

Religion and the Meaning of Life



Next Topic: Existentialism

Readings:

Reading 18 (Optional online): Stephen Crowell, “Existentialism”, 2010, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, available at:

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/existentialism/>

Reading 19 (Online): Jean-Paul Sartre, “The Humanism of Existentialism” available at:

<http://teacherweb.com/MI/PCCS/Humanities/sartre.pdf>

Readings for this topic

- **Reading 6 (optional): Leo Tolstoy, “My Confession”, (Klemke) p. 7**
- **Reading 7 (Online): William Lane Craig, “The Absurdity of Life Without God”. Available at:
<http://www.reasonablefaith.org/the-absurdity-of-life-without-god>**
- **Reading 8: Louis Pojman, “Religion Gives Meaning to Life, (Klemke) p. 27**
- **Reading 9 (CuLearn): Theodore Schick, “Morality Requires God – Or Does It?” posted on CuLearn**

Readings – cont'd

- **Reading 10: Robert Nozick, “Philosophy and the Meaning of Life”, (Klemke) p. 224**
- **Reading 11 (Optional CuLearn): “What is Humanism?”, from the website of the British Humanist Association**
- **Reading 12: Kurt Baier, “The Meaning of Life”, (Klempke) p. 82**



Summary of the Religious Approach

Basic reasoning behind the religious view

- **There is nothing in the empirical, natural world around us that could give human life meaning, purpose or value.**
- **We may have the best life, as Tolstoy explains, but this doesn't mean our life as a whole has value or importance.**
- **So far as nature is concerned we just exist, perhaps by accident. Nature doesn't offer any reason *why* we exist.**

Main Thesis of the Religious Approach

The meaning, purpose, and value, of human life must therefore, depend on the existence of some *transcendent reality*, on a reality beyond the natural world, that is, on the existence of God and an afterlife.

The existence of such a supernatural realm is the only thing that could save us from nihilism, since there is nothing in this earthly existence, taken in itself, that could give meaning and purpose to human existence.

Interprets the meaning of life literally

The religious approach interprets the issue of the meaning of life in a very straightforward, literal sense:

The purpose of human life is to fulfill whatever purpose/role God intended for us when He created the universe, just as the purpose of any utensil is to perform the function we intended when we created it.

Examples of purposes God had in mind would be: 1) to prove our love for God; 2) to pass the test God has set for us, 3) to share in the glory of God's creation

The role of faith

Of course, we may not be able to fully understand *how* the supernatural, how God, could give meaning to our lives. That knowledge may be inaccessible to us.

But it is here that faith, believing in something without having reasons for believing, plays a crucial role. It is faith in God that gives our lives meaning and purpose.

This is why, according to Tolstoy, the masses don't sense any problem about the meaning of life – they simply have faith that there is somehow meaning.

Additional Claims

Defenders of a religious approach also typically make a number of additional claims. For example, Pojman and Craig in our readings make the following claims:

- 1) The very possibility of morality, of right/wrong, good/bad, depends on the existence of God. Only on the religious view do we have a reason to be moral.**
- 2) On the religious view, we can be sure that cosmic justice will be achieved as God will punish wrongdoers, whereas, without God, wrongdoing might never be punished.**

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- 3) Cosmic love – in the struggle between good and evil, God is on our side and He will take care of us, whereas on the scientific view, the world is indifferent to us.**
- 4) On the religious view, all people are of equal moral value and worth as we are all God's creatures, whereas, without God, it is difficult to justify this principle of equal worth**
- 5) The religious view gives a more satisfying account of the origin and existence of the universe than science**

Cont'd

- 7) Craig also emphasizes the importance of permanence: on the scientific world view, neither individual people, nor the human race as a whole, nor the physical universe as a whole, are permanent. At some point they will all cease to exist. Craig believes this fact robs them of intrinsic value. On the religious view, by contrast, we are guaranteed permanent existence through the afterlife.**

