

# **We Are That We Are – Theism, Spiritualism, Naturalism and a Path to Spiritual Existentialism**



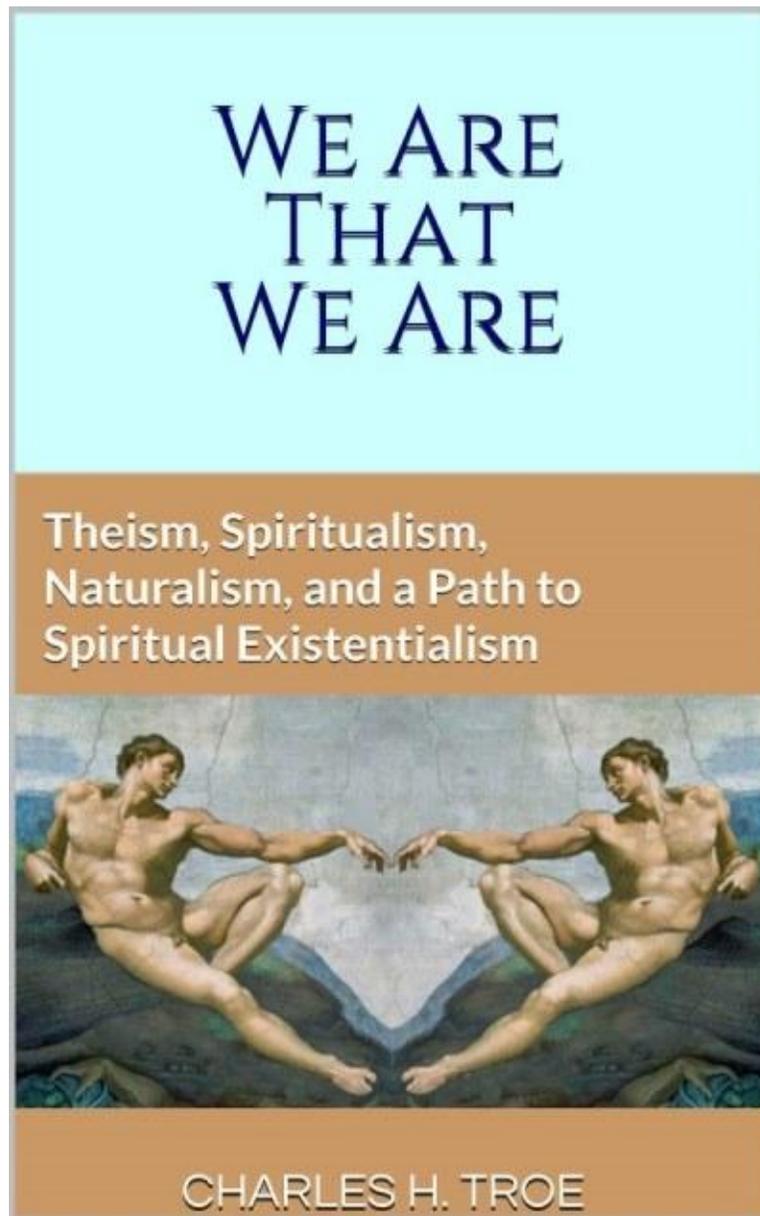
## ***Review by Chris G.***

If you have read some popular books explaining philosophy and science, particularly modern physics and evolution, and have thought about how the information you have read relates to your own beliefs, you should enjoy this book very much. If you have not yet dipped into that wonderful body of knowledge, but would like to, this is an excellent starting point. An if on top of that you are an alcoholic with problems about the religion in AA, you really, really should give this a go.

There is science in this book, lots of it. But it is not the difficult science of equations, but rather the concepts that are important, and they are well explained and easy to understand. Don't be frightened off just because it is "science". If you have not read much in science, this is a great opportunity to start.

Personally, I was amazed in the first couple of chapters that the author and I have been reading the same books and thinking along the same lines for several years. So this review is undoubtedly biased, as I feel so aligned to the author's ideas that it is almost a review of my own journey. His scholarship in keeping all this straight and organized and writing it down in such detail is, to me, amazing.

