and mediating validity, *speak as if with authority*. The only speech which is spoken is spoken by people.

I also have a sense that he plays down the disturbing range of ethical attributes of the Abrahamic God which, if they were to be perpetrated by people today, would warrant accusations of mass murder and genocide.

I do not make this point glibly. There are still religious people who knock on my door and who, when I pose what to me are deeply immoral activities of their God will respond: *Well these people, ( Amalekites and others who disobeyed God or seriously upset his Chosen People) deserved what they got. They must have sinned.* That seems to them to 'justify' death and extermination perpetrated by their God. There are numerous passages in the Psalms and other places where God is extolled as one who destroys the wicked and those who are deemed to be the enemies of Israel. As an ethical humanist that worries me.

There may well be rabbinical interpretations which are intended to mitigate the horror of these narratives of the 'ancient religious past' but I could never accept that this kind of God was a source of ancient, valid or credible 'revelations'. I can see that Sacks emphasises the more humane aspects of the Abrahamic tradition - justice, mercy, loving kindness, forgiveness, concern for the poor – but I do think that it is necessary to take the other 'immoral' divine attributes more seriously. Selective focus on 'humane' divine attributes could be seen to derive from non-religious criteria of appropriate ethical behaviour. Or it is a form of ethical cherry picking.

The way in which Sacks contrasts Greek thought (rational) and Hebrew thought (narrative) was very interesting. It had not occurred to me before I read his book. However, it leaves me with a problem: How can I offer a critique of a religious perspective which derives from the authority of *narratives* if I am not able to exercise a *rational* critique? It's almost as if I am left with a 'take them or leave them' approach to the narratives in which he believes. Why should I be impressed with them? Why should I believe them? Why should I act on them as a basis for my living and my agency? Why should I adopt them as an authoritative source for any

meanings which I give to my life? The authority of the sources seems to derive from that God of whom the sources speak, and I think that this is rather circular.

Another aspect of Sacks' reason/revelation dichotomy is the longevity and tenacity of the Abrahamic tradition and he makes reference to neo-Darwinism. I have long since given up the assumption that just because something has been believed for a long time by many people and believed by people who have overt status – gives that belief any inherent authority, validity or veracity.

He says: *If neo-Darwinism is true and reproductive success a measure of inclusive fitness, then every neo-Darwinian should abandon atheism immediately and become a religious believer, because no genes have spread more widely than those of Abraham, and no memes more extensively than that of monotheism. But then, as Emerson said, consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds.* (p 8).

I think that his views ignore the current understanding of the locus of the origins of *homo sapiens* ie Africa. DNA research does not, as far as I know, locate the origin of a major DNA type in the land inhabited by Abraham. I think that he makes mistakes in genetics, chronology and geography in deference to his need to specify revelation to a particular chosen group and specific location. There has been consistent criticism of Dawkins' notion of *memes* which have never been validated by careful research. (Rose 2005 p 93). Neither genes nor memes provide a secure 'scientific' basis for his statements. From the way in which he asserts the total veracity of the authoritative, transcendental, existential, and religious Hebrew narrative as opposed to a scientific/rational approach I sense that perhaps scientific invalidation of 'Abrahamic genes' and absence of evidence for memes would be of no relevance. In this crucial respect I do not think that he establishes 'the Partnership' between science and religion which his title asserts.

I found the following research into the tenacity of incorrect ideas interesting in this context:

*Fifteen years ago, researchers quizzed Britons about their attitude to science. Oh yes, they all said, science was terribly important, and what's more they would welcome better reporting of science in newspapers and on TV. And then the researchers moved in for the kill. Does the Earth go round the sun, or does the sun go round the Earth, they asked? One in three got that wrong. The next question was: how long does it take? Two in three could not answer.* (Tim Radford, Science correspondent, 'The Guardian', 25 November 2004).

The contrast between the positive responses to 'science' and the serious inaccuracy of what people believed to be the case compared to matters of fact perhaps indicates the tenacity of false ideas. People have believed, and continue to believe, these false ideas for centuries – even post Copernicus. Again I make the point that longevity of beliefs is not a valid justification of either their authority or their accuracy.

And it is not only the case that people believe false ideas for long periods of time. In Sam Harris's recent (2010) book: 'The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values' he notes: *Many social scientists incorrectly believe that all longstanding social practices must be evolutionarily adaptive: for how else could*

*they persist? Thus even the most bizarre and unproductive behaviours – female genital excision, blood feuds, infanticide, torture of animals, scarification, foot binding, cannibalism, ceremonial rape, human sacrifice, dangerous male initiations, . . . use of heavy metals to treat illnesses have been rationalised, or even idealised, in the fire-lit scribblings of one or other dazzled ethnographer. The mere endurance of a belief system does not suggest that it is adaptive, much less wise. It merely suggests that it hasn't led directly to a society's collapse or killed its practitioners outright.* (p20). (My emphases).

Harris goes on to observe: *Science simply represents our best effort to understand what is going on in this universe, and the boundary between it and the rest of rational thought cannot always be drawn.* (p 29).

Longevity of beliefs is not a useful criterion as to their validity or veracity. They need to be exposed to constant, rational and rigorous critique.

The history of science is the history of ideas and beliefs which have been discovered to be incorrect and which have therefore been abandoned. Incorrect or non evidenced ancient religious beliefs are not usually treated with the same scepticism by believers, nor are they easily abandoned especially where cultural, national, organisational, hierarchical and individual status and identities are at stake.

