RESEARCH ARTICLE

LIVING WITHOUT THE QUESTION: ‘FORREST GUMP’ AS A SOCIAL TYPE OF APATHEISM

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Abstract

This article examines *Forrest Gump*, the protagonist of Robert Zemeckis’s 1994 film, as a social type of contemporary apatheism. Drawing on Hedberg and Huzarevich (2017), Gonçalves (2023), von Hegner (2016), Şimşek (2023), Beshears (2017), and Zając and Wilkosz (2025), it uses philosophical analysis and comparative close reading to argue that *Gump* embodies apatheism as a pre-reflexive existential orientation rather than a conscious commitment. His indifference to metaphysical inquiry, immanent basis for moral agency, resistance to cosmic authority, and immunity to common epistemic and motivational barriers enact the second-order judgment that theological questions lack practical significance. The article further reads *Gump* as an early cinematic anticipation of the mass apatheism associated with Generations Y and Z in the digital age.

Keywords: apatheism, theological indifference, constitutive secularism, popular culture, sociology of religion.

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ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ

SORGUSUZ YAŞAMAK: APATEİZMİN TOPLUMSAL TİPİ OLARAK 'FORREST GUMP'

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Bu çalışma araştırma ve yayın etiğine uygun olarak gerçekleştirilmiştir.

Öz

Bu makale, Robert Zemeckis'in 1994 tarihli filminin başkahramanı *Forrest Gump*'ı çağdaş apateizmin toplumsal bir tipi olarak incelemektedir. Hedberg ve Huzarevich (2017), Gonçalves (2023), von Hegner (2016), Şimşek (2023), Beshears (2017) ile Zając ve Wilkosz'un (2025) kuramsal çerçevelerinden yararlanan çalışma, felsefi analiz ve karşılaştırmalı yakın okuma yoluyla *Gump*'ın apateizmi bilinçli bir bağlılıktan çok ön-yansıtıcı bir varoluşsal yönelim olarak somutlaştırdığını savunmaktadır. Metafizik sorgulamaya kayıtsızlığı, ahlaki eylemliliğini içkin ilişkilere dayandırması, kozmik otoriteye direnci ve epistemik-motivasyonel engellerden etkilenmemesi, teolojik soruların pratik önem taşımadığı yönündeki ikinci düzey yargıyı edimselleştirir. Makale ayrıca *Gump*'ı, dijital çağda Y ve Z kuşaklarıyla ilişkilendirilen kitlesel apateizmin erken bir sinemasal habercisi olarak değerlendirmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: apateizm, teolojik kayıtsızlık, kurucu sekülarizm, popüler kültür, din sosyolojisi.

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Introduction: The Problem of Theological Indifference and Its Cultural Typology

The history of the philosophy of religion has been dominated by a triadic framework in which individuals are classified according to their first-order propositional attitudes toward the existence of God: theism, atheism, and agnosticism. Each position presupposes that the question of God's existence is cognitively meaningful and practically urgent, and therefore deserves sustained epistemic engagement. Yet the twenty-first century has seen the emergence and rapid proliferation of a fourth orientation, one that does not answer the question of God's existence but instead dismisses the question's practical relevance. This orientation, theorised under the designation "apatheism," represents what Hedberg and Huzarevich (2017) describe as a second-order meta-belief: not a claim about whether God exists, but a judgment that whether God exists is not a question worth caring about.

Apatheism, as Şimşek (2023) has demonstrated, is neither a variant of atheism nor a subspecies of agnosticism. It is, rather, a distinct existential posture that locates itself entirely outside the cognitivist chain. Where agnosticism suspends judgment while keeping the question alive, and atheism negates the proposition while remaining within the framework of theological concern, apatheism exits the framework altogether. The apatheist does not wrestle with theological questions and conclude that they cannot be answered; the apatheist finds that such questions do not present themselves as worthy of wrestling with in the first place. This structural exit from the theological question, marked not by a refusal to answer but by the absence of any felt need to engage, defines apatheism as a sui generis philosophical and existential category.

The philosophical analysis of apatheism, however, has remained largely confined to abstract argumentation. The question of what an apatheist looks like, and what kind of life is lived by someone for whom theological questions generate no existential resonance, has received comparatively little attention. This gap is precisely what the present paper addresses by proposing that *Forrest Gump*, as portrayed in Robert Zemeckis's 1994 Academy Award-winning film of the same name, constitutes a richly elaborated social type of apatheism in contemporary popular culture.

A brief clarification of the concept of social type invoked throughout this analysis is warranted here. The notion draws on the sociological tradition of the ideal type associated with Weber and extended in studies of concrete figures such as Simmel's analysis of the stranger: a method by which a recurring cluster of dispositions, attitudes, and behavioural patterns, observable in dispersed form across many empirical individuals, is condensed into a single, analytically tractable figure that renders a mode of being-in-the-world visible and recognisable. A social type, on this understanding, is neither a literal statistical average nor an arbitrary stipulation; it is a heuristic construction. To identify

Forrest Gump as a social type of apatheism is therefore not to claim that he is a real apatheist in any biographical sense, nor that every apatheist resembles him in every particular, but to claim that his character crystallises, with unusual clarity and completeness, a structural pattern of theological indifference that is elsewhere diffused and only partially visible across concrete empirical lives.

The argument does not concern the intentions of the film's creators, nor does it suggest that *Forrest Gump* was designed as a philosophical illustration of apatheism. The concept of apatheism had not yet received systematic philosophical articulation at the time of the film's production; Rauch's (2003) foundational essay in *The Atlantic*, which is widely credited with introducing the term into contemporary discourse, appeared nearly a decade after the film's release. Rather, the claim advanced here is that the character of Forrest Gump, through his consistent non-engagement with metaphysical questions, his grounding of moral and relational life in immanent rather than transcendent values, his structural resistance to the existential urgency that theological belief demands, and his pre-reflexive embodiment of what Gonçalves (2023) calls a "particular practical apatheism," functions as an inadvertent but remarkably precise cultural typification of the apatheist orientation.