- 8) Pojman and Craig both use a version of Pascal's wager to argue that the above considerations provide good reason to accept the religious outlook.**

Louis Pojman (1935-2005)



- **Grew up in Illinois**
- **Educated at Oxford**
- **Taught at U.S. Military Academy at West Point**
- **Minister in Reformed Church of America**
- **Editor of many excellent anthologies in philosophy**
- **Environmentalist, anti-war activist, vegan**

William Lane Craig (1949-)



- ❑ **Born in Illinois**
- ❑ **Educated at U. of Birmingham, England**
- ❑ **Research Professor at Talbot School of Theology**
- ❑ **Evangelical theologian, prominent in Intelligent Design movement**
- ❑ **Frequent participant in public debates on religion and science**

Religion and Morality

- 1) **How, and why, would morality depend on the existence of God?**
 - a) **If it were not for the threat of God's punishment, most people would not do the right thing, so morality could not effectively be enforced.**
 - b) **If God does not exist, there would be no good answer to the question 'Why be moral?'**
 - c) **If God does not exist, we would have no reliable means of *knowing* which acts are right and which are wrong.**

The divine command theory of morality

- d) Without God there would be no *source* of morality. The reason for this is that right and wrong are determined by God's commands: If God commands us to do something, then it is morally right to do it, and if God commands us not to do something, then it is wrong to do it. Nothing else is *directly* relevant to whether an act is right or wrong. This view of morality is called the divine command theory.

For all of these reasons, Pojman and Craig claim that the scientific world view undermines morality and values.

Note

“The belief that morality requires God is not limited to theists Many atheists subscribe to it as well. The existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre, for example, says that “If God is dead, everything is permitted.” In other words, if there is no supreme being to lay down the moral law, each individual is free to do as he or she pleases. Without a divine lawgiver, there can be no universal moral law.”

From Schick, Reading 9: “Morality Requires God – Or Does It?”

Cont'd

So the issue is not about whether we are going to accept religion, or believe in God.

The issue concerns *the relationship between our religious beliefs on the one hand and moral beliefs and practices on the other hand*. As we will see in more detail shortly, it is quite consistent for religious believers to reject the divine command theory.

Evaluation of these claims

Reason a): Is religion needed to motivate moral conduct?

This is an old issue in philosophy. Near the beginning of his famous book *The Republic*, the ancient Greek philosopher Plato has one of his characters raise the following issue: Suppose he found a magic ring that made him invisible when he put it on. Then he could break any rules he liked without fear of punishment. What reason would he have, then, to act morally?

Replies to argument

- **There is plenty of evidence that atheists are, in general, just as moral in their behaviour as believers.**
- **There would still be the threat of punishment in *this* world in the form of social or legal sanctions for wrongdoing.**
- **Why isn't morality itself sufficient reason to behave morally?**

Argument b): Why be moral?

Reason b) is not very convincing b/c the religious view turns morality into a matter of self-interest – we are to do what's right only to avoid God's punishment.

But why can't we say that we do what's right just because it *is* right? Why is that not enough of a justification for doing what's right? Further, we might also say we do the right thing because this coincides with what maximizes overall happiness?

Reason c): we could not know what is right

- 1. Religion itself is not a very reliable guide to right and wrong for several reasons: first, different religions disagree to some extent; second, religions are often not very clear guides to right and wrong; and, third, religions sometimes give incorrect answers to moral questions.**
- 2. There are also other means besides religion for determining what is right and wrong, e.g. we can use reason, philosophical analysis, and, to some extent, scientific inquiry.**

Turn now to objection d)

According to the divine command theory of morality, it is God's commands and nothing else that determines what is right and what is wrong.

Plato expressed the issue here as follows: Are such acts as killing stealing, lying, etc.,

(a) wrong b/c God commands us not to them

(b) or does God command us not to do them b/c they are wrong?

