THE BIG QUESTIONS AND THE QUESTION OF GOD

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THE BIG QUESTIONS

Reality has two parts.

Most of reality is divisible into areas of knowledge that can be investigated by empirical evidence and experimentation. These are the aspects of reality studied in the sciences (natural sciences like chemistry, or social sciences like sociology) and the humanities (e.g., French literature). It was by ignoring traditional authorities and concentrating on evidence and experiment that the Enlightenment was able to speed up humanity’s advances in knowledge of these aspects of reality.

But there is another aspect of reality that forms a backdrop to the rest. That aspect is the big questions. These concern the religious mysteries which frame our lives as a whole.

Here, for example, are four quotations from the Catholic tradition which refer to these basic questions.

Vatican Council II, *Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* (*Nostra aetate*, 28 Oct. 1965) § 1: “Men look to the various religions for answers to those profound myster­ies of the human condition which, today even as in olden times, deeply stir the human heart: What is a man? What is the meaning and the purpose of our life? What is goodness and what is sin? What gives rise to our sorrows and to what intent? Where lies the path to true happiness? What is the truth about death, judgment, and retribution beyond the grave? What, finally, is that ultimate and unutterable mystery which engulfs our being, and whence we take our rise, and whither our journey leads us?””

Vatican Council II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (*Gaudium et spes*, 7 Dec. 1965) § 10: people “raise the most basic questions or recognize them with a new sharpness: what is man? What is this sense of sorrow, of evil, of death, which continues to exist despite so much progress? What purpose have these victories purchased at so high a cost? What can man offer to society, what can he expect from it? What follows this earthly life?”

Pope John Paul II, *The Splendor of Truth* (*Veritatis splendor*, 6 Aug. 1993) § 30: “These [the questions in *Nostra aetate*, above] and other questions, such as: what is freedom and what is its relationship to the truth contained in God’s law? what is the role of conscience in man’s moral development? how do we determine, in accordance with the truth about the good, the specific rights and duties of the human person?—can all be summed up in the fundamental question which the young man in the Gospel put to Jesus: “Teacher, what good must I do to have eternal life?””

Pope John Paul II, *Faith and Reason* (*Fides et ratio*, 14 Sept. 1998) § 1: “in different parts of the world, with their different cultures, there arise at the same time the fundamental questions which pervade human life: *Who am I? Where have I come from and where am I going? Why is there evil? What is there after this life?* . . . [These questions] have their common source in the quest for meaning which has always compelled the human heart. In fact, the answer given to these questions decides the direction which people seek to give to their lives.”

The questions asked in these passages are largely classifiable under five headings.

God

“What, finally, is that ultimate and unutterable mystery which engulfs our being, and whence we take our rise, and whither our journey leads us?”

the meaning of life

“What is a man?”

“What is the meaning and the purpose of our life?”

“Who am I?”

“Where have I come from and where am I going?”

evil

“What gives rise to our sorrows and to what intent?”

“What is this sense of sorrow, of evil, of death, which continues to exist despite so much progress?”

“Why is there evil?”

morality

“What is goodness and what is sin?”

“Where lies the path to true happiness?”

“What can man offer to society, what can he expect from it?”

“What is freedom and what is its relationship to the truth contained in God’s law?”

“What is the role of conscience in man’s moral development?”

“How do we determine, in accordance with the truth about the good, the specific rights and duties of the human person?”

afterlife

“What is the truth about death, judgment, and retribution beyond the grave?”

“What follows this earthly life?”

“What is there after this life?”

The basic religious questions seem, then, to be at least the questions of God, the meaning (or purpose) of life, evil, morality, and the afterlife.

Unlike aspects of reality inside of the big-questions frame (the sciences and the humanities), knowledge about the big questions cannot be gained by empirical evidence and experimentation. Answering the big questions requires a faith commitment.

This is not a defect: reality is simply structured in such a way that the questions that frame our lives cannot be answered *without* belief. About the big questions, certainty is impossible. Therefore everyone—adherent (of whichever persuasion), atheist, or agnostic—makes a faith commitment concerning the big questions. (Even not to make a commitment is a commitment.)

One of the intra-frame realities that one can choose to investigate is religions. In religious studies, one can “bracket” one’s faith commitment and examine religions by the methods of history, sociology, psychology, and so on. (Bracketing is an essential practice in the philosophy called phenomenology, where bracketing is known as *epoché*.) But religious studies is not the same as religion. If one wishes to attain answers to the big questions themselves, one will ultimately have to *choose* which answers one believes about them.