The argument proceeds as follows. The first part provides a systematic conceptual analysis of apatheism, drawing on the six key theoretical contributions that constitute the philosophical literature on the subject. The paper then undertakes a close reading of *Forrest Gump*'s existential orientation, demonstrating that his relationship to theological questions is structurally non-cognitivist in the sense theorised by Zając and Wilkosz (2025). The subsequent section examines the implicit rejection of cosmic authority in light of von Hegner's (2016) heroical apatheism and the democratic autonomy thesis. This is followed by an analysis of the psychological architecture of *Gump*'s indifference through the lens of Beshears's (2017) 'Pantheon of Indifference'. The final analytical section situates the character within the broader sociological dynamics that Zając and Wilkosz (2025) identify as the structural drivers of mass apatheism. The paper concludes with a reflection on the significance of reading popular cultural texts through the lens of philosophy of religion, and on what the Gump figure reveals about the existential condition of the contemporary secular subject.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative research design organised around comparative analysis. The data consist of the film *Forrest Gump* (Zemeckis, 1994), examined as a document alongside two comparative case films, *Being There* (Ashby, 1979) and *No Country for Old Men* (Coen & Coen, 2007), which are discussed under the heading "Methodological Justification: Against Interpretive Projection." The narrative content, dialogue, and characterisation of each film were

analysed through a combination of discourse analysis and content analysis. Scenes were read for their treatment of theological questions, moral agency, and cosmic or institutional authority, and the resulting patterns were then interpreted comparatively against the philosophical apatheism literature outlined in the conceptual overview of apatheism. This comparative procedure operates on two levels: across films, by contrasting Gump with Chance the Gardener and Sheriff Ed Tom Bell; and within the film itself, by contrasting Gump with Lieutenant Dan as an internal control. Together, these comparisons constitute the uniqueness test presented in the methodological justification, which grounds the psychological and sociological analyses developed in the later sections of the paper.

Apatheism: A Systematic Conceptual Overview

Before proceeding, terminological clarification is in order. Throughout this paper, the term structural, as in structurally non-cognitivist or a character's structural incapacity for theological engagement, designates a stable, recurring feature built into the settled organisation of a character's existential orientation across a wide range of situations, rather than a single deliberate act, a temporary mood, or a claim about conscious psychological interiority. In this usage, a structural feature governs behaviour consistently and pre-reflexively, whether the character could articulate it if asked.

The meta-belief structure of apatheism

The philosophical distinction that defines apatheism is between first-order and second-order beliefs about theological propositions. Hedberg and Huzarevich (2017) offer the most rigorous formulation of this distinction in the literature. First-order beliefs are propositional attitudes directly concerning the existence or non-existence of God: the theist affirms "God exists," the atheist denies it or withholds affirmation, the agnostic suspends judgment on the grounds of epistemic insufficiency. While atheism, in its most philosophically rigorous formulation (Le Poidevin, 1996), constitutes a positive first-order claim about the non-existence of God or, in its more modest versions, a withholding of assent to theistic claims, apatheism operates at an entirely different level of analysis. All three positions share a common structural presupposition: they treat the question of God's existence as cognitively meaningful and practically significant, regarding it as a question that merits engagement, resolution, or, at minimum, honest epistemic suspension.

Apatheism, by contrast, operates at the second-order level. The apatheist does not take a first-order position on God's existence; rather, the apatheist holds the second-order meta-belief that "we should not care whether God exists" (Hedberg & Huzarevich, 2017, p. 260). This meta-belief is not a claim about God but a claim about the practical and existential relevance of claims about God. It is a judgment that theological questions, whatever their correct

answers might be, do not make a practical difference to how one should live, what one should value, or how one should organise one's moral and relational existence. Şimşek (2023) has articulated the practical consequence of this position with particular clarity: the apatheist does not introduce the idea of God into any domain of daily life, and as a result lives what is, in practice if not in theory, a godless existence, one structurally proximate to atheism in its lived expression even when it makes no ontological claims against theism.

Theological non-cognitivism and the apatheist position

Zając and Wilkosz (2025) situate apatheism within the broader category of theological non-cognitivism, a stance that refuses to treat theological propositions as candidates for truth-functional evaluation. The non-cognitivist does not say "God does not exist" (which would be atheism) or "I cannot know whether God exists" (which would be agnosticism) but rather declines to enter the epistemic framework in which such evaluations are possible and meaningful. The apatheist's refusal is not an epistemic failure but an existential choice: the choice to allocate cognitive and emotional resources to questions that yield tractable, practically consequential answers, and to exit gracefully from questions that do not. It should be emphasised that apatheism and theological non-cognitivism, while closely related, are not strictly identical: non-cognitivism is, in the first instance, a semantic and epistemic thesis about the status of theological propositions as such, in principle available to any inquirer who adopts it, whereas apatheism is the broader existential and practical orientation of a lived life toward those propositions. On the account developed here, theological non-cognitivism is best understood as the epistemic core of apatheism, a possible and philosophically apt articulation of a practical orientation that need not itself be theorised by the individual who lives it.

The distinction between apatheism and neighbouring positions in the philosophy of religion is sharpened by contrast with Schellenberg's (2007) argument from divine hiddenness, which holds that the absence of compelling evidence for God's existence constitutes a reason for "reasonable nonbelief." Schellenberg's position remains within the cognitivist framework: it concludes what one should believe given the available evidence. Apatheism, by contrast, exists outside the cognitivist framework entirely: it is not a conclusion about evidence but an orientation toward the question of evidence itself. The apatheist does not conclude that the evidence is insufficient; the apatheist finds that the question of evidence does not present itself as requiring engagement. This distinction places apatheism at a structural remove from even the most carefully argued forms of religious scepticism.

This non-cognitivist dimension of apatheism distinguishes it from the lazy recumbency with which it is sometimes conflated. Hedberg and Huzarevich (2017) argue that the investigation of theological questions is, for the ordinary individual, an epistemically supererogatory activity, one that is praiseworthy when undertaken but not blameworthy when omitted. The apatheist's

non-engagement with theological questions is therefore not an epistemic vice but the absence of an epistemic virtue that was never obligatory in the first place.

Rational justification: the universalist theodicy argument

Gonçalves (2023) offers the strongest positive rational justification for apatheism by deploying the resources of universalist theodicy against the "necessity of caring" presupposition of traditional theology. Traditional theism argues that whether God exists is an urgently practical question because the answer determines one's eternal fate: belief and obedience lead to salvation, disbelief and disobedience to damnation. This structure of eternal consequences creates the rational pressure to care about theological questions, the pressure that Pascal's Wager famously exploits.

Gonçalves's universalist response dismantles this pressure by arguing that an omnibenevolent God (a God of infinite and unconditional love) cannot coherently be reconciled with the doctrine of eternal punishment. If God is genuinely omnibenevolent, then no individual will be permanently excluded from ultimate well-being regardless of their earthly beliefs or behaviours. Hick's (1966) soul-making theodicy similarly proposes that earthly suffering functions not as divine punishment but as the necessary condition for the moral and spiritual development of immature souls, a conclusion that reinforces the universalist framework outlined above. If this universalist framework is accepted, then the individual's theological beliefs and practices do not affect their ultimate eternal fate. If they do not affect eternal fate, the rational pressure to care about theological questions evaporates. Apatheism becomes not merely psychologically understandable but philosophically warranted.