Two views of the Relation between God and Morality

- 1) **The divine command theory – It is God's commands that determine morality: Some things are right b/c God commands us to do them, others are wrong b/c God forbids us to do them.**
- 2) **Morality does not depend on God. Rather, God commands us to do certain things *because* they are right, and He forbids us to do certain things *because* they are wrong. On this view, right and wrong exist prior to and independently of anything God commands. But b/c God is good, He commands us to do what is right.**

Some theologians accept the one view, some accept the other.

Summary of objections to DCT

- 1) **The absurd consequences problem – the DCT entails that even such acts as rape and genocide would have been right if God had commanded them**
- 2) **The explanation problem – no explanation of how God's commands could determine right and wrong**
- 3) **The arbitrariness problem – the DCT makes morality arbitrary b/c God could not have had any reason for his commands**
- 4) **The emptiness problem – the DCT entails that it would be vacuous to say that God is good**
- 5) **There are other, better, ways to account for morality**

The absurd consequences problem

If God's commands determine what is right, it follows that morality could have been very different. Suppose God had commanded us to commit genocide. Then mass murder would have been morally right.

Intuitively this seems implausible. How could it ever be right or good to cause pain and suffering for not good reason, or for no higher goal?

The explanation problem

There is no adequate explanation of how God's commands could be the source of morality. What is it about God that is supposed to account for this?

Imagine that a very powerful dictator commands us to do things. Because he is so powerful, we might have no choice but to obey him. But this would not mean his commands determine what is right. How would it be different, then, in the case of God's commands? How are His commands supposed to determine morality? (The answer cannot be b/c He is so powerful, or knows so much, or b/c He is good.)

The arbitrariness problem

The question arises how God decided what to make right and what to make wrong? Why did he command us not to kill or steal or lie?

If the DCT is correct, the answer cannot be b/c these things are bad or cause pain. For, according to the DCT, prior to God's commands, *nothing* is good or bad. The problem is that God could not have had *any* reason whatever to command us to do some things and not others. So the DCT seems to make morality entirely arbitrary.

The emptiness problem

This is similar to the arbitrariness problem. Religious people believe, of course, that God is not only good, but perfectly good. But the DCT renders any claim about God's being good, entirely empty or vacuous:

No matter what God commands, He Himself would be good, since what is good is *whatever* He commands. So, on the DCT, it becomes completely trivial to say that God is good. It is like saying that X is X.

There is a much better account

There is a much better, less problematic view of the relation between God and morality:

B/c God is perfectly benevolent, He commands us to do what is right, and forbids us from doing what is wrong. On this view, morality exists independently of God.

Many theologians and other religious thinkers accept this view. There is no reason why a religious person must accept the DCT.

The rationality of morality

The fundamental problem with the DCT is that it fails to appreciate the inherent *rationality* of morality.

Perhaps there are some facts in the world that just exist, without being reasonable in any sense. Perhaps physical facts are ultimately like this.

But moral facts are not like this. For example, it could not just be a brute fact that wearing a green shirt on Mondays is wrong, but *not for any reason*. If it is wrong, that must be because of some bad or harmful affect it has.

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If something is wrong, there must be a reason *why* it is wrong, and it must be possible in principle for a rational person to see why it is wrong.

So, if something is wrong, God, at least, would know the reason why it is bad, and hence wrong, and He could always explain it to us. There is, therefore, no ultimate *need* to invoke religion in trying to justify moral principles or beliefs. We can just explain the rationale behind them.

Pojman's other claims about morality

Pojman claims that only the religious view can accommodate the idea of equal moral worth – that from a purely moral point of view everyone is equal.

Pojman also claims that only the religious world view can accommodate the demands of cosmic justice. If there is no God then we have little assurance that wrongdoers will be punished and right doers will be rewarded.

How serious are these objections to the scientific world view?

