

The Relevance of Christianity: An Apologetic

Rick Wade develops and defends the relevancy of Christianity, encouraging believers to find points of contact with an unbelieving world.

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

Christianity and Human Experience

In his book, *Intellectuals Don't Need God and Other Modern Myths*, theologian Alister McGrath tells about his friend's stamp-collecting hobby. His friend, he says, "is perfectly capable of telling me everything I could possibly want to know about the watermarks of stamps issued during the reign of Queen Victoria by the Caribbean islands of Trinidad and Tobago. And while I have no doubt about the truth of what he is telling me, I cannot help but feel that it is an utter irrelevance to my life."[\[1\]](#)

Christianity strikes many people the same way, McGrath says. They simply see no need for a religion that is 2000 years old and has had its day. How is it relevant to them?

One of the duties of Christian apologetics is that of making a case for the faith. We can prepare ourselves for such opportunities by memorizing many facts about our faith, such as evidences for the reliability of the Bible and the truth of the resurrection. We can learn logical arguments such as those for the existence of God or the logical consistency of Christian doctrines. While these are important components, such things can seem very remote from people today. They will not do much good in our apologetics if people are not listening.

This is why some Christian thinkers are now saying that before

we can show Christianity to be *credible*, we must first make it *plausible*. In other words, we must get people's attention first by bringing Christianity—at least in *their* thinking—into the position of being possibly true.[{2}](#) We need to find those points of contact with people that will encourage them to want to listen.

Why do we need to begin at such a basic level? A few reasons come to mind. First, many people think religion has nothing important to say regarding our public activities. So, in our daily lives religion is only allowed a minor role at best. This attitude quickly affects how we view our private lives as well. Second, many people hold that science is the only worthwhile source of meaningful knowledge. This often—although not necessarily—leads to a naturalistic worldview or at least causes people to think like naturalists. Scientism and naturalism seem to go hand-in-hand. Thus, in order to get a person's attention, the first step we might need to take is to show him how Christianity applies to his life's experience.[{3}](#)

Even though we are physically better off because of our scientific knowledge applied through various technologies, are we better off all around than before we had such things? I am not deriding the benefit of science and technology; I am simply wondering about our spiritual and moral health. Our society is trying to find itself. This is clearly seen in current debates over important ethical and social issues. At the root of our culture wars is the question, Who are we, and what are we to be about? The age-old questions continue to haunt us: Where did I come from? Why am I here? What am I supposed to be doing? Where am I going? With the loss of his exalted place in the universe following the loss of a Christian world view, man now wonders what his place is. Am I significant in a universe that sees me as just one more piece of cosmic dust? Is there any intrinsic meaning to my existence? Or must I determine for myself what my place and role will be?

In addition to apologetic arguments from logic and factual evidence, we should also be prepared to answer questions such as these. We need to let people know that in Christ are found answers to the major issues of life. By doing this, we can engage people where they really live. We can show them that God is not some abstract force separated from the concerns of life, but “is intimately related to personal and human needs.”^{4} As one writer put it, “God must be shown to be necessitated or justified by *practical* or *existential* thinking.”^{5}

In this article I will address these three issues: meaning, morality, and hope.^{7} offers and contrast it with the Christian view.

The Matter of Meaning

Let us begin with the matter of *meaning*. The question What is the meaning of life? might not be one which most people give serious attention to. But a similar question is often heard, namely, What’s the *point*? When we look for the significance or the point of our activities, we are wondering about their meaning. Reflective individuals carry this idea further, wondering What’s the point—or what is the *meaning*—of it *all*? Although many people would argue that life *has* no ultimate meaning, most people seem to expect it to. We search for it in creativity, in helping others, in “finding ourselves,” and in a variety of other ways.

The question of meaning encompasses other questions: Where did I come from? What is the significance of the experiences of my life? What is my overall purpose, and what should I be doing? Where is all this heading?

The prevailing view in the West today, for all practical purposes, is naturalism. This is not only the prevailing philosophy on college campuses, but we have all been encouraged by the successes of science to believe that if

something is not scientific, it is not reliable. Since science investigates the natural order, we tend to see nature as all that is really important, or even as all that exists. This is called scientific reductionism.

However, the scientific method is capable of dealing only with quantitative matters: How much? How big? How far? How fast? Philosopher Huston Smith has argued that, for all the achievements of science, it is incapable of speaking to such important issues as values, purpose, meaning, and quality.[\[8\]](#)

This focus on science is not meant to pick on this discipline, but to point out that science cannot give answers to some of the major issues of life. Moreover, if we go so far as to adopt naturalism as a world view, we are really in a bind, for naturalism *has* no answers to give, at least to the question of ultimate meaning. Naturalism says there was no purpose for our coming into being; the only meaning we can have now is that which we superimpose on our own lives; and we are all just going back to the dust. If the universe is just a chance accident in space and time; if living beings intrinsically are nothing more than just so many molecules, no matter how marvelously arranged; if human beings are merely cousins to trees, trapped on a planet caught somewhere “between immensity and eternity,” as Carl Sagan said; then there is no meaning to life that we ourselves do not give to it. Being finite, we are by nature incapable of providing ultimate meaning.