Heroical apatheism and democratic autonomy

Von Hegner (2016) extends the philosophical analysis of apatheism from the epistemological to the normative and political domain. His concept of "heroical apatheism" argues that indifference to divine authority is not merely rationally permissible but morally courageous: it is a principled refusal to submit to a form of power that fails the tests of democratic legitimacy. The God of traditional religion is, in von Hegner's analysis, structurally identical to a cosmic dictator: an authority that has not been chosen, cannot be removed, imposes its commands on conscious beings without their consent, and threatens eternal punishment for non-compliance. Modern democratic theory has established that no earthly authority possesses legitimate power on these terms. Von Hegner argues that the same principle, applied consistently, implies that no cosmic authority possesses such power either. The heroical apatheist refuses divine authority not from ignorance of its claims but from the same moral conviction that leads democrats to reject the claims of earthly tyrants.

Forrest Gump's Existential Orientation as Structural Apatheism

The absence of theological engagement as a structural feature[1]

The film *Forrest Gump* spans approximately thirty years of American history, from the mid-1950s to the mid-1980s, and subjects its protagonist to an extraordinary range of experiences: the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, the AIDS crisis, and numerous encounters with historically significant figures. Throughout this panoramic narrative, *Gump* is repeatedly situated in contexts that, for many individuals, would prompt existential and theological reflection. He witnesses death, suffering, and moral complexity at close range. He loses friends in combat. He experiences love, abandonment, and bereavement. He endures physical disability and social marginalisation. Yet across this entire experiential arc, the film provides no evidence that *Gump* ever poses to himself the questions that traditionally drive theological inquiry: Why do the innocent suffer? Does God exist? What happens after death? What is the meaning of human existence?

This absence is not incidental. It is a structural feature of the character's existential orientation, consistent across the film's full narrative arc and not explainable by intellectual deficiency alone. *Gump* does engage with complex relational and moral questions: he demonstrates extraordinary loyalty, empathy, and moral integrity. His cognitive and emotional life is rich, even if it operates outside the registers of abstraction and systematic reflection. The absence of theological engagement is therefore not the consequence of an inability to engage but of an orientation in which theological questions do not present themselves as questions at all. This is precisely what Şimşek (2023) identifies as the defining feature of apatheism: not the inability to engage with theological questions but the structural non-presence of such questions in one's lived horizon.

Several additional scenes reinforce this structural absence. At his mother's deathbed and funeral, *Gump* neither seeks nor receives any framework of religious consolation; her explanation of death, "It's my time . . . don't be afraid," is delivered and received entirely within a register of practical acceptance, with no reference to an afterlife, divine will, or providential design. When *Bubba* dies in his arms on the riverbank in Vietnam, *Gump*'s grief is immediate and wordless, and it resolves not in prayer or theological questioning but in a concrete promise later fulfilled by founding the *Bubba Gump Shrimp Company*.

[1] It should be noted that the apatheist profile identified here is specific to the cinematic *Forrest Gump* rather than the character as presented in Groom's (1994) source novel, in which the protagonist exhibits a considerably more complex and at times morally ambiguous character. The systematic moral integrity and existential equanimity that enable the present analysis are, in significant part, products of the film's narrative and characterological choices, a distinction that reinforces rather than undermines the argument, since it suggests that the apatheist structure is the result of deliberate artistic construction rather than incidental narrative omission.

Most tellingly, the interpretive framework *Gump* repeatedly invokes to organise the whole of his experience, his mother's dictum that "life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you're gonna get," is a wholly immanent, non-teleological metaphor of contingency that occupies, structurally, the explanatory position that a theological cosmology would occupy in a differently oriented character, without any of its transcendent content.

The same pattern extends to scenes in which theological content is, in principle, close at hand. During the storm sequence in which *Lieutenant Dan* defies and curses God from the mast of the shrimping boat, *Gump*'s own register of experience never rises to meet the theological register *Dan* has opened: for *Gump* the storm remains, throughout, a practical meteorological event bound up with the shrimping operation, something to be endured and worked through rather than a stage on which a confrontation with the divine is unfolding. Similarly, when *Gump* sings in the church choir, the film does not indicate that he experiences the setting with theological awe or devotional feeling; his engagement registers instead as a wholly practical and communal act of shared rhythm and musical participation, continuous in kind with his other embodied, relational activities rather than set apart as sacred. Finally, in his monologue at *Jenny*'s grave, *Gump* takes up his mother's question of destiny and his own reflection that people may be "floating around accidental-like on a breeze" and declines to adjudicate between them theologically; rather than treating destiny and chance as competing metaphysical accounts requiring resolution, he holds both together pragmatically in the statement "I think maybe it's both," treating them as equally serviceable ways of getting on with life. Such a fusion would be unavailable to a character for whom the question of providence versus contingency carried genuine theological stakes.

Immanent moral agency without transcendent grounding

One of the most philosophically significant features of *Gump*'s character is the consistency and robustness of his moral agency in the absence of any explicitly theological foundation. *Gump* is, by any reasonable standard, a morally exemplary figure: he is honest, loyal, generous, courageous, and incapable of deliberate cruelty. He demonstrates a level of moral integrity that many theistically grounded characters in the film conspicuously fail to achieve. Yet his moral agency is never presented as deriving from theological conviction, divine command, fear of divine punishment, or aspiration toward divine reward.

Gump's moral compass rests entirely on immanent relational values: his love for his mother, his friendship with *Bubba* and *Lieutenant Dan*, and his devotion to *Jenny*. His moral orientations are relational rather than grounded in theological universals. When he acts with courage in Vietnam, it is not because God commands courage or because scripture endorses it; it is because *Bubba* is in danger. When he shows extraordinary fidelity to *Jenny* despite her repeated abandonments, it is not because religious doctrine requires fidelity; it is because his relational bond with *Jenny* constitutes the organising centre of

his emotional world. This pattern of immanent moral grounding (moral agency that operates without transcendent scaffolding) is precisely what Şimşek (2023) identifies as the practical consequence of apatheism: a life lived, in its moral and relational dimensions, entirely without reference to God, regardless of what theoretical position the individual may or may not hold on the question of God's existence.

Hedberg and Huzarevich (2017) argue that the objection from moral motivation, the claim that apatheism undermines the motivational foundations of ethical behaviour, fails empirically. Zuckerman's (2008) fieldwork in Denmark and Sweden, among the least religious and most contented societies on measurable indicators of human welfare, demonstrates that populations characterised by near-total theological indifference exhibit not moral deficit but what Zuckerman terms "organic atheism": a pre-reflective, culturally embedded non-engagement with religious questions that is lived rather than argued, assumed rather than chosen. The parallel with *Gump*'s constitutive apatheism is structurally precise: both the Danish secular subject and the cinematic *Gump* inhabit a form of life that is fully functional, morally rich, and existentially stable without any reference to transcendent grounding. *Forrest Gump* functions as a cinematic illustration of precisely this empirical claim: a character whose theological indifference coexists with, and in no way undermines, a rich and admirable moral life.