I have some sympathy with Harris at this point and his observation goes some way to addressing my question about the boundaries of scientific investigation in relation to the human condition.

I suspect that some beliefs have a long and tenacious life for a number of reasons:

People may not want to engage with the effort required to scrutinise their beliefs. It's hard work, and sometimes confusing, to examine one's beliefs – and to change them. There are existential consequences.

Some people, I suspect, do not want to interrogate their beliefs too closely or too rationally because they have vested interests in maintaining them. These interests may be: their status and authority in the religious group depends on their espousal of certain key group beliefs; their actual belonging to a group, even as members, may depend on at least their outward avowal of group beliefs. For some people their defining narrative of national, historical, religious and personal identity may require them to avow certain national/historical beliefs and practices in order to maintain their 'special' sense of status. Some nation states as well as individuals are defined by their metaphysical belief frameworks. The tenacity, and sometimes aggression, of their beliefs in the metaphysical/theological/scriptural sources of their origins and rights can make life extremely difficult for those who do not share their beliefs and who are excluded from the origins, the identity and the rights.

Many years ago I decided to take responsibility for deciding on my own beliefs and my own senses of meaning. Not an easy option but one with which I have a sense of integrity as well as creative struggle.

## 2 God and ‘*what the totality means*’.

Sacks gives central significance to his assumption that ‘true’ meaning can only be derived from his version of monotheism. ‘*Monotheism is something else entirely. The meaning of a system lies outside the system. Therefore the meaning of the universe lies outside the universe.*’ (p 9). His emphasis.

He goes on to say: *Monotheism, by discovering the transcendental God, the God who stands outside the universe and creates it, made it possible for the first time to believe that life has a meaning, not just a mythic or scientific explanation.* (p 9) .

Even within his assertion of monotheism there seem to me to be significant differences of ways in which what I will term this ‘rhetorical monotheism’ is expressed, and even within the same ‘monotheistic’ religious tradition. These ‘significant differences’ sometimes erupt as deadly religious conflicts when various factions seek to impose their *orthodox* ‘monotheistic’ meanings on those who differ both within and between versions of monotheism. His assertion of the validity and authority of his monotheism does not avoid the problem of intra and inter religious conflicts. I say ‘his monotheism’ because it is obvious to me that, paradoxically, there are various ‘monotheisms’ each claiming to be *the monotheism*. Monotheism among the various religions is not monolithic. I cannot help but think that there is an inherent contradiction in this ‘monotheistic’ position. In spite of Sacks’ resistance to the idea that Abrahamic monotheism encouraged the exercise of power between people, my observations lead me to exactly the opposite conclusion. Namely that the exercise of power to the detriment of non-believers and in terms of the oppression of ‘inferior’ or ‘unorthodox’ people within the monotheistic tradition has been and still is one of the most worrying of features of various forms of monotheism. Even *within* the organisational ambit of a particular monotheism various groups are oppressed and treated with profound inequality. I do not need to provide examples and I do not think that Judaism escapes this abuse of power problem.

From my point of view his assertion contains a *non sequitur*. On what basis might he assert that ‘*the meaning of a system lies outside the system*’? I do not find that the mere assertion of something so crucial is a valid way of demonstrating the veracity or authority of the assertion. The assertion does, evidently, establish the basic premise on which his whole argument relies. Namely that the universe has a unified moral creator who is external to that which has been created and not just a deistic, mechanistic creator but one who is the only valid source of human meaning with all that flows from this in terms of ethical and relational and purposive (teleological) living. If, as he asserts, *the meaning of the system lies outside the system* then I am back with my problem as to how the external meaning of the system is conveyed to those within the system. I suppose that from his perspective ‘revelation’ is the answer. But, from my point of view as I have said, revelation does not carry epistemological validity.

It has long been said that if the conclusion is prescribed, then discussion is precluded. I have this sense with Sacks’ own ‘conclusion’. It would seem, not only from the quotations which I mention above but throughout his book, that his central ‘revealed’ conclusion requires him to believe that all other, non-monotheistic and secular sources of meaning, are partial and deficient because they arise from within the system not

from outside it. I find this confusing not least because the implication is that my own ways of making meaning are necessarily deficient.

How can Sacks' version of God and '*what the totality means*' apply to the millions of people who lived before the Hebrew God decided to reveal himself to Abraham and Moses? Did they live deficiently meaningless lives? Poverty and enslaved people existed before the Israelites became of special concern to God. Why did God not take revelatory and liberating actions well before this very late date – late that is in terms of the evolution of *homo sapiens*? How can the assertion be justified that life only has meaning when the version of monotheism in which he believes came into existence, by what he terms '*the discovery of the transcendental God*'? This leads me to suspect that there is confusion between 'discovery' and 'revelation'. And why did not God reveal his ethical and religious requirements to the millions of other people who were also in existence when he decided to reveal himself to a few people in the Middle East? What about China and India for instance. I can't help but think that this God shows disturbing characteristics of seriously localised, tribal and detrimental discrimination – 'human all too human' as the philosopher Nietzsche, whom Sacks likes to quote, said. I am also not clear how Abraham and Moses avoid his criticism of other sources of meaning as '*just a mythic*' explanation. Strongly believing in Abraham and Moses should not transmute from belief and myth into revelatory epistemology or assumed historical 'fact'.