Pascal's Wager

A major objection that might be raised against the considerations that Pojman and Craig present in support of the religious view is that the most they would show is that the world would be a better place if the religious view were correct than if the scientific world view was correct. Even if that is so, it is still no reason to believe that the religious view is correct. (We might prefer that it be possible to travel faster than light, but that is not reason to believe we can travel faster than light.)

Pojman and Craig both suggest that Pascal's wager might be used to respond to this objection.

Pascal's Wager

Classic form of Pascal's Wager

The 17th century mathematician Blaise Pascal argued that even if we cannot produce any evidence to prove that God exists, there is still a “pragmatic reason to act on the assumption that God exists, since we have much to gain and little to lose by doing so.

More precisely


1) Suppose we believe in God

- if God exists, we get eternal bliss
- If God does not exist, we suffer only minor inconvenience

2) Suppose we don't believe in God


- If God exists, we suffer eternal damnation
- If God does not exist, we don't gain much

So we have much to gain and little to lose by believing in God,
but much to lose and little to gain by failure to believe in God.
So 1) is the better option.



Pojman and Craig claim that by the same sort of reasoning, we have much to gain and little to lose by embracing the religious outlook that there is a loving God and an afterlife.

If we embrace the religious view and reject the scientific view, our lives will be much better, for we will live with the feeling that life has meaning and purpose and avoid existential angst or despair.



Evaluation and Criticism of the Religious View of the Meaning of Life

Critique of the religious view

Let's begin our assessment of the religious view by discussing the idea that the meaning of human life depends on our playing a certain role in God's plan.

We will now look at Robert Nozick's criticisms of this idea. These are presented in the selection in Klemke, pp. 224-232

Robert Nozick (1938-2002)



- **Born in Brooklyn, N.Y.**
- **Professor at Harvard**
- **Contributed to many fields, especially political philosophy and theory of knowledge**
- **Most influential works: Anarchy, State and Utopia, and Philosophical Explanations**
- **Died of stomach cancer**

Nozick's criticisms of the religious approach

How could the fact that we play a role in God's plan for the universe mean that our lives have meaning and purpose?

Nozick notes first that this will not give a satisfactory account of the meaning of life if the role we play is *too trivial*, e.g. if our function is only to put oxygen into the earth's atmosphere, or to plug a leaky faucet. Also, the role we play must be *positive* – it would not be enough if we were put here by God just as an example to other beings of how *not* to live, or to provide food for intergalactic travellers.

How could God's plan give meaning to our lives?

Conforming to the plan of a powerful dictator would not be enough to give meaning to our lives.

Discovering that we were created by a race of powerful intergalactic beings for some purpose (for them) would not give meaning to our lives.

How, then, could the fact that God created us for a certain reason give meaning to our lives? What makes the case where we are created by God different?

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“If it were sufficient merely to play some role in some external purpose, then you could give meaning to your life by fitting it to my plans or to your parents’ purpose in having you.”

It might be *prudent* to follow God’s plan b/c of His power, but that is different. Because it is God, this all powerful being, we may forget to ask this question, but it does seem to require an answer.

The circularity objection

“It seems it is not enough that God have some purpose for us – his purpose itself must be meaningful.” God’s plan must involve genuine meaning, and then our lives might derive meaning from our relationship to God’s plan.


But what would give God’s existence and plan meaning and purpose in the first place? Is this question not as difficult to answer as the original question about the meaning of *our* lives? So the religious solution to the problem of the meaning of life appears *circular* – it presupposes that the problem of meaning has already been resolved at some level.

Cont'd

The difficulty is that the problem of the meaning of life or existence can be raised for God as well. What is it supposed to be about God's nature that gives *His* existence meaning?

Is it His being all powerful? Perfectly good? Perfectly wise? But how would these attributes make God's existence meaningful? It is not clear that we have an answer to that.

Without a good answer to this question, nothing about our relation to God could give our lives meaning.