This structure of moral life organised entirely within what Taylor (2007) calls the "immanent frame" (a self-sufficient social imaginary that operates without reference to any transcendent beyond) provides the philosophical vocabulary for what the present analysis identifies as *Gump*'s constitutive apatheism. For Taylor, the immanent frame is not a deliberate rejection of transcendence but a background condition of modern experience: the sense, pre-reflective and structurally before any conscious philosophical commitment, that the world is "just there," complete, requiring no supplementation from outside. Gump inhabits this frame with a purity and completeness that Taylor's analysis predicts but rarely finds instantiated so unambiguously in a concrete individual life.

The non-cognitivist structure of *Gump*'s existential horizon

Zając and Wilkosz (2025) argue that apatheism belongs to the non-cognitivist tradition in philosophy of religion: it does not assign truth values to theological propositions but instead declines to treat such propositions as candidates for truth-functional evaluation. The apatheist's position is not "I do not know whether God exists" (agnosticism) or "God does not exist" (atheism), but rather a pre-reflective orientation in which the question of God's existence does not present itself as requiring an answer.

This non-cognitivist structure runs through *Gump*'s narrative. The film contains one scene of philosophical significance in this regard: the exchange

between *Gump* and *Lieutenant Dan* following the latter's extended confrontation with God during the shrimping expedition in the storm. *Lieutenant Dan*, whose character arc constitutes a sustained engagement with the problem of theodicy (how a good God can permit the suffering he has undergone) eventually achieves what the film presents as a resolution through confrontation with divine power. For *Dan*, the theological question is existentially alive and urgent; his relationship to God is adversarial, anguished, and ultimately transformative.

Gump, by contrast, witnesses this drama from a position of complete equanimity. He does not share Dan's anguish, does not pose the theodical question himself, and appears to experience no resonance with the theological dimension of Dan's transformation. His observation that "Lieutenant Dan got me invested in some kind of fruit company," uttered with characteristic cheerful matter-of-factness, encapsulates a mode of engaging with events that is entirely practical and relational, stripped of any theological overlay. This is not obtuseness; it is the structural absence of theological questioning that Zając and Wilkosz (2025) identify as the defining feature of the non-cognitivist position.

Methodological Justification: Against Interpretive Projection

A methodologically rigorous application of the apatheist social type framework to a fictional character must confront a fundamental challenge: the risk of interpretive projection. If the analytical framework is sufficiently elastic, it may generate apatheist readings of virtually any character whose narrative does not foreground explicit theological engagement. Were this the case, the identification of *Forrest Gump* as an apatheist social type would constitute not a philosophical discovery but a hermeneutic imposition, a case of finding what one has already decided to look for. This section addresses this challenge directly by subjecting the *Gump* reading to what might be called a uniqueness test: a systematic comparative analysis designed to determine whether the apatheist social type framework, applied with equal rigour to other candidates, yields equivalent results. The argument advanced here is that it does not, and that the reasons for this outcome illuminate precisely what is philosophically distinctive about the *Gump* case.

The blank surface problem: Chance the gardener in Being There (1979)

The most obvious candidate for a competing apatheist reading is *Chance the Gardener*, the protagonist of Hal Ashby's 1979 film *Being There* (Ashby, 1979), based on Jerzy Kosiński's (1971) novel of the same name. *Chance*, played by Peter Sellers, is, like *Gump*, a figure of severely limited abstract intelligence who navigates an absurd social world with apparent serenity, produces no explicit theological reflection, and grounds his engagement with reality in immediate, practical, and sensory experience. On a superficial reading, *Chance* appears to instantiate the same structural features that the present analysis

attributes to *Gump*: the absence of theological engagement, immanent orientation, and a non-cognitivist relationship to metaphysical questions.

The comparison fails, however, at precisely the point that matters most philosophically. The apatheist social type, as theorised by Şimşek (2023) and Hedberg and Huzarevich (2017), is characterised not merely by the absence of theological engagement but by the positive presence of an immanent existential orientation: a life organised around concrete relational and practical values that fill the space where theological concern might otherwise reside. Apatheism, on this account, is not an empty position but a full one: the apatheist's existence is not a vacuum from which theological content has been removed, but a richly constituted form of life that leaves no motivational space for theological inquiry because it is already completely occupied by other concerns.

Chance does not satisfy this condition. His defining characteristic is precisely that he is a kind of existential vacuum: a consciousness so thoroughly evacuated of interpretive content that every interlocutor can project their own meanings onto him without resistance. His equanimity is not the equanimity of a person whose relational and practical commitments constitute a stable existential centre; it is the equanimity of a surface that reflects without absorbing. The film's central irony depends on this emptiness: others attribute profundity to *Chance*, although he never generates it himself. He is, in philosophical terminology most apt for the comparison, a blank surface rather than a full surface.

Gump's existential orientation is the precise structural opposite. His relationship to *Bubba*, to *Lieutenant Dan*, to *Jenny*, and to his mother constitutes a positive existential content of extraordinary density and stability. When *Gump* acts, he acts from something: loyalty, love, and a relational commitment that functions as an organising centre of his identity. When *Chance* acts, he acts from nothing; his actions are outputs of a system that has received no genuine inputs. The distinction is not incidental. It is the distinction between apatheism, which Gonçalves (2023) characterises as a particular practical orientation toward existence, and what might be called existential vacancy, which is a different and philosophically unrelated condition. The *Chance* case demonstrates that the apatheist social type framework is not infinitely elastic: it requires a specific positive structure, not merely the absence of theological content, and *Chance* lacks that structure entirely.

***The theological saturation problem: No Country for Old Men* (2007)**

A second candidate for comparative analysis is the Coen brothers' 2007 film *No Country for Old Men* (Coen & Coen, 2007), which presents, in *Sheriff Ed Tom Bell*, a character whose relationship to theological questions superficially resembles an apatheist orientation. Bell neither affirms nor denies the existence of God; he does not pray in any conventional sense; his moral agency operates without explicit divine grounding. A hasty reading might classify him

as an apatheist.

The comparison fails for a reason that, structurally, is the inverse of the *Chance* problem. Where *Chance* fails the apatheist test because he lacks the positive existential content apatheism requires, *Bell* fails it because the narrative that embeds him is theologically saturated in a way that makes genuine apatheism impossible as an existential option within the film's diegetic world. Throughout the film, *Anton Chigurh* functions as a figure of quasi-divine determinism: a force that moves through the human world with the implacable purposiveness of providence, selecting its victims according to a logic indifferent to human agency and incomprehensible to human reason. *Chigurh*'s famous coin-toss scenes are not merely philosophical performances; they enact a theology of divine arbitrariness that the film presents as the governing structure of reality.

Within this narrative universe, the theological question is not one any character can avoid through structural indifference; the narrative itself forces it on every character as a condition of their existence within the story. *Bell*'s relationship to theological questions is not the pre-reflective non-engagement of the apatheist but the anguished non-resolution of a man who cannot escape the question and cannot answer it. His famous dream sequences, particularly the final image of his father riding ahead of him in the darkness, carrying fire, are the images of a man for whom the transcendent is not absent but inaccessible: present as a wound rather than as a live answer. This is not apatheism; it is a form of what Şimşek (2023) would recognise as suspended theism, theological concern without theological resolution.