Mr. Troe takes us through the main thoughts of several philosophers, gives a synopsis of his own beliefs over the years, and an insight into his experiences with Alcoholics Anonymous. Then it is off to physics, quantum and macro, the elegant logic of emergent theories, Bayesian thinking, domains of applicability, time, evolution, and the question of consciousness. All of these subjects, for me as for him, have had a profound impact on my world-view, especially with regard to religion and my existence in the world.



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A great deal of the book, maybe more than half, is made up of quotations from his sources – there are 274 footnotes. This at first looks cumbersome, but he does it so very well that it works. He asks the reader several times to please, go read the sources...and having read many of them, I fully agree. The whole bibliography is daunting, but a few books are key. Major sources, in the science area, are Carlo Rovelli's *The Order of Time*, and *Reality Is Not What It Seems: The Journey to Quantum Gravity*, and Sean Carroll's *The Big Picture: On the Origins of Life, Meaning, and the Universe Itself*, (both are excellent; I have read them). I've not read D. C. Dennett's *From Bacteria to Bach and Back: The Evolution of Mind*, nor Michael S. Gazzaniga's *Consciousness Instinct: Unraveling the Mystery of How the Brain Makes the Mind*, but now I am about to.

Before Troe gets into the science he does do a strange thing. Chapter 10 consists of a series of essays he wrote some years ago. He still likes a lot of what he wrote, but each now has, according to his current thinking, a flaw: some reliance on an "everything god" or a "non-random force". The problem for the reader is that she has to go to the Appendix at the end of each essay to get a discussion of the change. This is a bit trying, but I found it worth the effort in the end. In fact, re-reading the Appendix after finishing the book is worthwhile.

I will pick and choose a few of the key concepts from the book, just to give a flavour. To try and summarize everything would be to re-write the book. Everything here is surrounded by deep and rich discussion:

**Existentialism:** "For myself, I will stick to the basics of freedom to define the essence of humanity in a universe in which there is no predetermined or supernaturally imposed nature of humanity, together with responsibility for individuals' choices. Such a universe is indeed one in which freedom and responsibility may evoke a sense of anxiety, but the antidote is to embrace the truth and attempt to make choices the consequences of which are to facilitate the freedom of all other individuals and to deal with one's own consciousness of mortality."

**Bayesian Thinking:** Thomas Bayes revolutionized statistical thinking in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with a simple idea: when thinking of the probability of something happening, your estimate should change when new information is received, and this is quantifiable. As Troe says, "It can never lead to a certain conclusion. It cannot discover "truth." It can only lead to probabilities. It is a quantification of an approach to inductive reasoning. There is plenty of math, but it is never to be confused with "proof." What matters, is that the employment of Bayesian reasoning, to be valid, must be with open-mindedness and willingness to consider, without bias, new information. The prior credence must be honest."

Think about the applicability of this the next time you are arguing with a religious friend. Would he want to discuss the probability of a god, quantitatively?

**The Science of Physics:** Troe takes us on a brief but comprehensive history of physics, from ancient Greece to the Higgs boson. With a lot of quotes, this is a great thing to read. Troe even makes relativity relatively easy. It leads to: "Nevertheless, as claimed above and frequently,

what science knows now leaves precious little in the realm of human experience that invites or reluctantly permits an explanation that includes a supernatural god. And while it may be uncomfortable for the theist, it is the realm of human experience that posits such a god in the first (and last) place.” This gives you a real clue where he is heading...

**Emergent Theories and Domains of Applicability:** “The concepts of emergent theories and of domains of applicability are two of the most critical ideas in Carroll’s *The Big Picture* that brought me face to face with the impossibility of a supernatural god.”

“A property of a system is “emergent” if it is not part of a detailed “fundamental” description of the system, but it becomes useful or even inevitable when we look at the system more broadly. A naturalist believes that human behavior emerges from the complex interplay of the atoms and forces that make up individual human beings.”

“Domain of applicability is the notion that a valid theory is valid at all levels of reality, but may have no practical or useful meaning at certain, or all but one, level of reality.”