Nozick even raises the possibility that we give meaning to God's existence:

What does God exist *for* if not to create a universe and make our existence possible? Are we, and perhaps other creatures in the universe, God's way of giving meaning and purpose to *His* existence? Perhaps God is conforming to the existentialist view of meaning, that everyone must create his/her own meaning, and this is how God creates meaning for Himself. But, in that case, we would not depend on God to give *our* lives meaning.



Kurt Baier

“The Meaning of Life”

Inaugural Lecture

Canberra university College, 1957

Further criticism from Kurt Baier, Section 2: “The Purpose of Existence”

Baier first notes that many people feel that the scientific view of the world implies that human life has no purpose – that humans just came into existence for no reason – and that the religious world view is preferable for this reason.

Baier proposes that this way of thinking rests on a failure to distinguish two different senses of the word ‘purpose’.

Two meanings of the word 'purpose'

Sense 1 – *“In the first and basic sense, purpose is normally attributed only to persons and their behaviour, as in “Did you have a purpose in leaving the ignition on?” (p. 100)*

Sense 2 – *“In the second sense purpose is normally attributed only to things, as in “What is the purpose of the gadget you installed in the workshop?”” (p. 100)*

Sense 1 involves a person doing things for a reason or goal. **Sense 2** involves the function for which a thing was created.

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A person's life would have purpose in sense 1 if the things they did in it tended to have purposes or goals. If they do things for no purpose or reason, do things randomly as it were, then their lives would tend to have no meaning.

A person's life would tend to have meaning in sense 2 only if they were created by someone else for a purpose or function. Here the purpose of one's existence will be a purpose from some *other* being's point of view. If one was not created for any reason, then one's life would have no purpose in sense 2.

Cont'd

Baier notes that, so far as human beings are concerned, it is considered a good thing for one's life to have meaning in sense 1. We tend to think a life is better if the things the person did in it had reason and purpose rather than being directed to no purpose or goal at all.

But he notes that it is usually considered a bad thing for a person's life to have a purpose in the second sense. At least we think that having a purpose in that sense is of no benefit to the person *him/herself*.


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The scientific world view is quite compatible with our lives having a purpose in sense 1 – science even expands the possibility of having a purposeful life in this sense by providing us with many more purposes/goals to aim for.

The scientific world view entails that our lives have no purpose in sense 2, but that is not something to regret. It might even be suggested that it is incompatible with the autonomy and dignity of human beings to speak of them as having a purpose in sense 2, i.e. as existing to perform a function. For this makes it sound like we *belong* to someone else, or that we exist only *for* someone else.

“Not only does each of these versions of the purpose theory have specific problems, but they all face this shared objection: if God assigned us a purpose, then God would degrade us and thereby undercut the possibility of us obtaining meaning from fulfilling the purpose (Baier 1957, 118–20; Murphy 1982, 14–15; Singer 1996, 29). This objection goes back at least to Jean-Paul Sartre (1948, 45), and there are many replies to it in the literature that have yet to be assessed ...”

(From the Stanford Encyclopedia, “The Meaning of Life”, by Thaddeus Metz)



For these reasons Baier concludes that it is not a valid objection to the scientific world view that it entails that human life would have no meaning or purpose in any sense of that phrase that is significant.

Have Nozick/Baier refuted the religious view?

Is there any possibility that the meaning and purpose of human life could be provided by a transcendent reality?

Could we argue that, even though we don't know *how* such a reality could provide meaning, we cannot rule out the *possibility*. We can be sure that there is much about reality that we don't know, and maybe even much that we cannot now even conceive or understand. So, for all we can know, there might be some reality, whether natural or supernatural, that could be the source of meaning.