The *No Country for Old Men* case establishes an important methodological principle: the apatheist social type can only be instantiated in a narrative that does not itself foreground theological questions as structurally constitutive of its world. The apatheist's freedom from theological concern is philosophically significant, visible as a genuine existential orientation rather than a narrative omission, only when the narrative context provides adequate opportunities for theological engagement and the character consistently fails to take them. *Forrest Gump* satisfies this condition precisely because its narrative universe is not theologically organised: the film does not present existence as a theological problem to be solved, and *Gump*'s failure to pose theological questions is therefore not an artefact of narrative design but a characterological feature that demands explanation.

The internal control: Lieutenant Dan as the constitutive contrast

The most philosophically decisive comparative case is not drawn from another film but from within *Forrest Gump* itself. The character of *Lieutenant Dan Taylor* provides what, in the methodology of controlled comparison, would be called an internal control: a figure who undergoes substantially identical existential experiences to *Gump*'s (combat, traumatic injury, the loss of men under

his command, and the radical disruption of his life's anticipated trajectory) but whose response to those experiences is structurally and qualitatively different in precisely the dimensions that the apatheist analysis identifies as significant.

The comparison can be organised along four axes, each illuminating a distinct aspect of *Gump*'s apatheist structure by contrast with *Dan*'s theistically engaged orientation.

First, the structure of the theological question. For *Dan*, the theological question is not merely present but existentially urgent and personally anguished. His survival of a war in which he believed he was destined to die honourably, following the military tradition of every male member of his family, constitutes, in his own self-understanding, a form of divine betrayal: God has failed to keep His implicit covenant with him. *Dan*'s subsequent behaviour (his deliberate self-destruction, his confrontation with Gump, and eventually his direct challenge to God during the storm at sea) is the behaviour of a man for whom the theological question is not an abstract philosophical puzzle but a burning personal grievance. For *Gump*, the identical experiences (combat, the deaths of friends, and the disruption of anticipated life) produce no theological question at all. The question that *Dan* cannot escape does not, for *Gump*, present itself as a question.

Second, the phenomenology of suffering. *Dan*'s suffering is explicitly theodical: it is organised around the question of why God has permitted what has occurred, and it demands a response from the divine order that has, in his judgment, violated its obligations. *Gump*'s suffering, by contrast, is processed entirely within an immanent relational framework: *Bubba*'s death produces the *Bubba Gump Shrimp Company*; *Jenny*'s repeated abandonments produce continued fidelity; his mother's death produces a resumption of forward movement. There is no theodical dimension to *Gump*'s suffering because there is no transcendent framework against which the suffering can be registered as a violation.

Third, the structure of resolution. *Dan*'s character arc is resolved, to the extent that it is resolved, through a direct confrontation with divine power during the storm sequence, which the film presents as a genuine encounter with transcendent force. *Dan* emerges from this confrontation transformed: he achieves what the film codes as a form of peace that was unavailable to him before the encounter. The resolution is explicitly theological. *Gump* witnesses the same storm, observes *Dan*'s confrontation with the divine, and reports its outcome with characteristic matter-of-factness: "After that, Lieutenant Dan never once talked about dying again." He then moves immediately to the practical consequence, an investment in what turns out to be *Apple Computer*. The theological drama that constitutes the climax of *Dan*'s arc registers for *Gump* as background context for a financial development.

Fourth, and most importantly for the methodological argument, the implication of internal control. The fact that *Dan* and *Gump* are subjected to the same narrative conditions and respond in structurally opposite ways eliminates the most powerful remaining objection to the apatheist reading of *Gump*: the objection that *Gump*'s theological silence is simply a narrative omission, namely that the film fails to depict his theological life rather than depicting its absence. If so, the same omission would be expected to apply to *Dan*. But the film depicts *Dan*'s theological engagement in extensive, emotionally elaborate detail. The film can demonstrably represent theological struggle; it chooses, with equal deliberateness, to represent its absence in *Gump*. The *Dan* comparison transforms what might have been an argument from silence into an argument from systematic contrast.

The five conditions of uniqueness

The preceding comparative analysis enables a positive characterisation of what makes *Forrest Gump* a uniquely apt vehicle for the cinematic instantiation of the apatheist social type. Five conditions, each individually necessary and collectively sufficient, are satisfied by the *Gump* case in a combination that is, so far as the present analysis can determine, without precise parallel in the canon of mainstream popular cinema.

The first condition is narrative scope: the film encompasses approximately three decades of the protagonist's life and subjects him to an extraordinary range of existential provocations (war, bereavement, love, abandonment, disability, and unexpected success), each of which constitutes a culturally recognised occasion for theological response. The breadth of coverage ensures that the absence of theological engagement cannot be attributed to the narrative's failure to provide adequate opportunity; it has provided opportunity abundantly, and *Gump* has consistently failed to take it.

The second condition is internal contrast: the film provides, in the figures of L*ieutenant Dan*, *Jenny*, and to a lesser extent *Mrs Gump*, characters whose relationships to theological questions range from active combat (*Dan*) to anxious experimentation (*Jenny*) to quiet conventional theism (*Mrs Gump*). These figures ensure that *Gump*'s theological silence is visible as silence because it registers as the absence of something that the film's narrative universe recognises as a real possibility, rather than as a simple default condition. The apatheist's indifference is only philosophically legible against a background in which non-indifference is available and exemplified.

The third condition is moral adequacy: *Gump*'s theological indifference coexists with, and in no way undermines, a moral life of evident richness and integrity. This condition is essential because it demonstrates that the apatheism in question is not a form of moral vacancy, a life from which both theological and ethical concern have been evacuated, but a form of moral life that has found adequate grounding in immanent relational values. The apatheist social

type, as distinct from the nihilist or the hedonist, requires this demonstration of moral sufficiency.

The fourth condition is cultural temporality: the film was produced and released in 1994, before the philosophical literature on apatheism had achieved significant articulation or cultural visibility. Rauch's foundational essay in *The Atlantic*, which is widely credited with introducing the term into contemporary public discourse, did not appear until 2003. The film's protagonist therefore functions not as a cultural reflection of an already-theorised orientation, but as what might be called a pre-theoretical instantiation: a cultural typification that preceded and, in some sense, anticipated the philosophical concept it exemplifies. This temporal relationship, in which the character precedes the concept, lends the apatheist reading distinctive philosophical interest, suggesting that the orientation was culturally available and culturally significant before it was philosophically named.