Sacks continues with his criticism of science as a source of meaning in the following quotation:

*'Nature is sublimely indifferent to who we are and what we deserve. There is nothing moral about it; it carries no meaning within it. Myth and science in their different ways tell us how the parts are related. They cannot tell us what the totality means. Only something or someone outside the universe can give meaning to the universe. Only belief in a transcendent God can render human existence other than tragic. Individual lives, even within a tragically configured universe, may have meaning, but life as a whole does not.* (p 30 my emphasis).

I am always deeply sceptical of any religious or other system of thought which purports to tell people '*what the totality means*'. From my point of view this religious totalising assertion is as epistemologically flawed as are such totalising statements made in the name of 'scientism'. Thomas Nagel famously criticises the 'View from Nowhere' (1986). That is, there can be no perspective from outside the universe, the 'meaning' cannot 'lie outside the system'. I fail to see that divine revelations solve that problem, particularly as such revelations are couched in very human terms and subject to constant human re-interpretation. Such revelations also seem to have the same ethical characteristics and contradictions typical of all the various moral frameworks invented by human beings, including notions of 'us' and 'them'. Meaning is neither total nor static.

Clocks in (in Cornwell (1998)) refers to the problems of a '*prevailing folk belief which critical theorists call a 'totalising metanarrative*'. (p 102). I suspect that Sacks' own views could be seen within this 'totalising metanarrative' and God serves as the metaphysical validator. John Gray (2007) provides an interesting critique of utopian ideologies. One of his many trenchant observations is that '*Realists should reject*

*teleological views of history*'. (p 195). It seems to me that assertions as to '*what the totality means*' are inherently teleological and, for me at least, deeply problematic. I also have problems with the notion that the God who is intrinsically transcendent can, by means not clear to me, infuse that which he has created with 'meaning' which is distinct from the physical reality of that which he has created. I would have thought that Sacks' view of monotheism would also include the necessary consequence of monism, but he seems to lapse into an implicit divine/human dualism in which the physical and the spiritual are distinct but related in terms of God's ethical requirements for a minuscule aspect of his creation, namely human beings.

I am persuaded by the arguments mounted by Everett (2012) in the title of his book: '*Language is a Cultural Tool*'. His functionalist conception of language assumes that 'cognition + culture + communication' is functionalist in a way which I think would accord with the Wittgenstein of '*Philosophical Investigations*'.

Ferrari (2002 p 7) makes a similarly persuasive point: *Meaning is bound to discourse; there is no meaning outside the symbolic space of culture.*

Whilst Sacks interestingly asserts the *narrative* nature of revelations in the Hebrew scriptures as compared to the *rational* approaches of some Greek thought and some subsequent Western thinking and science, again I need to emphasise that, for me, there is no inherent validity in any particular narrative. This may be disconcerting to those who need to believe '*what the totality means*' but from my point of view 'the totality' is only another linguistic, cultural human construction designed to create a sense of comfort, meaning and purpose. Belief in 'totality' from which is derived a sense of meaning serves the function of relieving the sense of isolation in existence. But discourses and therefore narratives are always and unavoidably cultural constructions. Totalising discourses there simply cannot be – except by the assertion of believers in them. This too is an epistemological problem – how could we possibly know '*what the totality means*'? Again I comment that believing should not be taken as having epistemological security or validity.

In summary: I simply cannot see how the Transcendent Other (God) can reveal himself via humanly constructed – and limited – language. I do not see how language can be 'shaped', influenced or determined by any divine revelatory intervention. This may reflect the poverty of my imagination, but that's where I am. From my perspective, we create gods – even a monotheistic God – in response to our own needs, especially our needs for meaning, comfort and purpose. All metaphysical concepts and meanings have their origin in human ideas. In an important sense all metaphysical ideas are therefore secular. We create and own our meanings. Grayling (2001) '*The Meaning of Things*' makes the following comment: *Humanity's sense of beauty, and decency, our power to love, our creativity – all these best things about us – belong to us, to human experiences in the real world. They neither need, nor benefit from, some alleged connection with supernatural agencies of one kind or another. They are ours, just as much as the evil, stupidity, greed and cruelty which they oppose.* (p 124).

A personal statement: I do not feel deficient in the meanings which I make and which change from time to time. I also do not see how the Christian version of monotheism which I gave up would provide any benefits to my current existential endeavours and

to the seriousness with which I take my meaning making. In the terms to which Sacks refers on p 158: *At the end of the day there is a difference between discovering morality and inventing it. Discovering it means that it exists independently of our will.* I am content to be part of the demanding efforts to continually invent and reinvent morality in a democratic society of debate, difference and dignity. *Individual lives, even within a tragically configured universe, may have meaning, but life as a whole does not.* (p 30). I am content to admit that I do not know about 'life as a whole'. I do not have any sources which would persuade me that they have access to 'life as a whole'. And on p 159: *The great religions are the most effective moral tutors the world has ever known.* Thus he links meaning and morality. Whilst I could agree with him that the great religions of the world have been 'moral tutors' I am less impressed with his assertion as to their 'effectiveness'. They are, and have been, a very mixed blessing one might say. They evidently do not adopt a coherent and integrated ethic, nor do they agree on who has the authority to transmit and interpret that ethic. Religious ethics give the impression of being stuck in the revealed past and therefore find it threatening and problematic to engage with current debates in modern terms without worrying that they are failing in their loyalty and obligations to the traditional ethics of the God in whom they believe. Nor is it obvious to me that religious ethics are consistently humane in treating others with dignity, respect and compassion. Counter evidence is, historically and currently, abundant. Hitchens (2007) explores some of the ethical problems arising from the ethical vagaries of religious revelations. Religions do not, and should not, have a monopoly on ethical discourse. Holloway (1999) explores ethical issues in ways which do not require recourse to God as the only source of morality.