These ideas are intertwined throughout the book. Again consider your argument with a religious friend: Darwinian Evolution is an emergent theory, and it’s domain of applicability is the (macro) natural world, especially biochemistry and animal behavior – not folk tales from the desert written down a couple of thousand years ago.

**The Nature of Time:** Time does not appear anywhere in any equation describing the quantum world. The second law of thermodynamics (think entropy), in the macro world, is the only place in *basic* physics that requires time as a variable. Time is local and relative. There is no universal simultaneity. You will meet light cones, if you have not already, and be reminded of the M&M experiment – nothing to do with chocolate. How does he fit this in? “I have come to believe that spiritual experience is analogous to our experience of time. Something real is happening but only at the macro human domain of applicability. It may remain mysterious, but it is not part of the fabric of the universe. It cannot be explained by a supernatural being or force that by its nature must violate the laws of physics.”

**Evolution:** Following a long and interesting discussion: “If the theist’s god is not required to account for the diversity of life on earth, including homo sapiens, there is not much of a role left for that god. It would be a peculiar god that created a self-executing process that resulted in, among millions of other species, human beings, and then chose that species for physics-defying eternal life in exchange for obeisance to the miraculously discovered creator. The proposition that the human being, unlike every other species, was created whole cloth without progenitors (notwithstanding their presence in the fossil record) is a convenience too far.”

There is much, much more: a long and fascinating discussion of consciousness, another on spiritual experiences, and finally a chapter that describes just “what he is” now: a Spiritual Existentialist, as defined by this book, “...nothing compared to the wonder and grandeur of a natural world that has come to be by an initial unknown biochemical mechanism or event and

that has proceeded for 4.5 billion years without any external guidance or internal purpose. How much more wondrous it is to me to contemplate that this natural world resulted in the existence of the aggregation of matter that is our planet. And more wondrous still that in the 4.5 billion years of existence of this insignificant planet, organic life was sparked and evolved into an astonishing diversity of life that includes conscious beings capable of contemplating it all.”

“Such a naturally occurring universe is to me vastly more awe-inspiring than one created by a supernatural god with a plan and an infinite capacity for detail.”

This book is not an attempt to convert anyone to any point of view. It is an intensely personal journal of deep thought over the years, from the starting point to the result. AA is inextricably woven in, but only as part of the thought experience—you won’t find any drunkalogues here, nor prescriptions for following the steps. I view this as a real post-recovery work, of which there are all too few.

The writing is excellent and the trains of thought are tight and easy to follow, but it is by no means an easy read. This is serious, complicated stuff he is discussing, and he does it very well. It is worth a serious try.

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*Born in 1947, Chuck Troe has had plenty of time to experience life. His experience does not include taking a drink of alcohol without then having a physical craving for more alcohol. He claims no memory of ever having had a single drink. Chuck’s last drink was on August 1, 1979 when he went to a treatment center that was his portal to AA. In 1981 he came under the influence of “Big Book Literalists”, to whom he attributes his recovery and long-term sobriety. Over the years, Chuck’s understanding of a higher power has evolved to its present state as described in his book **We Are That We Are**. Chuck attends AA meetings regularly. He and his wife met at a meeting and have been happily married for 30 years.*

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*The author of today’s review, Chris, is pushing three quarters of a century, over half of which he spent drinking too much. During that time, he had three careers, read voluminously, and was never arrested or fired. How this happened he considers a major mystery of life, since drinking every day did trash his relationships and got seriously in the way of, basically, everything. Now nine years sober, he sincerely thanks the fellowship of AA for its help. He did the first three years of sobriety on the fake-it-’til-you-make-it plan, trying really hard to find spirituality in the doorknobs of the rooms. Somewhere around year four he discovered AA Agnostica, breathed a great sigh of relief, and began enjoying life and sobriety again. He is now in retirement, meditating, helping to publish works with AA Agnostica, generally messing with ebooks, and reading, reading, reading – mostly science. He occasionally gets to the We Agnostics meeting in Hamilton, weather permitting.*