The fifth condition is mass identification: *Forrest Gump* achieved extraordinary commercial and critical success, winning six Academy Awards and becoming one of the highest-grossing films of its decade, and its protagonist was embraced by audiences across a remarkably wide range of ideological and theological commitments. The ease with which millions of viewers identified with and admired a character whose existential structure is, in its fundamental features, radically apatheist constitutes sociological evidence that apatheism was, by the mid-1990s, already a broadly available and broadly appealing existential orientation, one that did not require philosophical articulation to resonate with a mass audience. This audience identification is suggestive rather than conclusive: a film's commercial success is overdetermined by many factors (including narrative craft, star performance, and historical nostalgia) that have nothing to do with theological orientation, and the inference from box-office reception to a claim about the psychological state of mass audiences should accordingly be drawn with caution. With that caveat in place, the pattern of identification is at least consistent with, even if it cannot on its own demonstrate, the philosophical claim that apatheism captures something real about the existential condition of the contemporary secular subject, and that *Forrest Gump*'s success owed something, in part, to his having given that condition a recognisable face.

Democratic Autonomy and the Implicit Rejection of Cosmic Authority

Von Hegner's heroical apatheism and the *Gump* character

Von Hegner's (2016) heroical apatheism posits that refusing to submit to divine authority is not merely epistemically permissible but morally courageous: it extends the democratic principle that no authority can claim legitimate power over conscious beings without their consent. The heroical apatheist refuses to acknowledge divine authority not because God's existence

has been disproven but because the structure of that authority (unelected, unaccountable, and maintained by the threat of infinite punishment) is incompatible with the dignity and autonomy of the rational individual.

Gump's character does not engage in explicit political or philosophical critique of theistic authority structures; his cognitive style does not readily accommodate such abstraction. Nevertheless, the film consistently depicts him as a figure who orients his life according to his own values, attachments, and judgments, not according to external authoritative directives, whether divine or human. When institutional authority (military, governmental, or religious) enters his life, he navigates it with characteristic compliance and good humour, but without letting it penetrate the existential core of his self-understanding or displace the relational values that govern his choices.

This pattern of behavioural compliance with surface-level authority, combined with deeper existential autonomy, is precisely what von Hegner (2016) identifies as the structure of heroical apatheism in practice. The heroical apatheist does not necessarily engage in overt rebellion against divine authority structures; rather, the heroical apatheist lives as though such structures bear no weight in organising one's existential life. *Gump*'s complete absence of prayer, religious observance, theological reflection, or appeal to divine guidance, within a narrative that encompasses experiences of extreme suffering, loss, and moral complexity, constitutes precisely this kind of lived refusal of cosmic authority, enacted not through ideological confrontation but through the simple structural absence of any felt need for divine reference.

The tauromachy metaphor and power-based legitimation

Von Hegner (2016) employs the metaphor of tauromachy (bullfighting) to illustrate the philosophical problem with power-based legitimation of authority. The matador's right to kill the bull rests on no foundation other than the fact that the matador has the power to do so. If the bull were to become sufficiently intelligent to turn the tables, its self-defence claim would rest on no firmer foundation than the matador's original claim to kill. Power, von Hegner argues, does not generate legitimacy; it merely generates the capacity to enforce compliance.

This metaphor's relevance to the *Gump* character emerges most clearly in the film's treatment of authority figures. *Gump* encounters a remarkable range of powerful individuals throughout the narrative: presidents, military commanders, media figures, and corporate leaders. His relationship with all of them is characterised by a fundamental equanimity that refuses to invest their power with special existential significance. He shakes presidents' hands with the same unaffected ease with which he greets ordinary people; he participates in historically significant events with the same cheerful pragmatism with which he participates in everyday activities. This consistent refusal to treat the powerful as possessing special authority over the meaning of one's

life constitutes a practical enactment of the philosophical principle that power does not equal legitimacy.

When this pattern extends to divine power, *Gump*'s existential orientation takes on philosophical significance. A God who possesses omnipotent power is, on the democratic autonomy view, not thereby authorised to command obedience or to determine the meaning of human existence. *Gump*'s life embodies this implication not as a philosophical conclusion but as a pre-reflexive existential posture: he does not organise his life around any appeal to transcendent power, and the film does not indicate that the prospect of cosmic authority over his existence presents itself to him as either threatening or relevant.

Psychological Architecture: Beshears's Pantheon of Indifference and the *Gump* Profile

Inratio: The absence of rational need for theological engagement

Beshears (2017) proposes a typology of three "gods" that constitute what he calls the Western Pantheon of Spiritual Indifference: Inratio (the god of insufficient reason to believe), Incausam (the god of insufficient motivation to engage), and Involuntas (the god of insufficient will to commit). Each represents a distinct psychological mechanism through which individuals arrive at theological indifference. The *Gump* character offers a complex and philosophically illuminating case study of each mechanism.

Inratio represents the disposition of individuals who find no rational justification for theological engagement, not because they have reasoned their way to atheism, but because the framework of theological reasoning has never presented itself as relevant to their practical and intellectual lives. *Gump* exemplifies this disposition in an unusually pure form. His cognitive style is thoroughly practical and relational: he reasons effectively about the things that matter to him: how to run, how to play ping-pong, and how to shrimp, but he never exhibits the kind of abstract, systematic reasoning that theological inquiry requires. The theological question never enters his cognitive horizon as a question demanding rational resolution, not because he has resolved it but because his intellectual life does not encompass the type of abstract inquiry that theological reasoning represents.

This aspect of *Gump*'s character connects directly to Beshears's (2017) analysis of contemporary secular culture, in which the dominance of scientific and technological reasoning has displaced theological reasoning from the intellectual mainstream. For *Gump*, however, the displacement is not ideological; it does not result from a commitment to scientific materialism or secular humanism. It is, rather, the structural consequence of a cognitive orientation that is radically immanent: focused entirely on the practical, the relational, and the immediate. In this sense, *Gump* represents not the ideological Inratio

of the New Atheist who has reasoned his way to secular commitment, but the pre-ideological Inratio of the individual for whom the theological framework has never been activated.

Incausam: The motivational architecture of immediate engagement

Incausam, in Beshears's (2017) typology, describes individuals who lack the motivational resources for sustained theological engagement, not because they oppose theological inquiry, but because the demands of immediate experience consume the motivational energy such inquiry would require. *Gump*'s character profile fits this description with striking precision.

Throughout the film, *Gump* shows an extraordinary capacity for immediate, wholehearted engagement with whatever is directly before him. When he runs, he runs with complete commitment. When he loves *Jenny*, he loves her with absolute fidelity. When he befriends *Bubba*, the friendship becomes an organising commitment of his life. This radical orientation toward the immediate and the present (what might be described, in philosophical terms, as a kind of existential presentism) leaves no motivational surplus for the abstract, the distant, and the speculative, which is precisely what theological inquiry demands.

Beshears (2017) notes that the digital age has produced a generation whose motivational architecture resembles *Gump*'s in this respect: conditioned to immediate gratification and deep engagement with the proximate, they find sustained reflection on transcendent questions motivationally inaccessible not through ideological opposition but through the simple exhaustion of motivational resources in the management of immediate experience. *Gump* anticipates this condition not as a product of digital technology but as a natural expression of a cognitive and motivational style that, in its structure, is the pre-digital equivalent of the attention economy's characteristic product.

