

Answering the Big Questions of Life

Sue Bohlin presents a Naturalistic, a Pantheistic, and a Christian perspective on the five major questions all of us should ask about life. Knowing the answers to these questions is critical to living a meaningful, fulfilling life on this earth. She concludes by demonstrating that only a Christian worldview provides consistent answers to all of these questions.



This article is also available in [Spanish](#).

One of the most important aspects of Probe's "Mind Games" conference is teaching students to recognize the three major world views—Naturalism, Pantheism, and Theism—and the impact they have both on the surrounding culture as well as on the ideas the students will face at the university. Because we come from an unapologetically Christian worldview, I will be presenting the ideas of Christian theism, even though Judaism and Islam are both theistic as well.

In this essay I'll be examining five of the biggest questions of life, and how each of the worldviews answers them:

- Why is there something rather than nothing?
- How do you explain human nature?
- What happens to a person at death?
- How do you determine right and wrong?
- How do you know that you know?[\[1\]](#)

Why Is There Something Rather than Nothing?

The most basic question of life may well be, **Why is there something rather than nothing?** Why am I here? Why is anything

here at all?

Even Maria Von Trapp in the movie *The Sound of Music* knew the answer to this one. When she and the Captain are singing their love to each other in the gazebo, she croons, "Nothing comes from nothing, nothing ever could."

But naturalism, the belief that says there is no reality beyond the physical universe, offers two answers to this basic question. Until a few years ago, the hopeful wish of naturalism was that matter is eternal: the universe has always existed, and always will. There's no point to asking "why" because the universe simply *is*. End of discussion. Unfortunately for naturalism, the evidence that has come from our studies of astronomy makes it clear that the universe is unwinding, in a sense, and at one point it was tightly wound up. The evidence says that at some point in the past there *was* a beginning, and matter is most definitely not eternal. That's a major problem for a naturalist, who believes that everything that now is, came from nothing. First there was nothing, then there was something, but nothing caused the something to come into existence. Huh?

Pantheism is the belief that everything is part of one great "oneness." It comes from two Greek words, *pan* meaning "everything," and *theos* meaning "God." Pantheism says that all is one, all is god, and therefore we are one with the universe; we are god. We are part of that impersonal divinity that makes up the universe. In answering the question, **why is there something rather than nothing**, pantheism says that everything had an impersonal beginning. The universe itself has an intelligence that brought itself into being. The "something" that exists is simply how energy expresses itself. If you've seen the *Star Wars* movies, you've seen the ideas of pantheism depicted in that impersonal energy field, "The Force." Since the beginning of the universe had an impersonal origin, the question of "why" gets sidestepped. Like naturalism, pantheism basically says, "We don't have a good

answer to that question, so we won't think about it."

Christian Theism is the belief that God is a personal, transcendent Creator of the universe—and of us. This worldview showed up on a T-shirt I saw recently:

"There are two things in life you can be sure of.

1. There is a God.
2. You are not Him."

Christian Theism answers the question, **Why is there something rather than nothing**, by confidently asserting that first there was God and nothing else, then He created the universe by simply speaking it into existence. The Bible's opening sentence is an answer to this most basic of questions: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth."

How Do You Explain Human Nature?

Another one of the big questions of life is, **How do you explain human nature?** Why do human beings act the way we do? What it really boils down to is, Why am I so good and you're so bad?

During World War II, a young Jewish teenager kept a journal during the years she and her family hid from the Nazis in a secret apartment in a house in Amsterdam. Anne Frank's diary poignantly explored the way she tried to decide if people were basically good or basically evil. Acts of kindness and blessing seemed to indicate people were basically good; but then the next day, Anne would learn of yet another barbarous act of depravity and torture, and she would think that perhaps people were basically bad after all. After reading her diary, I remember carrying on the quest for an answer in my own mind, and not finding it until I trusted Christ and learned what His Word had to say about it.

Naturalism says that humans are nothing more than evolved social animals. There is nothing that truly separates us from the other animals, so all our behavior can be explained in terms of doing what helps us to survive and reproduce. Your only purpose in life, naturalism says, is to make babies. And failing that, to help those who share your genes to make babies. Kind of makes you want to jump out of bed in the morning, doesn't it?

Another answer from naturalism is that we are born as blank slates, and we become whatever is written on those slates. You might mix in some genetic factors, in which case human nature is nothing more than a product of our genes and our environment.