As with making a commitment to a person, so with making a commitment to a stance about the big questions: it is a big part of becoming a mature person.

In the following poems, I try to give a sense of the mystery of existence.

life is a river

 We begin at a mountain spring and meander through childhood.

 Things speed up downward, as we focus on family and career.

 In retirement, what fills our ears is the roar of the approaching waterfall.

existence

The ice cores are gathered!

Upon Antarctic ice,

Scientists celebrate

In a circle of light.

Thirty feet below,

In the ice, a runnel flows.

On it a body floats,

Dreaming nothing.

The researchers sing,

Crack open extra rations;

Laughter spills outward

Toward darkness.

As celebrants carouse,

The body passes beneath.

Never will it know

Existence, above, exists.

THE QUESTION OF GOD

(The following is a presentation of the cosmological argument for God’s existence. I recommend studying the cosmological argument as presented by Thomas Aquinas [1225-74] in *Summa theologiae* 1.2.3.)

Fundamental to the big questions is the question of God. Does God exist?

A conditional syllogism in logic has the form of three sentences: If A, then B. A. Therefore B. (E.g.: If it’s raining, the ground is wet. It’s raining. Therefore the ground is wet.) Such a syllogism is valid, which means that, as long as the first two statements (the premises) are true, the third statement (the conclusion) must be true. I propose this conditional syllogism: If something exists, then God exists. Something exists. Therefore God exists.

About the second premise there can be no doubt. Something exists. Otherwise, you would not be reading this. Since a conditional syllogism must be true if both premises are true, and since the second premise in my syllogism is true, the only question remaining, to prove God’s existence, is the first premise: If something exists, then God exists. Is that true?

Imagine that the Universe is like a roll of coins; each coin is the Universe at a moment of time. The roll stretches to the left (the past) and to the right (the future). Since we believe that creation had a beginning, the Big Bang, we suppose that the roll has a terminus to the left. (Scientists say the Big Bang was about 13.7 billion years ago.) To the right, however, the roll may extend indefinitely: for all we know, existence will never end.

But what about the existence of the coin roll as a whole? We can say with certainty that the Universe did not bring itself into existence—because if the Universe did not yet exist, it was not there to bring itself into existence. You cannot get something from nothing. Nor does the Universe seem capable of holding itself in existence, once it is created. (No thing—a dog, a chair—seems to know how to hold itself in existence; so there is no reason to think that the collocation of all things is able to hold itself in existence.) The Universe, then, was brought into existence, and is sustained each moment in existence, by something external to it. Let us call that something God. And let us imagine God as underneath the Universe, holding it (sustaining it) in existence.

Now, theoretically there could be a second God underneath the first one, sustaining the first God in existence. And there could be a third God underneath the second, sustaining the second God; and a fourth, and a fifth, and so on. But what *cannot* be the case is that there is no *ultimate* God. It *cannot* be the case that the series of vertical causes continues downward without end. You can have an infinite series of temporal causes (causes within the Universe, horizontally extending from past to future); but you cannot have an infinite series of contingent (depending) causes (causes external to the Universe on which it depends for existence, vertically extending downward).

Why not? Because, if the downward series of Gods never ends, then there will never be an ultimate God to bring the God above it into existence, so that that God can bring the next higher God into existence, and so on, up to the God who immediately brings the Universe into existence.

Imagine that you jump into a swimming pool feet first, but the swimming pool has no bottom. You sink down, and down, and down; you never reach a bottom, on which you can crouch and spring upward so as to be able to reach the surface. Similarly, if you never reach an ultimate God, then the Universe (the surface) will never be reached.

There cannot be an infinite series of contingent causes because, if no ultimate cause begins the series, the Universe will never come into existence.

Consequently, the first premise (If A, then B) is true: If something exists, then God exists.

Using Occam’s razor (the principle in philosophy that the simplest explanation is to be preferred), it is simplest to imagine that there are not multiple contingent causes (Gods) but just one: God.

In the following poem, I try to give a sense of the mystery of God’s existence.

the empty room: which happened?

The room is empty, barren of furniture.

In the center, above an open trapdoor,

God stands.

He reaches down, grabs nothing, pulls up:

And brings something into existence.

——

The room is empty, barren of furniture.

In the center, above an open trapdoor,

No one stands.

Nothing ever exists.