Involuntas: The preservation of autonomy and the avoidance of commitment

Involuntas, the third element of Beshears's (2017) typology, represents the disposition of individuals who sense, at some level, that genuine theological engagement would require a transformation of their lives that they are unwilling to undergo. The fear of losing autonomy (of having one's self-understanding, moral commitments, and relational priorities restructured by a divine demand) produces an involuntary paralysis of the will to engage, even when intellectual curiosity might otherwise draw one toward theological questions.

The Involuntas dynamic in the *Gump* character operates differently from Beshears's standard case. Beshears (2017) typically describes Involuntas as a form of motivated avoidance: the individual senses the potential demand of authentic religious commitment and retreats from inquiry to protect their cur-

rent mode of life. In *Gump*'s case, the dynamic is less a retreat from a sensed threat than a structural absence of self-consciousness that would make such a threat perceivable. *Gump*'s existential identity is so thoroughly constituted by his immediate relational commitments (to *his mother*, *Bubba*, *Dan*, and *Jenny*) that no external authoritative demand could plausibly restructure it, because the identity has no room for such restructuring.

This extension of Involuntas beyond Beshears's (2017) original scope of motivated avoidance is retained here, rather than replaced with a new term, because both cases name the same underlying structural position within his broader typology: an incapacity of the will to submit to a theological demand, whether that incapacity results from an active retreat from a perceived threat or, as in *Gump*'s case, from the prior absence of the reflexive self-awareness that would be needed to perceive such a threat in the first place. Preserving the term therefore marks continuity with Beshears's typology of indifference rather than claiming that *Gump* instantiates his original description of the mechanism.

This pre-reflexive self-sufficiency of immanent relational identity represents a philosophically distinctive form of Involuntas: not the fearful avoidance of an individual who senses the cost of commitment and retreats, but the structural imperviousness of an individual whose existential core is so thoroughly occupied by immanent values that there is no psychological space for the disruption that genuine theological commitment would require.

Sociological Contextualisation: Gump as a Cultural Anticipation of Mass Apatheism

The sociological analysis of apatheism as a mass phenomenon requires situating it within the broader theoretical literature on secularisation. Casanova's (1994) influential account of the differentiation, privatisation, and decline of religion in modern societies provides an indispensable framework: apatheism, on this reading, represents the terminal point of religious privatisation: a condition in which religion has been so thoroughly evacuated from the public and practical dimensions of life that even its private, interior dimensions cease to generate existential resonance.

The four structural dynamics of contemporary apatheism

Zając and Wilkosz (2025) identify four structural dynamics that drive the mass adoption of apatheism in contemporary societies, particularly among Generations Y and Z: the decline of existential insecurity, the pluralism-generated ambivalence produced by the marketplace of worldviews, the cognitive exhaustion produced by information overload in the digital age, and the conflict between the demands of religious commitment and the hedonism of wellness culture. The *Gump* character, a product of the mid-1990s film industry, does not directly instantiate all four of these dynamics, but offers a cultur-

ally significant anticipation of the existential structure these dynamics would later produce on a mass scale.

The decline of existential insecurity is perhaps the most directly relevant of these dynamics to the *Gump* character. Şimşek (2023) and Zając and Wilkosz (2025) both note, following the sociological literature, that religious engagement tends to be inversely correlated with levels of existential security: populations whose lives are characterised by reliable access to health, welfare, and safety exhibit lower levels of theological urgency than populations whose lives are characterised by pervasive existential threat. *Gump*'s life, despite its surface-level exposure to violence and loss, is characterised by an extraordinary existential equanimity that functions as a narrative equivalent of existential security. He is never existentially threatened by his experiences; he always lands on his feet. This structural equanimity (an immunity to the kind of existential crisis that drives theological urgency) represents, at the level of individual character, the psychological condition that Zając and Wilkosz (2025) identify at the sociological level as the precondition of mass apatheism.

This inverse relationship between existential security and theological urgency is precisely what Norris and Inglehart (2004) identify as the central dynamic of religious change in the modern world. Their "existential security thesis" proposes that as societies develop reliable institutions of welfare, health, and personal safety, the existential functions traditionally performed by religion (the management of uncertainty, the consolation of suffering, and the provision of meaning under conditions of vulnerability) become less urgently required. *Gump*'s narrative embodies this thesis at the level of individual character: his extraordinary immunity to existential crisis, his structural equanimity in the face of experiences that devastate other characters, represents the psychological equivalent of what Norris and Inglehart document at the sociological level.

The pluralism problem and the *Forrest Gump* solution

Zając and Wilkosz (2025) describe the post-secular marketplace of worldviews as generating a characteristic ambivalence in the contemporary individual: confronted with hundreds of competing "absolute truth" claims, the individual finds the cognitive and emotional resources required to adjudicate between them overwhelming and chooses to exit rather than engage. Beshears (2017) captures this dynamic with the metaphor of an orchestra in which every instrument plays a different tune: the listener's response is not to identify the correct melody but to remove the headphones altogether.

The film *Forrest Gump* offers a notably different resolution to this problem, one that, in its structure, is more radical than the exit strategy described by Zając and Wilkosz (2025). *Gump* does not experience the pluralism problem because he was never inside the marketplace of worldviews to begin with. He has not surveyed the competing truth claims of the major world religions and

found them bewildering; he has never entered the cognitive and existential register in which such claims present themselves as requiring attention. His solution to the pluralism problem is structural rather than strategic: not a retreat from an overwhelming plurality of options, but the absence of any felt need to choose among them.

This distinction is philosophically significant. The apatheism Zając and Wilkosz (2025) describe as a response to pluralism is, in some sense, a reactive apatheism, an indifference produced by the frustration of the desire for orientation. *Gump*'s apatheism, by contrast, is constitutive, an indifference that precedes the desire for orientation and renders it unnecessary. This distinction maps onto Şimşek's (2023) distinction between the apatheism that emerges from the disappointment of theological expectation and the apatheism that emerges from the structural non-activation of theological concern.

Information overload, cognitive exhaustion, and the *Forrest Gump* model

Zając and Wilkosz (2025) document the extraordinary cognitive demands of the digital information environment, noting that the total volume of data produced by humanity before 2003 is now generated every 48 hours. The chronic cognitive fatigue produced by this informational environment has, they argue, significantly reduced contemporary individuals' capacity for the sustained, patient, and distraction-free reflection that genuine theological inquiry requires.