I agree with Warnock (2010): *Those who profess religious faith, and those of the clergy who are unable to discuss moral issues without reference to God, do a great disservice to society, insofar as they prevent moral questions being taken seriously except by those who share their own beliefs.* (p 95).

Stenger (2007) makes the following observation: *The religions of the world have laid claim to the role of arbiters of human behaviour, and their leaders continually decry the moral decay they claim to see in society. They insist they have the right to tell the rest of us what is right and what is wrong because they have a special pipeline to the place where right and wrong are defined – the mind of God. Even secular institutions pay tribute to this claim. Whenever a moral issue arises in politics, such as stem cell research or when to end life support, clergy are called upon to provide their wisdom. On the other hand, the opinions of atheists, freethinkers and humanists are rarely solicited – and frequently reviled.* (pp 193-194).

### **3 The Bible and democracy.**

Sacks states: *The Bible knows nothing about democracy, and if you are seriously religious you must have qualms about it. Democracy is, after all, about the will of the people. Religion is about the will of God.* (p 128). And on p 132: *Politics is a problem for the Bible, precisely because it believes that no human being should exercise coercive force over another human being. Politics is about power, and Abrahamic faith is a protest against power.*

He also states (p 215): *One definition of fundamentalism, and an explanation of why it is religiously wrong, is that it is the attempt to impose a single truth on a diverse world.*

I am not clear as to how he makes coherent political/theological sense of his distinction between his doubts about democracy based on the will of the people as compared to the will of God on the one hand, and his view of religious fundamentalism as being *religiously wrong*. To put my dilemma precisely: How does Sacks' espousal of monotheism, revelation, transcendence and '*what the totality means*' avoid his own criticism of religious fundamentalism? If, as Sacks asserts, it is not the will of the people which is the basis of political organisation but the will of God, how is this God's will formed into a social structure and who decides on the form of that social structure? I sense that theocracy is not far from his thought at this point. I also fail to see how there could be anything which I would recognise as oppositional politics in his implied theocratic system. Can the Kingdom of God cope with a variety of democratically structured and oppositional political views? Or, does revealed religion impose narratives of uniformity?

I also think that he is inconsistent in his assertions relating to the equality of all people by virtue of having been created by God on the one hand, and the way in which revelation is vouchsafed to very few (Abraham and Moses) and then interpreted by 'authorised' rabbis on the other. I would have thought that assertions of the equality of all people would lead to democratic political structures rather than priestly/rabbinic authority to interpret and, in a sense, dictate. If indeed all people are created equal, then I would have thought that the God who created them would also validate that equality by arranging for anyone to be the vehicle of revelation and authority. I suspect that this was a revolutionary consequence of the Reformation instigated by Luther - the authority/egalitarian/democratic implications of *sola fide*.

In the briefest of terms my response to Sacks' qualms about democracy is that in the absence of a version of democracy people are left to the vagaries of tyranny, hierarchy, dictatorship, monarchy, theocracy or various versions of religious and secular based patriarchies or oligarchies. My reading of history leads me to the view that all of these forms of power at various times have been, and still are, supported by various religions and even by factions within the same religion.

I am reminded of Tony Benn's famous five questions:

- 1 What power have you got?
- 2 Where did you get it from?
- 3 In whose interests do you exercise it?
- 4 To whom are you accountable?
- 5 How can we get rid of you?

The Churchillian view on democracy was well put – and on this I agree with him.

The serious concern I have about assertions relating to the authority of a transcendental God and supposed revelations is that it is only *people* who can project their interpretations on to this God, and these projections have all the characteristics of human beings who wish to create that transcendental God in their own image and

to meet their own needs and interests. I simply cannot see how a male, Orthodox Rabbinical or Christian or Muslim exegetical hierarchy can claim sole interpretative authority in relation to the veracity of ancient revelations. Indeed, the very exclusion of women from equality of interpretative opportunities and the various claims to be 'the Chosen People' have all the oppressive characteristics with which we are painfully familiar in religious – as well as some secular – traditions and practices.

I have long thought that if people believe intensely in that for which there is no testable evidence, then their beliefs will merely consist of their projections of their own prejudices, interests and needs on to the God who is the imagined construction of their projections. My concerns are supported by the fact that these asserted monotheistic metaphysical belief systems result in conflicting interpretations simply because there is no evidence basis either for the beliefs or for their multiple and conflicting interpretations. Their contents cannot be tested for validity nor can they be falsified. They can merely be asserted.

But where belief is concerned validity is not necessarily seen to be important. I am impressed by Montaigne's axiom: *Nothing is so firmly believed as that which is least known.*

On the issue of authority I will quote Randall again: *We've seen that in the seventeenth century, the ascent of scientific thinking splintered the Christian attitude to knowledge – leading to conflicts between different conceptual frameworks that continue to this day. But a second source of division between science and religion was about authority. In the eyes of the church, Galileo's claim to be able to think for himself and presume the capacity to independently understand the universe deviated too far from Christian religious belief. When Galileo pioneered the scientific method, he rejected a blind allegiance to authority in favour of making and interpreting observations on his own. He would change his views in accordance with the observations. In doing so Galileo unleashed a whole new way of approaching knowledge about the world – one that would lead to much greater understanding of and influence over nature.* (p 60).