Pantheism explains human nature by saying we're all a part of god, but our problem is that we forget we're god. We just need to be re- educated and start living like the god we are. Our human nature will be enhanced by attaining what pantheists call "cosmic consciousness." According to New Age thought, the problem with humans is that we suffer from a collective form of metaphysical amnesia. We just need to wake up and remember we're god. When people are bad, (which is one result of forgetting you're god), pantheism says that they'll pay for it in the next life when they are reincarnated as something less spiritually evolved than their present life. I had a Buddhist friend who refused to kill insects in her house because she said they had been bad in their previous lives and had to come back as bugs, and it wasn't her place to prematurely mess up their karma.

The Christian worldview gives the most satisfying answer to the question, **How do you explain human nature?** The Bible teaches that God created us to be His image-bearers, which makes us distinct from the entire rest of creation. But when Adam and Eve chose to rebel in disobedience, their fall into sin distorted and marred the sacred Image. The fact that we are created in God's image explains the noble, creative,

positive things we can do; the fact that we are sinners who love to disobey and rebel against God's rightful place as King of our lives explains our wicked, destructive, negative behavior. It makes sense that this biblical view of human nature reveals the reasons why mankind is capable of producing both Mother Teresa and the holocaust.

What Happens after Death?

In the movie *Flatliners*, medical students took turns stopping each other's hearts to give them a chance to experience what happens after death. After a few minutes, they resuscitated the metaphysical traveller who told the others what he or she saw. The reason for pursuing such a dangerous experiment was explained by the med student who thought it up in the first place: **"What happens after death?** Mankind deserves an answer. Philosophy failed; religion failed. Now it's up to the physical sciences."

Well, maybe religion failed, but the Lord Jesus didn't. But first, let's address how naturalism answers this question.

Because this worldview says that there is nothing outside of space, time and energy, naturalism insists that death brings the extinction of personality and the disorganization of matter. Things just stop living and start decomposing. Or, as my brother said when he was in his atheist phase, "When you die, you're like a dog by the side of the road. You're dead, and that's it." To the naturalist, there is no life after death. The body recycles back to the earth and the mental and emotional energies that comprised the person disintegrate forever.

Pantheism teaches reincarnation, the belief that all of life is an endless cycle of birth and death. After death, each person is reborn as someone, or something, else. Your reincarnated persona in the next life depends on how you live during this one. This is the concept of karma, which is the

law of cause and effect in life. If you make evil or foolish choices, you will have to work off that bad karma by being reborn as something like a rat or a cow. If you're really bad, you might come back as a termite. But if you're good, you'll come back as someone who can be wonderful and powerful. New Age followers sometimes undergo something they call "past lives therapy," which regresses them back beyond this life, beyond birth, and into previous lives. I think it's interesting that people always seem to have been someone glamorous like Cleopatra and never someone like a garbage collector or an executioner!

Christian Theism handles the question, **What happens to a person at death**, with such a plain, no-nonsense answer that people have been stumbling over it for millenia. Death is a gateway that either whisks a person to eternal bliss with God or takes him straight to a horrible place of eternal separation from God. What determines whether one goes to heaven or hell is the way we respond to the light God gives us concerning His Son, Jesus Christ. When we confess that we are sinners in need of mercy we don't deserve, and trust the Lord Jesus to save us from not only our sin but the wrath that sin brings to us, He comes to live inside us and take us to heaven to be with Him forever when we die. When we remain in rebellion against God, either actively disobeying Him or passively ignoring Him, the consequences of our sin remain on us and God allows us to keep them for all eternity—but separated from Him and all life and hope. It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Hebrews 10:31). But it is a delightful thing to fall into the arms of the Lover of your soul, Who has gone on ahead to prepare a place for you! Which will you choose?

How Do You Determine Right and Wrong?

One of the big questions in life is, How do you determine right and wrong? Steven Covey, author of *Seven Habits of*

Highly Effective People, appeared on the Oprah Winfrey show one day. He asked the studio audience to close their eyes and point north. When they opened their eyes, there were several hundred arms pointing in wildly different directions. Then Mr. Covey pulled out a compass and said, “*This* is how we know which way is north. You can’t know from within yourself.” He used a powerful object lesson to illustrate the way Christian theism answers this big question in life.