Tolstoy's answer: the role of faith

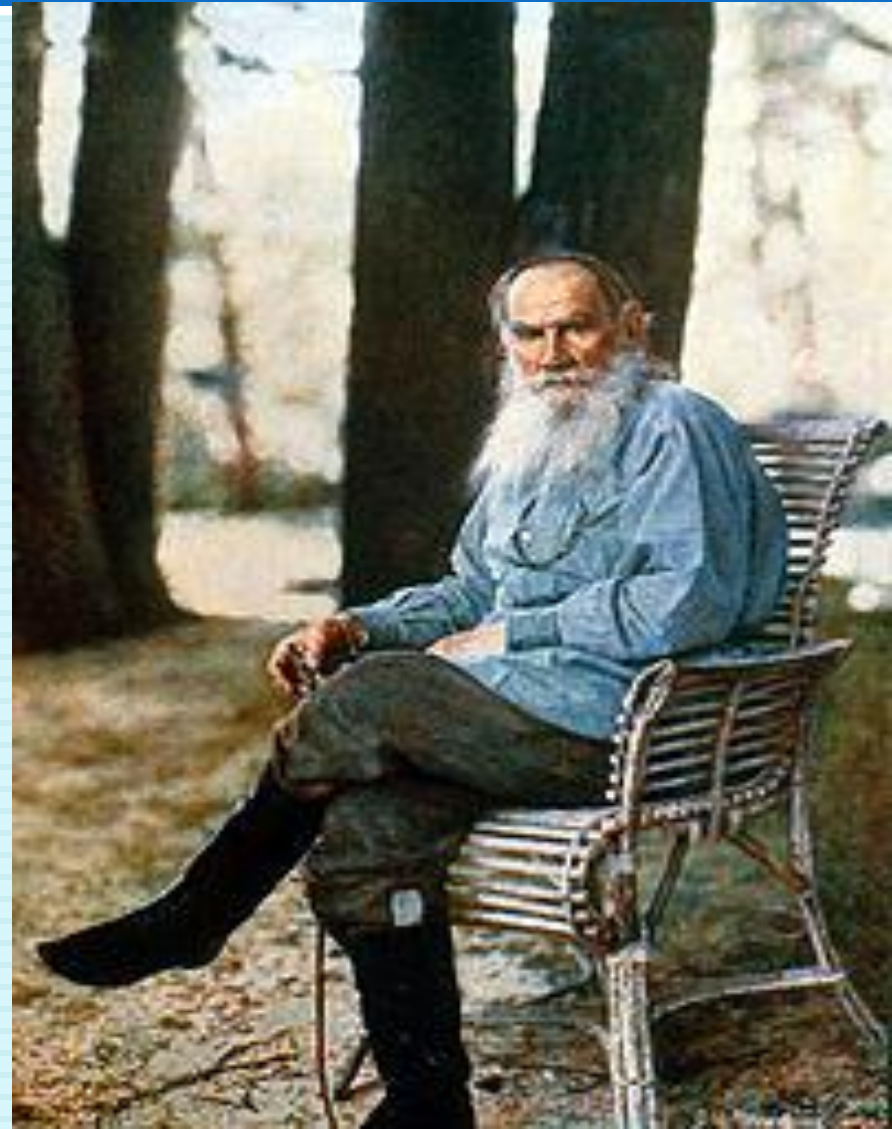
Of course, we cannot really understand *how* the supernatural, how God, would give meaning to our lives. That knowledge is inaccessible to us.

But it is here that blind faith, believing without having reasons for believing, plays a crucial role. It is faith in God that gives our lives meaning and purpose.


This is why the masses don't sense any problem about the meaning of life – they simply have faith that there is somehow meaning.

Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910)

- ❑ Born into Russian nobility
- ❑ Described as “unable and unwilling to learn”
- ❑ One of the greatest novelists in history
- ❑ Most famous works: *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*
- ❑ Advocated nonviolent anarchism in later life
- ❑ Argued that God is the only possible source of meaning and purpose for human life




“Today or tomorrow sickness and death will come (they had come already) to those I love or to me; nothing will remain but stench and worms. Sooner or later my affairs, whatever they may be, will be forgotten, and I shall not exist. Then why go on making any effort? . . .How can man fail to see this? And how go on living? That is what is surprising! One can only live while one is intoxicated with life; as soon as one is sober it is impossible not to see that it is all a mere fraud and a stupid fraud!”