I also agree with Dworkin and I conclude that if, as a society, we make laws which are based on fear, if we privilege dogmatic interest groups whose beliefs are based on revelation, then we are in danger of changing the very nature of the complex, tense and changing relationship between law, democracy and freedom of speech. Dworkin's statement is crucial to my position: *No one's religious conviction can be thought to trump the freedom that makes democracy possible.* (New York Review of Books p 23 March 2006).

Whilst I might have 'qualms' about democracy I certainly have a lot more qualms about any society in which I might live which was based on a version of revelation and theocracy. My understanding of theocratic societies, as with other forms of totalitarianism, makes me fearful of the inherently restrictive, oppressive and demeaning practices of such societies. They are inevitably based on behavioural and credal conformity and in my ethical framework, obligatory, orthodox conformity is a form of tyranny.

*The surest way to corrupt a youth is to instruct him to hold in higher regard those who think alike than those who think differently. Thus spoke Nietzsche !!*

#### **4 The idea that because God is free, then our freedom as creatures is derivative - including freedom to take risks and to make mistakes.**

It was in Sacks' chapter: 'Why God?' that I came across views which caused me serious ethical concerns.

He quotes the British Humanist Association recent advertisement on London buses: '*There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life*'. I was amused by his comment on this, namely that it '*is one of the less profound propositions to have been produced by the collective intelligence of people who pride themselves on their intelligence*'. (p 281).

In a similar, and presumably religious, vein on a recent holiday in Edinburgh I noticed that some buses had the following advertisement prominently displayed: *Try prayer*. I did just wonder whether this was on the assumption that having tried it one found that prayer 'worked' or, that having tried prayer, it would become clear that praying did not work. An ambiguous advertisement !! Buses are becoming important mediators of our dialogue.

On the same page Sacks says: '*If I wanted to stop worrying, I would not choose a world blind to my existence, indifferent to my fate, with no solace in this life or any other. Nor would I put my trust in those who ridiculed my deepest commitments*'.

I juxtapose this with a quotation from Atkins (2011): *We could simply lie back and think fearfully of death, the unavoidable sequel to life. Our forefathers could do no more, and to ameliorate its prospect built myth upon myth. But careful scientific investigation has revealed what lies in store for all of us, like it or not. There is no comfort here, but science is not about false comfort, it is about truth.* ( p 103 in 'The Epilogue').

It will not surprise Sacks that I believe that I live in a cosmos which is blind to my existence, indifferent to my fate and in which I have no sense of solace – except from the people close to me and whose intimacy and support I value. I have concluded that this is the kind of cosmos in which I exist. I conclude this because I have thought carefully and honestly and come to the considered view that there is no transcendent overarching God who both created the cosmos, provides the '*totality of meaning*' and who has ethical prescriptions for the minuscule species otherwise known as *homo sapiens*. The thinking which I have undertaken has included: scientific evidence in general and evolution and neurobiology in particular; careful introspection on my own experiences; observations on what various religious people say that they believe and, importantly, how they behave towards those who do not accept their belief system and also the aggression and disdain with which they can treat those who, at least on the surface, seem to share their beliefs but with some excluding 'unorthodox' and heretical differences. In the latter category I include the ways in which various religions treat lesbian and gay people and women. I have only to mention the Anglican conflicts and dilemmas and the Pope's attitude to women priests and

homosexuality. The current evidence of Catholic cover up – and therefore collusion - in relation to paedophilia provides damning confirmation that when religions become powerful they also become inhumane. These excluding, abusive and oppressive attitudes are, sadly, fairly common amongst various religions. The rhetoric of an egalitarian ethical monotheism, with its various excluding caveats, does not impress me. I do not ridicule Sacks', or others', deepest commitments but at the same time I reserve the right to engage in rigorous criticism – as indeed I have done and continue to do in relation to my own deepest commitments.

The reasons which he states for his not worrying are, I suggest, precisely why many people in the past and present find it very difficult to accept the 'indifference' of existence. Difficulty in accepting the uncomfortable sense of 'indifference' is not a sufficient reason for rejecting '*indifference to my fate*'. Many people have, and continue to want, solace. I don't blame them for that – we all seek solace, but the sources of this solace are important. I do not think that finding it difficult to accept the indifference of existence is a sufficient reason for believing in a creating and caring God based in ancient texts pronounced by 'authorities'. I can easily appreciate the existential benefit of this form of belief in terms of solace, but I decided that I could not, in all honesty, accept those benefits because I became unconvinced. I gave a paper to the Multifaith Group at the University of Derby which details my reasons for adopting a humanist position. It is titled: '*Giving up God: Losses and gains. An existential audit*' which is now on my website: [www.bowlandpress.com](http://www.bowlandpress.com) in the Seminars section. I also decided to write a book in which I provided a more detailed discussion of my own source of beliefs and values titled: '*Believing in Nothing and Something. An approach to humanist beliefs and values*'. (2003).

In important respects my humanism is my version of Ockham's razor to which Sacks alludes. I try to believe in as little as possible rather than as much as possible, hence the title of my book.

It was later in this chapter 'Why God?' that I came across more views which caused me concern.

Sacks states: '*There is no creation without risk. What impresses me about the Bible is that it suggests that, even for God, creating humanity was a risk, and one that at least once he regretted having taken*'. (p 286). ( His emphasis).

