



Philosophy, Science and Religion

Let us begin where all things begin – In The Beginning. Whether we are considering deep philosophical ideas, great scientific formulations or profoundly devout religious concepts we are all bound to begin at the beginning. So this evening we will start there. We will examine how each of these vast arenas of human activity deals with the greatest questions held before the mind.

This inquiry can be distilled down to three essential questions. Each of us, in our unique way, has spent a lifetime considering these questions. They shape every aspect of our lives. The way we answer them determines how we interact with others and our immediate environment. And these questions are:

- Who am I?
- What is the nature of this vast creation before me?
- What is my relationship to that creation?



These are the questions that drive all philosophic, scientific and religious activity and each of us, in our particular manner, arrives at answers to these questions which then inform the activities of our lives. So, as we proceed tonight, let me encourage you to stay open to these three questions and, if the opportunity presents itself, to appreciate how the answers that we've reached have shaped the world the we live in.

In The Beginning – how do we begin this search for meaning? Well, one possibility, and I would suggest that it is the only viable one, is that we begin,



consciously, in ourselves. That is, that we all begin with a measure of Self awareness. And from that point, as we look out, our relationship to the creation begins to formulate, based on a number of factors. These may include the clarity of our observation, our belief systems, our education and our capacity to reason. Paramount in this is whether or not we recognize that the

creation is not just physical in nature. If, in our investigations, we ignore the world of the mind, or Man's spiritual nature, then our conclusions and, therefore, the world in which we will live, will become correspondingly limited. This is the nature of ignorance – it limits our freedom, our understanding, and our capacity to fully engage the three essential questions.

So how do we employ religion, science, and philosophy as we search for meaning in the world and ourselves? Let us examine each in turn.

Religion is defined (American Heritage Dictionary) as **‘the belief in and reverence for a supernatural power or powers regarded as creator and governor of the universe and as a personal or institutionalized system grounded in such belief and worship.’** Here is another view, expressed by Sri Shantananda Saraswati who, for a significant portion of his life, was the spiritual leader for millions of Indians and who, for over thirty years, was the philosophic inspiration for this school:

“Religions are a set of rules which arise out of certain situations, based upon the physical, intellectual, and emotional parts of human nature, the society, the nation and time. All such aspects come together in some special measure in a system given by some individual for the uplift and wellbeing of his people. This is a universal phenomenon.” (Sri Shantananda Saraswati – 1978).

So, religion, in the sense described, is a system based on belief in a creator, which is rules-based and which exists at an appropriate time and place for the purpose of satisfying the deepest needs of people. Religion provides a particular world view. It helps us to make sense of the world around us. It provides an ethical framework from which we can lead our lives. The central feature in all religions is the existence of God, who is the primary cause of the creation. From this impulse flows structure. By this, I mean a set of laws which are meant to regulate life in such a way as to allow us to live in harmony with the creation and, in the end, to return us to its source. The bulk of scripture in both the east and the west is taken up with this. The ten commandments, the whole of the books of Deuteronomy, Numbers and Leviticus, the Sermon on the Mount, vast sections of the Quran, the teachings of Buddha, the Laws of Manu, are all there to refine our interactions with each other and the creation and to free us to return to the Creator. Each has served a great purpose when exercised truly in the appropriate time and place. The great religious traditions, in their purity, have helped their followers to forge and maintain a link to the unseen world of the spirit. In our modern materialistic world, however, it is easy to lose sight of that sense of longing, that desire to have the spiritual, intellectual and physical world harmonized. In her collection of essays, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Annie Dillard speaks about that growing void:

"Now we are no longer primitive. Now the whole world seems not holy. We as a people have moved from pantheism to pan-atheism. It is difficult to undo our own damage and to recall to our presence that which we have asked to leave. It is hard to desecrate a grove and change your mind. We doused the

burning bush and cannot rekindle it. We are lighting matches in vain under every green tree. Did the wind used to cry and the hills shout forth praise? Now speech has perished from among the lifeless things of the earth, and living things say very little to very few. And yet it could be that wherever there is motion there is noise, as when a whale breaches and smacks the water, and wherever there is stillness there is the small, still voice, God's speaking from the whirlwind, nature's old song and dance, the show we drove from town. What have we been doing all these centuries but trying to call God back to the mountain, or, failing that, raise a peep out of anything that isn't us? What is the different between a cathedral and a physics lab? Are they not both saying: Hello?" *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Annie Dillard.

Science is defined (American Heritage Dictionary) as ‘**The observation, identification, description, experimental investigation, and theoretical explanation of natural phenomena**’. The word itself is synonymous with knowledge. Now the vast majority of what we call knowledge has, as its foundation, the information that is provided to us through our five senses. We know where we are and we make conclusions about the world based on the evidence that these five organs of knowledge deliver. The scientist channels this knowledge through a discipline known as The Scientific Method. The method consists of four steps:

1. Observation and description of a phenomenon or group of phenomena.
2. Formulation of a hypothesis to explain the phenomena. The hypothesis often takes the form of a causal mechanism or a mathematical relation.
3. Use of the hypothesis to predict the existence of other phenomena, or to predict quantitatively the results of new observations.
4. Performance of experimental tests of the predictions by several independent experimenters and properly performed experiments.