“I asked: “What is the meaning of my life, beyond time, cause, and space?” And I replied to quite another question: “What is the meaning of my life within time, cause, and space?” With the result that, after long efforts of thought, the answer I reached was: “None.”

“Having understood this, I understood that it was not possible to seek in rational knowledge for a reply to my question, and that the reply given by rational knowledge is a mere indication that a reply can only be obtained by a different statement of the question and only when the relation of the finite to the infinite is included in the question. And I understood that, however irrational and distorted might be the replies given by faith, they have this advantage, that they introduce into every answer a relation between the finite and the infinite, without which there can be no solution.”



“No matter what answers faith may give, its every answer gives to the finite existence of man the sense of the infinite - a sense which is not destroyed by suffering, privation and death. Consequently, in faith alone could we find the meaning and possibility of life ... faith was the knowledge of the meaning of life, in consequence of which man did not destroy himself but lived.”

Does the religious view solve the regress problem?

“The basic idea is that for a finite condition to be meaningful, it must obtain its meaning from another condition that has meaning. So, if one's life is meaningful, it might be so in virtue of being married to a person, who is important. And, being finite, the spouse must obtain his or her importance from elsewhere, perhaps from the sort of work he or she does. And this work must obtain its meaning by being related to something else that is meaningful, and so on. A regress on meaningful finite conditions is present, and the suggestion is that the regress can terminate only in something infinite, a being so all-encompassing that it need not (indeed, cannot) go beyond itself to obtain meaning from anything else. And that is God.”

(from Thadeus Metz, “The Meaning of Life” Stanford Encyc of Phil)

Turn now to

Pojman and Craig's argument that the religious world view provides a better, more satisfying explanation of the existence and origin of the universe than the scientific world view.

And Kurt Baier's defence of the scientific world view from such objections.

The argument from explanation

Everyone agrees that scientific method has great explanatory power. Science has explained countless phenomena that could never be explained before.

Nevertheless, Pojmen and Craig both claim that scientific explanation does have certain weaknesses that limit its capacity to explain things, and that for this reason, the religious world view does a better job than science of explaining the existence of the universe.

Alleged explanatory weaknesses of the scientific world view

- Science gives only **causal** explanations, not **teleological** explanations, which limits its capacity to explain things
- Causal explanations are 2nd rate b/c they lead to a regress of explanation – as a result, nothing is ever completely explained by science.
- Science is incapable of explaining the existence of the universe as a whole, whereas religion can explain it perfectly well by reference to God.

Causal and teleological explanation

Causal explanations explain events by their causes – e.g. heat is caused by the motion of molecules, lightening is caused by an electrical discharge in the atmosphere, etc.

Teleological explanations explain events in terms of reasons – e.g. Jim went to the bank in order to withdraw some cash; you're going to university to get a better job, etc. Here things are explained by the fact that someone, or some being, had certain reasons for doing something.

A little history of science

In the Aristotelian world view, phenomena in nature were always explained, in part, teleologically b/c Aristotle thought that nature is purposive and has goals.

Why does an object soon come to rest on the surface of the earth when we throw it? Answer: B/c the natural state for a physical thing to be in is at rest at the center of the universe, which Aristotle assumed as at the center of the earth, and so the object is trying to get to the center of the universe. Modern scientists, like Galileo and Isaac Newton, in the 17th century refuted this idea that nature is permeated by purposes and goals, and so modern science *mainly* explains by causes.