I assume that the 'at least once' was a reference to Noah and the flood. I have given the implied reference to the Flood and the destruction of all humanity with the exception of Noah and his family considerable thought since I read the book. Sacks says: '*I would not choose a world blind to my existence, indifferent to my fate, with no solace in this life or any other.*' ( p 281). I have to say that those whose existence was terminated due to God's somewhat belated realisation that he had made a 'mistake' strikes me as a blatant example of '*indifference to their fate*'. I only have to pose the question in human terms to demonstrate its horror: What would happen to a person who decided, on the basis of a mistake he had made, that all those who suffered from his mistake should be killed by drowning with only a select few being saved? As a secular moralist I believe that I adopt and live by higher ethical standards than the ethical monotheism espoused by those who recount the moral validity of the Noah narrative – however justified by metaphorical exegesis.

I think that my basic question here is: By what right does God decide to take the risk of creating this world with its numerous and endemic problems for humans and other species? Some biologists have estimated that approximately 99% of all species have ceased to exist due to a variety of catastrophes. Did God's risk-taking foresee and guarantee this extent of species termination? Does God create by mere fiat?

In the human context, over 200 varieties of cancer, numerous painful and debilitating inherited genetic defects, viruses and bacteria causing us serious and terminal diseases, strokes, heart attacks, ignorance about the causes and cures of these 'risks' which God freely decided to take, without any obvious concern for those who would suffer from the risks which he, unilaterally, decided to take. Added to this list is: tsunamis, volcanoes, earthquakes, stray comets impacting the earth, huge, varied and constant radiation from the sun. Again, I do not intend to be glib, but speaking as a democrat it seems that God was taking a massive and immoral liberty with his freedom to take risks – and not basing this on either consultation or accountability. I simply could not believe in such a God with any sense of meaningful ethical or intellectual integrity.

On the same page he says: *'To be human is to live in a world fraught with risk'*. I could certainly agree with that – it seems self evident - but to compare the ignorance of inherently and unavoidable risky living of human beings with the deliberate and intentional risk taking of the one true (omniscient, omnipotent, beneficent) God seems to be an example of projection of the necessary incomprehensibility of human contingency onto God who is presumably only self contingent and intelligible only to himself.

On p 287 Sacks says: *'Monotheism expects great things from us, and by doing so makes us great'*.

I am afraid that his exposition of monotheism, with a God who takes these kinds of risks with human existence, does not impress me with a sense of 'greatness' – either of God or of the human condition. My understanding of the Noah narrative also suggests that God does not provide a very admirable ethical role model for 'greatness'. Quite the reverse.

*'The God of Abraham is the God of surprises, the supreme power who intervened in history to liberate the powerless and set them on the long journey to freedom'*. (p290). At this point I simply wonder why God was so limited and selective in his choice of those to whom he decided to offer liberation. It might have been preferable to have given these 'revelations' and liberations to everyone in order to create at least the semblance of equity. I am impressed with the notion of 'equality of opportunity'.

Finally, Sacks says: *'If natural selection tells us anything, it is that this faith, having existed for longer than any other, creates in its followers an astonishing ability to survive'*. (p 290).

Harris's observation which I quoted earlier is relevant at this point.

*The mere endurance of a belief system does not suggest that it is adaptive, much less wise. It merely suggests that it hasn't led directly to a society's collapse or killed its practitioners outright.* (p 20).

My own observation is that ‘natural selection’, as understood in an evolutionary context, does not apply to the origin or longevity of ideas even when these ideas pertain to faith. Longevity of ideas is unrelated to their ‘natural selection’, veracity or validity. Ideas are not subject to ‘replication with variation’ as with the evolution of genes. Ideas are culturally constructed and culturally transmitted artefacts. I think that Sacks has misunderstood the mechanisms of evolution and inappropriately transferred this misunderstanding to the cultural/linguistic sphere.

As Everett (2012) says: ‘*Language gives humans humanity*’. (p 4). And quoting Vygotsky (p 227): ‘*Like tool systems, sign systems ( language, writing, number systems) are created by societies over the course of human history and change with the form of society and the level of cultural development*’. Language does not ‘evolve’ in a biological sense. Language changes over time in response to usage and extension. Language never captures reality as it is and is always prone to what Tallis (2011 p 199) intriguingly terms ‘*myth-information*’. It is language, not revelation, which allows us to create meanings and even the idea of revelation itself.

On the complicated topic of freedom, I am not convinced that we have freedom simply on the asserted and believed metaphysical grounds of our freedom being derivative from God’s asserted freedom. The issue of ‘free will’ is too complex for me to offer other than a short comment, even were I capable of a longer discussion, but I enjoyed reading Dennett’s book: ‘Freedom Evolves’ (2003). If it is the case that our freedom is derivative from God’s freedom then our freedom seems, paradoxically, to be a limited and dependent freedom. I am not clear what Sacks means by ‘freedom’, indeed I am not clear about the very term itself, and my reading suggests that given current understanding of the brain’s functioning it may turn out that we are not as free to decide as we have been encouraged to think. Nagel (1986) makes a humorous but profound comment about freedom: *I change my mind about free-will every time I think about it, and therefore cannot offer any view with even moderate confidence; but my present opinion is that nothing that might be a solution has yet been described. This is not the case where there are several possible candidate solutions and we don’t know which is correct. It is the case where nothing believable has (to my knowledge) been proposed by anyone in the extensive public discussion of the subject.* (p 112).