Naturalism says that there is no absolute outside of ourselves. There is no final authority because space, time and energy are all that is. There is no such thing as right and wrong because there is no right- and wrong-giver. So naturalism tries to deal with the question of ethics by providing several unsatisfying answers. One is the belief that there is no free choice, that all our behaviors and beliefs are driven by our genes. We are just as determined in our behavior as the smallest animals or insects. Another is the belief that moral values are determined from what is; the way things are is the way they ought to be. If you are being abused by your husband, that’s the way things are, so that’s the way they ought to be. Even worse is the concept of arbitrary ethics: might makes right. Bullies get to decide the way things ought to be because they’re stronger and meaner than everybody else. That’s what happens in totalitarian regimes; the people with the power decide what’s right and what’s wrong.

Pantheism says that there is no such thing as ultimate right and wrong because everything is part of a great undifferentiated whole where right and wrong, good and evil, are all part of the oneness of the universe. Remember “Star Wars”? The Force was both good and evil at the same time. Pantheism denies one of the basic rules of philosophy, which is that two opposite things cannot both be true at the same time. Because Pantheism denies that there are absolutes, things which are true all the time, it holds that all right

and wrong is relative. Right and wrong are determined by cultures and situations. So murdering one's unborn baby might be right for one person and wrong for another.

Theism says that there is such a thing as absolute truth, and absolute right and wrong. We can know this because this information has come to us from a transcendent source outside of ourselves and outside of our world. Christian Theism says that the God who created us has also communicated certain truths to us. He communicated generally, through His creation, and He communicated specifically and understandably through His Word, the Bible. We call this revelation. Christian Theism says that absolute truth is rooted in God Himself, who is an Absolute; He is Truth. As Creator, He has the right to tell us the difference between right and wrong, and He has taken great care to communicate this to us.

That's why Steven Covey's illustration was so powerful. When he pulled out a compass, he showed that we need a transcendent source of information, something outside ourselves and which is fixed and constant, to show us the moral equivalent of "North." We are creatures created to be dependent on our Creator for the information we need to live life right. God has given us a compass in revelation.

How Do You Know That You Know?

This question generally doesn't come up around the cafeteria lunch table at work, and even the most inquisitive toddler usually won't ask it, but it's an important question nonetheless: How do you know that you know?

There's a great scene in the movie *Terminator 2* where the young boy that the cyborg terminator has been sent to protect, is threatened by a couple of hoodlums. The terminator is about to blow one away when the young boy cries out, "You can't do that!" The terminator—Arnold Schwarzenegger—asks, "Why not?" "You just can't go around killing people!" the boy protests.

“Why not?” “Take my word for it,” the boy says. “You just can’t.” He knew that it was wrong to kill another human being, but he didn’t know how he knew. There are a lot of people in our culture like that!

Naturalism, believing that there is nothing beyond space, time and energy, would answer the question by pointing to the human mind. Rational thought—figuring things out deductively—is one prime way we gain knowledge. Human reason is a good enough method to find out what we need to know. The mind is the center of our source of knowledge. Another way to knowledge is by accumulating hard scientific data of observable and measurable experience. This view says that the source of our knowledge is found in the senses. We know what we can perceive through what we can measure. Since naturalism denies any supernaturalism (anything above or outside of the natural world), what the human mind can reason and measure is the only standard for gaining knowledge.

Pantheism would agree with this assessment of how we know that we know. Followers of pantheism tend to put a lot of value on personal experience. The rash of near- and after-death experiences in the past few years, for example, are extremely important to New Agers. These experiences usually validate the preconceptions of pantheistic thought, which denies absolutes such as the Christian tenet that Jesus is the only way to God. The experiences of past-lives therapy have persuaded even some Christians to believe in reincarnation, even though the Bible explicitly denies that doctrine, because personal experience is often considered the most valid way to know reality.

Christian Theism says that while human reason and perception are legitimate ways to gain knowledge, we cannot depend on these methods alone because they’re not enough. Some information needs to be given to us from outside the system. An outside Revealer provides information we can’t get any other way. Revelation—revealed truth from the One who knows

everything—is another, not only legitimate but necessary way to know some important things. Revelation is how we know what happened when the earth, the universe and man were created. Revelation is how we know what God wants us to do and be. Revelation is how we can know how the world will end and what heaven is like. Revelation in the form of the Lord Jesus Christ is the only way we can experience “God with skin on.”

Naturalism’s answers are inadequate, depressing, and wrong; pantheism’s answers are slippery, don’t square with reality, and wrong; but Christian theism—the Christian worldview—is full of hope, consistent with reality, and it resonates in our souls that it’s very, very right.

Notes

1. These questions are taken from James W. Sire’s book *The Universe Next Door* (Downers Grove, Ill.:InterVarsity Press), 1977.

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