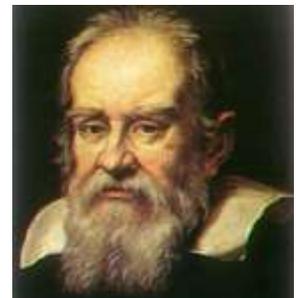
As modern science developed, particularly from the time of Galileo forward, this methodology strengthened and raised science from a sort of magical exercise to the powerful intellectual tool that we know today. We all use the method described as we try to understand our world, however, we use it selectively, sans valid experiment, reaching conclusions that are often dubious. After all, if, in NYC, it rains on the days of three successive launches of Apollo moon missions, is it reasonable to conclude that missions to the moon are directly causal to the weather on Earth? If, at dinner, I eat way too much heavy food followed by a small piece of fruit, is it reasonable to conclude that fruit is the causal element of my digestive troubles?

The world that we live in today, with its amazing wealth of material goods and the astonishing abundance of knowledge regarding the laws of nature is the direct result of the application of Man's intelligence to the second question (What is the nature of this vast creation before me?) through the instrument of the scientific method. Religion's limitation in this sphere is clear. Dependence on belief alone may provide a structure for living, but it will hinder any expansion beyond the framework of the belief. Belief can be dispelled by either acquiring another belief or by the use of reason. Science, on the other hand, is equally limited in its capacity to yield full satisfaction with respect to our three questions. Its limitation lies in the scientific method itself. The methodology of science is sensory based. That is to say that observation requires knowledge of the senses. Those senses may be extended and refined through the use of man-made instruments but, in the end, the data is still data related to the physical world. What about the world within the mind? What about the spiritual world? "Metaphysics begins where physics exhausts itself". Two quotes will serve well here, one from a scientist and another attributed by Galileo to a man of the cloth:

"Science is the tool of the Western mind and with it more doors can be opened than with bare hands. It is part and parcel of our knowledge and obscures our insight only when it holds that the understanding given by it is the only kind there is." Carl Jung

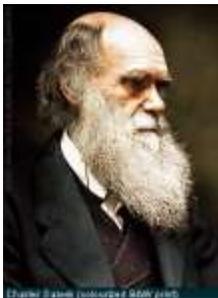
"The Bible tells us how to go to heaven, not how the heavens go." Galileo (quoting Cardinal Cesare Baronio). (Note - his inquisitors were not impressed.)

Before we move on with an examination of how the philosopher approaches our three questions, I'd like to spend a bit of time with Galileo and Darwin. Their ideas were seminal to our understanding of the world and our relationship to it. They were the source of controversy which, in Darwin's case, continues today. The controversy stemmed from a direct conflict between established religious doctrine (which was based on belief) and the application of reason through the scientific method. If one were to question your average person on the street about Galileo's trial or the conflicts engendered by the theory of evolution I think you would find that most would simply contend that science and religion are incompatible. They are, and have always been, at war with each other. Nothing could be farther from the truth. As far as the Galilean controversy goes, time doesn't allow for a full examination here but this can be said with certainty: Galileo had reached an agreement with one Cardinal Roberto Bellarmino, one of



the most prominent theologians of the day, that he could publish on the heliocentric theory, but only with conclusive proof. His proof was not conclusive and, in an important instance, inaccurate. Some years later, when ready to publish, he met with Pope Urban VIII to obtain the pope's permission to move forward. At this meeting, he deceived the pope regarding his agreement with Bellarmino. When the book appeared, the pope was furious over the deception and events unfolded from there. My point here is that the conflict was largely political with Galileo, who was irascible at best, infuriating those around him. His theory was absolutely accurate but his means of presentation left a lot to be desired.

As for the so-called 'great evolution controversy', I am barely inclined to discuss it. The controversy stems primarily from fundamentalist doctrine that was promulgated in this country in the years following World War I. The effort of religious fundamentalists to suppress Darwin's theory was, and remains, centered in their desire to have the theory of evolution excised from high school curricula. The recent debate over Intelligent Design is just another permutation of the same game. The greatest scientists in history have appreciated the inherent intelligence and beauty in the creation and, with Plato, have understood that this is a reflection of a finer, metaphysical world. No one has put it better than Albert Einstein and Isaac Newton:



"The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed." –Albert Einstein

"I must confess to a feeling of profound humility in the presence of a universe which transcends us at almost every point. I feel like a child who while playing by the seashore has found a few bright colored shells and a few pebbles while the whole vast ocean of truth stretches out almost untouched and unruffled before my eager fingers." --Sir Isaac Newton

"I have no better expression than 'religious' for this confidence in the rational nature of reality and in its being accessible, to some degree, to human reason. When this feeling is missing, science degenerates into mindless empiricism." – Albert Einstein

Unfortunately, as with so many things in our world, extremism has co-opted the words 'intelligent design' so they may be used as a hammer in an attempt to destroy a theory that has been tested through varied disciplines (chemistry,

biochemistry, geology, genetics, etc.) and which itself does not speak to anything other than development in the physical world. There is no reason to assume that evolution of species is not the product of a conscious creative process.