We need to be careful about assuming that intuitive and/or received beliefs about our ‘nature’ are correct. Freedom is one such. Our subjective experience of freedom can be massively constrained by: pre-birth trauma by maternal drug taking, perinatal brain damage, brain damage later in life such as accidents to the brain and strokes, various forms of dementia, versions of psychosis such as schizophrenia, and damage caused by a range chemicals and drugs. From my point of view those brief observations indicate that our sense of freedom is entirely dependent on the integrity of brain functioning. If this is the case then, in principle, freedom as a brain function can be explored by neuroscientists and this ‘in principle’ exploration relocates ‘freedom’ from the realm of the mystical and metaphysical to the realm of the biological.

Short quotations from Dennett (2003): *Even a snap judgment can be remarkably sensitive to myriad features of my world that have conspired over time to create my current dispositional state.* (p 116). *Human freedom is real – as real as language, music and money – so it can be studied objectively from a no-nonsense, scientific*

*point of view. But like language, music, money and other products of society, its persistence is affected by what we believe about it. So it is not surprising that our attempts to study it dispassionately are distorted by anxiety that we will clumsily kill the specimen under the microscope. (p 305). Our brains have been designed by natural selection, and all the products of our brains have likewise been designed, on a much swifter timescale, by physical processes in which no exemption from causality can be discerned. (p 305).*

And a quotation from Rose (2005): *This brain then, is that marvellous product and process, the result of aeons of evolution and for each human adult decades of development, the necessary organ of consciousness, thought, memory and identity, which modern neuroscience is beginning both to describe and explain. (p 167).*

Rose identifies a newly developing field of study: *'the cognitive neuroscience of social behaviour'*. (p166).

Those quotations indicate significant comments which influence me and they also provide a brief summary of my tentative and changing views on the biologically based, embodied nature of the human condition. I am willing to believe that we are the cultural creations of biological propensities. I think that it is essential that any attempt to explore notions of 'partnership' between religion and science should include the study of neurobiology and the cognitive sciences.

Narratives are not 'true' – they are ways in which we create and invent meanings within cultural frameworks. They are stories we tell ourselves to make cultural/individual sense of our human condition. I am content with that. Indeed I find it satisfying and exciting. There is no homogeneous and universal 'human nature'. There are culturally constructed 'natures' and 'narratives'. If a 'revealed narrative' is given inappropriate epistemological veracity it becomes self-invalidating and certainly exclusive and excluding.

I continue with the driving motivations which I have applied over the years: Curiosity, scepticism, and an ability to live with the stimulation of uncertainty – Keats' 'negative capability'.

I do not need any external metaphysical source of validation for my being, my identity, my mind or my meaning. My mind is, according to what I read, a function of my brain, and my brain is always changing: *'Today's brain is not yesterday's and will not be tomorrow's'*. (Rose. (2005) p 147).

I was amused by Pullman's observation: *For myself, I like it best when I have no such simple and public 'identity'. I don't know what I 'am', and I don't especially want to.* (Philip Pullman 'The Guardian' 19 November 2005). I also agreed with him.

## **Conclusion.**

I am not convinced that Sacks has produced cogent arguments which sustain the thesis of 'The Great Partnership' between God, Science and the Search for Meaning. My conclusion is that Sacks does not establish 'partnership' but rather a deep sense of mutual incommensurability in relation to respective sources, authorities, content and

methodology. From my point of view he fails in his project. I am not persuaded by the idea of a God who reveals confusing and conflicting ethical ‘truths’. I prefer to rely on what science discovers as a basis for my trying to make sense of the world in which I live along with other sources of meaning, including relationships and the values which I espouse. I also prefer Grayling’s view that: ‘*command morality*’ has to be replaced by ‘*consent morality*’. (2001 p 105).

I am personally not excluding the possibility of ‘partnership’ but this crucially depends on my assumption that religious beliefs, like all basic human believing propositions, are tentative, culturally constructed, mutable and porous. On this basis, beliefs, like scientific concepts, have to be capable of being invalidated by advances in science and by rational argument. It was Kuhn (1962) who argued for the important idea of paradigm shifts in the sciences. From my perspective not only do the sciences undergo such paradigm shifts but so also should religion tenets and practices. I therefore disagree with Sacks’ attempts to remove revealed religious beliefs from rational (scientific) criticism. Locating religious beliefs firmly in ‘*the authority of the past*’ is a serious blockage to major shifts of religious thinking and hence creates confusing impediments to dialogue and ‘partnership’ between reason and revelation. Any world view systems which are based on beliefs in their totalising assumptions suffer from two necessary problems. One, we cannot possibly know that they are ‘true’. Second, they are bound to create insoluble conflicts with other totalising systems.

If my own exploration of partnership between science and meaning, beliefs, values is feasible, then the beliefs of religious believers would need to be able to assimilate the ongoing, and challenging, developments of scientific concepts and knowledge rather than feeling threatened by this progress and dismissing science as a form of alien (rational) thought. Meaning is made primarily by *believing* not by *knowing*, albeit believing informed by what we increasingly come to know. That is the focus of any potential partnership. If religious believers could accept this developmental premise then dialogue between science and religion could be sustained – but only by religious believers accepting that their beliefs were open to rigorous rational scrutiny –and entertaining the possibility that these religious beliefs were invalid just as scientific ideas and theories have been abandoned in the light of later knowledge.