Gump's cognitive style, while not a product of digital overload, serves as a structural analogue of the cognitively fatigued individual described by Zając and Wilkosz (2025). His cognitive resources are fully deployed in managing his immediate environment and relational commitments. No cognitive reserves remain for abstract metaphysical inquiry. The difference between *Gump* and the digitally fatigued apatheist of the twenty-first century is the source of cognitive depletion: for *Gump*, it is the radical demands of immediate engagement; for the contemporary apatheist, it is the demands of the digital attention economy. But the structural consequence is the same: theological questions do not receive the cognitive hospitality they would need to take root as live existential concerns.

The wellness culture antithesis and its Gumpian equivalent

Beshears (2017) identifies the conflict between the hedonic demands of wellness culture and the ascetic demands of religious commitment as a major driver of contemporary apatheism. The individual who organises life around optimising comfort and pleasure while avoiding negative experiences finds religious obligation, with its demands for self-denial, sacrifice, and submission to transcendent authority, structurally incompatible with the governing values of their existence.

Gump's relationship with this dynamic is complex. He is not a hedonist;

his relational commitments frequently require and produce suffering. But his governing values (loyalty, love, and wholehearted engagement with immediate experience) share with wellness culture a fundamental immanence: they are entirely oriented toward this world, these relationships, this life, without any reference to transcendent norms or eschatological expectations. The difference between *Gump*'s immanent orientation and the hedonism of wellness culture is one of quality rather than structure: both are radically this-worldly, both are organised around values that require no theological grounding, and both produce individuals for whom the demands of religious commitment represent an intrusion from a framework that has no purchase on their actual lived concerns.

Discussion: *Forrest Gump* and the Philosophy of Apatheism

The analysis in the preceding sections has shown that *Forrest Gump* constitutes a remarkably coherent and philosophically illuminating instantiation of the apatheist social type as theorised in contemporary philosophical literature. Crucially, this instantiation is pre-reflexive throughout: at no point does *Gump* consciously hold, articulate, or endorse the meta-belief that theological questions lack practical significance; he lives in a manner that structurally enacts it. Across epistemological structure, moral agency, psychological architecture, and sociological positioning, *Gump* exemplifies what apatheism looks like when lived rather than merely theorised.

Taylor's (2007) genealogy of the secular age provides the broadest theoretical context for situating *Gump*'s existential orientation. For Taylor, the modern West has undergone a shift from a condition in which belief in God was "naïve" and almost unavoidable to one in which it is merely one option among many, and in which the "immanent frame" (the horizon of natural human flourishing) has become the default background of social existence. *Gump* does not choose this frame; he inhabits it. In this sense, he is Taylor's secular subject in its most untheorised, lived, and complete form.

This analysis yields several observations of broader philosophical significance. First, the *Gump* character demonstrates that apatheism is not necessarily a product of intellectual sophistication or deliberate philosophical reflection. By narrative design, *Gump* is a character of limited abstract intelligence. Yet his apatheism is, in its structural features, philosophically coherent: it exhibits the second-order meta-belief structure identified by Hedberg and Huzarevich (2017), the non-cognitivist posture described by Zając and Wilkosz (2025), and the practical moral sufficiency that Şimşek (2023) identifies as the defining feature of apatheism in its lived expression. This suggests that apatheism is not a philosophical position that requires philosophical sophistication for its instantiation; rather, it is a structural orientation toward existence that can be lived pre-reflexively, without theoretical articulation.

Second, the *Gump* character challenges the commonly held assumption that apatheism is a socially or morally deficient orientation. The objection from moral motivation (the claim that theological indifference undermines the foundations of ethical behaviour) is decisively refuted by the *Gump* character, who demonstrates extraordinary moral integrity in the complete absence of theological grounding. This cinematic refutation aligns with the philosophical responses to the moral motivation objection offered by Hedberg and Huzarevich (2017), who argue that the empirical evidence from secular societies demonstrates that theological indifference and moral excellence are entirely compatible.

Third, the *Gump* character illuminates the distinction between what might be called constitutive and reactive apatheism. Reactive apatheism, the indifference produced by the frustration of theological expectation, the cognitive exhaustion of pluralism, or the motivational depletion of the digital age, is a response to conditions that have generated theological concern and then disappointed it. Constitutive apatheism, the indifference of an individual whose existential orientation was never organised around theological concern in the first place, is a more primordial condition that does not presuppose the history of failed theological engagement. *Gump* exemplifies constitutive apatheism, and his character thereby reveals the possibility of an apatheism that is not the historical product of disappointed religious expectation but the natural expression of an immanently oriented existence.

Finally, analysing *Gump* as an apatheist social type raises important questions about the cultural work popular films do in representing and normalising existential orientations. The film *Forrest Gump* achieved extraordinary commercial and critical success; it won six Academy Awards and became one of the highest-grossing films of the 1990s. Audiences across a wide spectrum of ideological and theological commitments embraced its protagonist. The ease with which audiences identified with and admired a character whose existential orientation is, in its structural features, radically apatheist is consistent with the suggestion that apatheism was already, by the mid-1990s, a culturally available and broadly appealing existential orientation, one that required no explicit philosophical articulation to resonate with a mass audience. Given the many non-theological factors that contribute to a film's popularity, however, this response cannot by itself demonstrate that claim.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the character of *Forrest Gump* constitutes an exemplary social type of contemporary apatheism, understood in the philosophical sense developed by Hedberg and Huzarevich (2017), Gonçalves (2023), von Hegner (2016), Şimşek (2023), Beshears (2017), and Zając and Wilkosz (2025). Throughout, this apatheism is presented as pre-reflexive: the character does not consciously hold, articulate, or philosophically endorse it, but rather en-

acts it structurally through the pattern of his lived existence. The argument has proceeded through a systematic application of the theoretical frameworks developed in philosophical literature on apatheism to the specific character profile presented in the film, demonstrating convergence across the dimensions of epistemological structure, moral agency, psychological architecture, and sociological positioning.

The significance of this analysis extends beyond interpreting a single film or character. It demonstrates, first, that the philosophical concept of apatheism has genuine cultural resonance because it captures something real about a mode of existential orientation that contemporary audiences recognise and value. It demonstrates, second, that popular cultural texts can serve as philosophically productive objects of analysis, since close reading of film characters through the lens of philosophy of religion can illuminate both the philosophical concepts and the cultural phenomena they describe. It also shows, third, that apatheism is not an exclusively intellectual or deliberate orientation but a structural condition that can be lived pre-reflexively and expressed through the texture of a concrete human life.

Forrest Gump does not know that he is an apatheist. He has never read Rauch, Hedberg, or Gonçalves. He has never asked himself whether God's existence is practically significant. He lives with extraordinary wholeness, radical immanence, and complete absorption in the relational and practical demands of immediate existence, in a way that instantiates, at every structural level, the philosophical orientation that the concept of apatheism is designed to capture. In this pre-reflexive, untheorised, wholly enacted apatheism, *Forrest Gump* stands as perhaps the most eloquent cultural witness to the claim that theological indifference is not a philosophical failure but an existential possibility, one that is not only rationally permissible but, for many individuals, the natural expression of a life lived fully in the world.

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