Unfortunately, few prominent theologians are familiar enough with the current state of biology to speak to this with confidence. The most important exception to this came from none other than Pope John Paul II in his message to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences in 1996. He stated that:

“Today, fresh knowledge has led to the recognition that evolution is more than a hypothesis. It is indeed remarkable that this theory has been progressively accepted by researchers, following a series of discoveries in various fields of knowledge. The convergence, neither sought nor fabricated, of the results of work that was conducted independently is in itself a significant argument in favor of this theory.” --Pope John Paul II

Pope John Paul was, among other things, a classically educated philosopher who did not use words lightly. When he uses the word ‘theory’, he is using it with its full philosophic and scientific weight: **A set of statements or principles devised to explain a group of facts or phenomena, especially one that has been repeatedly tested or is widely accepted and can be used to make predictions about natural phenomena.**” This is a far cry from the fundamentalist perspective which, drawing on the calculations of the seventeenth-century Irish bishop, James Ussher, claims to prove that creation took place on Sunday, the 23rd of October, 4004 B.C.



Sometimes, when dealing with a thorny issue, we encounter a point of view which runs as follows: “I believe what I believe because I believe it! That’s just the way it is, so don’t waste your breath!” In these circumstances, I am compelled to accept that further conversation is indeed a waste of breath. For those who simply close their minds to the weight of evidence and reason, there is nothing to say.

Finally, we come to philosophy. How does philosophy guide us as we engage in our three questions? The simplest definition of philosophy comes from the word itself. Philosophy is “the love of wisdom”. Wisdom is defined (American Heritage Dictionary) as **‘the ability to discern or judge what is true, right, or lasting; insight.’** The last word of this definition is particularly illuminating. Insight is the

capacity to look within an event or ourselves as we discern what is true, right or lasting. It is here that the world of the observer and the object of observation are unified in truth. The philosopher is engaged in an investigation whose sole aim is harmony of the inner and outer worlds. Witness Immanuel Kant:

“Two things fill me with constantly increasing admiration and awe, the longer and more earnestly I reflect on them: the starry heavens without and the Moral Law within.” –Immanuel Kant

And consider St. Augustine. Born in North Africa in 354 A.D. to a pagan father and a Christian mother, he rejected religion at a young age and instead took up the study of philosophy. He was schooled in the works of Plato and the neo-Platonists, the Stoics, Aristotle and Cicero among others. He was eventually baptized in 387, eventually becoming a priest and then a bishop. He wrote prolifically until his death in 430. Out of his own work in philosophy and religion come four essential points:

1. There is a unity of truth. There is not one truth for philosophy, one for science and one for religion.
2. The Book of Scripture and the Book of Nature are equally valid. In one of his sermons, St. Augustine says, “Let the Bible be a book for you so that you may hear it. Let the sphere of the world be also a book for you so that you may see it.”
3. Both books require careful interpretation. Contradictions arise from incorrect interpretation. The Book of Nature can be difficult to interpret. Proper understanding of the bible is even more difficult.
4. Interpretation of biblical passages must be informed by the current state of demonstrable knowledge.



For philosophy, the investigation begins from rest; a rest to be found deep within one's being. For the philosopher, there is neither acceptance or rejection of a viewpoint. Rather, one is willing and open to testing concepts, hypotheses and principles in the present moment. That testing is the measure of one's willingness to step outside of dogma and time-worn precepts which may have been valid for others but which remain mere words for us. It is the meeting of observer and object of observation, under the conscious light of one's own being that transforms mere words into a living, breathing immediacy. It is this realization, this fusion of information and being that yields the knowledge of who we are, what the nature of the creation is, and what our relationship to the creation is.

Addendum: BioLogos

1. The universe came into being out of nothingness, approximately 14 billion years ago.
2. Despite massive improbabilities, the properties of the universe appear to have been precisely tuned for life.
3. While the precise mechanism of the origin of life on earth remains unknown, once life arose, the process of evolution and natural selection permitted the development of biological diversity and complexity over very long periods of time.
4. Once evolution got under way, no special supernatural intervention was required.
5. Humans are part of this process, sharing a common ancestor with the great apes.
6. But humans are also unique in ways that defy evolutionary explanation and point to our spiritual nature. This includes the existence of the Moral Law (the knowledge of right and wrong) and the search for God that characterizes all human cultures throughout history

Francis S. Collins, “The Language of God”