My overall sense is that the asserted ‘Partnership’ between science and religion in Sacks’ title turns out to be more an example of parallel worlds of reason, investigation, uncertainty, curiosity, experiment and multiple fronts of progress in understanding the cosmos, including human beings, on the one hand and religiously believed revealed knowledge deriving from ‘*the authority of the past*’ and ‘*what the totality means*’ on the other. The sciences make evident and crucial changes in understanding reality, whereas religions have a strong tendency to be static and backward looking to ancient texts which are accepted as definitive, revealed, prescriptive and orthodox in terms of beliefs. Exegesis of ancient texts is very far removed from the constant self-criticism and novel theory construction/experiment testing of science. Science makes progress. I am not sure how and if religions could be said to make progress – or what the criteria for such progress might be. Nor is it clear to me who is invested with the authority to deem religious progress to have been made – or to prevent such progress.

Sacks' failure arises necessarily from the polarising dichotomy which he asserts at the start of his book. 'Reason' and 'revelation' are uneasy bedfellows. There may well be the possibility of a developmental and creative partnership between science and the constant search for meaning, but my sense of any such possibility depends on the acceptance that just as there is no place for dogma in science, so there should be no place for dogma in the meanings which derive from revealed religious beliefs. Meaning is based primarily on believing not on knowing. Revelation is not a source of knowing, but of believing and therefore has no more validity than any other belief and meaning system. If religious knowing is 'revealed' then any changes (progress?) in that revelation imply that God changes his mind from time to time.

For me the question which I posed at the start of this article is significant:

*What are the boundaries/limits of scientific investigation re the human condition, and in particular issues around identity, subjectivity/qualia, beliefs, values, meanings, epistemology, aesthetics, ethics ?*

Some of the authors whose work I have quoted are exploring this very question.

At this time I simply do not know, indeed I cannot know, what these boundaries/limits might be, but such scientific boundaries/limits should not, *a priori*, be either asserted or assumed on the basis of revelation of truth.

I will conclude by making quotations from just three of the books which have impressed me, changed my thinking and therefore exerted an influence on my sense of my meaning.

Dennett (2003): *We are the species that discovered doubt. . . Is there enough food laid by for winter? Have I miscalculated? Is my mate cheating on me? Is it safe to enter this cave? Other creatures are often visibly agitated by their own uncertainties about just such questions, but because they cannot actually ask themselves these questions, they cannot articulate their predicaments for themselves or take steps to improve their grip on the truth. They are stuck in a world of appearances, making the best they can of how things seem and seldom, if ever, worrying about whether how things seem is how they truly are. We alone can be wracked with doubt, and we alone have been provoked with that epistemic itch to seek a remedy: better truth seeking methods. . . We invented culture.* (p165).

Phillips (1999): *The individual person, like the species of which she is a member, is going nowhere discernible (or predictable), and nowhere in particular. But this is not so much a cause of grief as an invitation to go on inventing the future. Once our death doesn't matter to anyone else but us – not to God, or gods, or nature itself – it matters in a different way. Once there is nothing (or no one) overseeing it, it begins to look different. Darwin and Freud invent new deaths for us.* (p 29).

The notion of the invention of 'new deaths' is a typical Phillips turn of phrase.

Weinberg (2009): *Traditional religions generally rely on authority, whether the authority is an infallible leader, such as a prophet or a pope or an imam, or a body of sacred writings, a Bible or a Koran. Perhaps Galileo did not get into trouble solely*

*because he was expressing views contrary to scripture, but because he was doing so independently, rather than as a theologian acting within the church. . . . We have our heroes in science, like Einstein, who was certainly the greatest physicist of the past century, but for us they are not infallible prophets. . . . The world can always use heroes, but could do with fewer prophets. (p 237). Living without God isn't easy. But its very difficulty offers one other consolation – that there is a certain honor or perhaps just a grim satisfaction, in facing up to our condition without despair and without wishful thinking – with good humor, but without God. (p 244).*

Thus Steven Weinberg, Nobel Laureate in physics and an atheist Jew, ends his book.

His ending moves me, impresses me and sums up my own perspective on what life might mean for me. As does:

*To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,  
Creeps this petty pace from day to day,  
To the last syllable of recorded time;  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out brief candle!  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,  
That struts and frets his hour upon this stage, and then is heard no more;  
It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.*  
Macbeth

I am content with that. I would assume that Sacks would be ‘not content’.

It does not provide the solace which he requires, nor does it resolve the indifference to his existence to which he objects. Nor yet does it validate the hope which he draws from his particular version of Abrahamic ethical monotheism. It emphasises the tragically configured universe which causes him existential dismay – or at least discomfort and lack of solace.

However, from my point of view any ‘greatness’ to which we might aspire requires us to accept lack of metaphysical solace, to create our own responses to cosmic indifference to our existence and to engage in the creation of our own meanings accepting their mutability, limitations and partiality. I have grave doubts about the concept of ‘greatness’ which may be a grandiose residue of people’s belief that we are the pinnacle of God’s creation. I put my modest hope in humanly constructed democratic constitutions, in the rule of law which can be challenged and changed, and in declarations of human rights (see Klug 2000) – none of which are revealed and all of which are flexible and subject to ongoing scrutiny and criticism. Whether or not the Bible supports the concept and practice of democracy, I see in that democratic dialogic process our only hope. The evident subversion and corruption of this democratic process by lack of both transparency and explicit accountability, greedy and uncaring global economic powers, corruption, religious and secular megalomaniacs and media ownership which subverts and distorts democratic processes - all these I find dismaying. However, my tentative hope is in a democratic process in a secular society which is multicultural and based on legally established

freedoms, rights and responsibilities along with adequately resourced equality of opportunity. Indeed I hope for a dialogue of the ‘Dignity of Difference’.

28 May 2012.

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