Not all scientific explanation is causal

But Baier points out that it is wrong to *identify* science with causal explanation:

Rather, the aim of science is to explain things by causes when this type of explanation is correct or appropriate, and to explain things by reasons when that type of explanation is correct or appropriate. If scientists discover a large rock orbiting Venus, they will explain this by causes; if they discover a (mechanical) satellite orbiting Venus, they would explain this by the fact that someone put the satellite there, i.e., in part, teleologically.

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According to Baier, the reason why science does not explain the origin of the universe teleologically is not that it rejects the very idea of teleological explanation. The reason is b/c science does not think the origin of the universe can successfully or convincingly be explained this way. (We don't really accomplish anything by saying that God created the universe, since we now have to explain God's existence.)

What we *can* say about science is that it rejects explanation of natural phenomena by supernatural beings or forces.

Criticism: Baier's analysis is incomplete

There is much truth in what Baier is saying here about science and teleological explanation. But he does seem to overlook the fact that science does give some priority to causal versus teleological explanation:

For there is a commitment in science to the view that teleological explanations are not fundamental. That is, an explanation in terms of someone's reasons for doing something will ultimately have to be broken down into a complex causal explanation. After all, that is what cognitive science, psychology, neuroscience, and so on are hard at work trying to do.


Does causal explanation lead to a regress? Is causal explanation always incomplete?

Suppose we explain a by reference to b. But then b must be explained, so we explain it by c, but then c must be explained. No matter how far we go there will always be something left to explain. This is the regress of causal explanation.

What's worse, Pojman and Craig imply that the things earlier in the series are never fully explained until the later ones are explained. But then none of them is ever fully explained – so causal explanations are always incomplete, and therefore second rate.

Critical comments on this argument

- 1) Pojman and Craig seem to assume that teleological explanation is not open to the same objection. But it was argued above (slide 53) that teleological explanations are always incomplete, and depend on deeper causal explanation. If this is correct, then they would be open to the same objection.**



2) In general, causal explanations don't seem to be incomplete in the way described. Suppose we explain the extinction of the dinosaurs by the fact that a large asteroid struck the earth. And we explain why the asteroid hit the earth by its trajectory through the solar system. And this would have to be explained by its origin outside the solar system, which, of course, we don't know.

But, assuming the asteroid hypothesis is correct, isn't this a *complete* explanation of the extinction of dinosaurs. The fact that we can always look for deeper causes, does not undermine the explanatory value of what we already know.

Can science explain the existence of the universe as a whole?

Baier claims that science *cannot* do this on the grounds that the only possible way to do it would be by explaining how the universe came into existence from nothing, and Baier says this is impossible.

Of course, we can all appreciate why he would think this. How could anything ever come from nothing, let alone the whole universe? Even so, we should note in passing that some contemporary physicists, e.g. Stephen Hawking, claim that physics is on the verge of being able to explain how the universe sprang into existence from literally nothing at all, as a result of a quantum fluctuation in the vacuum.

No need to explain the universe as a whole

Baier's position about explaining how the universe as a whole came into existence is that there is simply no need to think this is necessary:

“The question ‘Why is there anything at all?’ looks like a perfectly sensible question modeled on ‘Why does this exist?’ or ‘How has this originated?’ It looks like a question about the origin of a thing. However, it is not such a thing, for the universe is not a thing, but the totality of things. There is therefore no reason to assume that the universe has an origin. The very assumption that it has is fraught with contradictions and absurdities.”

Baier's conclusion

In other words, Baier's position is that, although science cannot explain the origin of the universe, this is not a serious problem for, or weakness of, science for there is simply no need for any such explanation.

The God hypothesis is brought in to explain something that doesn't have to be explained, and which cannot be explained in any plausible way.

Critical comment

The view Baier is defending here is very controversial, to put it mildly.

Why not just say instead that we really don't know at present what is the correct position to take about explaining the universe as a whole, or explaining its origin. But this incompleteness in present scientific theory and explanation does not make it plausible to posit supernatural beings or forces as the way out of the problem. All it means is that further scientific investigation is needed.