If we should seek to establish our *own* meanings, what is to guide us? By what shall we measure such things? What if that which is meaningful to me is offensive to you? Furthermore, what if the goals we pursue are not capable of bearing the meaning we try to put into them? Many people strive to move up the ladder, to attain the power and prestige that they think will fulfill them, only to find that it's not all it's cracked up to be. The possession of material goods defines many of our lives. But how much is enough? Does the one with the most toys when he dies really win? Or, as some have said, is it simply

that the one who dies with the most toys . . . still dies?

Thus, there is no ultimate meaning in a universe without God, and our attempts at providing our own limited meanings often leave us looking for more.

If naturalism is true, we should be able to shake off the fantasies of our past and give up worrying about questions of ultimate meaning. However, we continue to look for something bigger than ourselves, something that will give our lives meaning. Christianity provides the explanation. We are drawn toward the One who created us and imbues our lives with meaning as part of His purposes. We are significant in ourselves because He made us, and there is meaning in our daily activities because that is the context in which we work out His ambitions for us and our world. Recognizing the true God opens to us the reality of value and meaning. The meaning of life is found when we find our place in God's world.

The Matter of Morality

In his book, *Can Man Live Without God*, apologist Ravi Zacharias makes this bold assertion: "Antitheism provides every reason to be immoral and is bereft of any objective point of reference with which to condemn any choice. Any antitheist who lives a moral life merely lives better than his or her philosophy warrants."[\[9\]](#) What a bold thing to say! Is Zacharias saying that all atheists (or antitheists, as he calls them) are immoral? Not at all. But he is saying that atheism itself makes no provision for fixed moral standards.

One very important aspect of being human is morality. A basic understanding of the concept of right and wrong or good and bad is fixed in our nature. We constantly evaluate actions and events—and even people—as good or bad or, in some cases, neither. These are moral evaluations. They are significant for our personal choices, and they are critical to our participation in society.

In our culture today naturalism is the reigning public philosophy. Even if many people claim to believe in God, practical naturalism (or atheism) is the rule of the day. Regarding morality, the general attitude seems to be that there is no moral code to which we all are subject. We say in effect, I'll choose my morality, and you choose yours. But if Zacharias is correct, naturalism (or atheism) provides no solid foundation even for personal morality.

The question we might pose to an atheist (which could be directed at a practical atheist as well) is this: How do you justify your own actions? To that question the atheist could simply answer that he has need no for justification apart from his own desires and needs. While I think it is possible to argue that naturalism cannot be trusted to provide a moral compass—even for one's own needs—we can bring the real issue to the fore more quickly by asking two questions: How do you justify your moral outrage at the actions of others in any given instance? and, Do you expect others to take your objections seriously? To expect someone to take my objections to his behavior seriously, I must presuppose a moral standard that stands in authority above us all, unless, of course, I think that I *myself* am that standard. But what does that do to his right to determine his *own* morality? The atheist sometimes wants to have it both ways. He wants to be his own standard-maker. But is he willing to give this privilege to others?

Now, some atheist might respond that, of course, as a culture we have to have laws in order to live together peacefully. Individuals are not free to do anything they please; they have to obey the laws of society. The well-known humanist philosopher Paul Kurtz believes that "education, reason, science and democratic methods of persuasion" are adequate for establishing our norms.[\[10\]](#) But there are educated people who hold different beliefs. Intelligent reason has led people to different conclusions. Science can not instruct us in morality. And in a society where there are a variety of

opinions about what is right and wrong, how do we know which opinion is correct? Simple majority rule? Sometimes the minority is in the right, as the issue of civil rights has shown. No, Kurtz's reason, education, science, and democracy will not do by themselves. They need to be informed by a higher law.

Besides all this, Kurtz has certain presupposed ideas about the proper end of our laws. For example, does furthering the human race mean giving everyone an equal opportunity? Or does it mean joining with Hitler and seeking to exterminate the weak and inferior?

Naturalism provides no transcendent law that stands over all people at all times to which we can appeal to establish a moral order. Nor is there a solid basis upon which to complain when we are wronged. Christianity, on the other hand, *does* provide a transcendent moral structure and specific moral laws that serve to both restrain us and protect us.

When the question of morality arises, atheists will often offer the rebuttal that Christian morality is apparently not sufficient to lead people into the "good life" because Christians have done some terrible things to other people {and to each other) over the years. While it is true that Christians have done some terrible things, there is nothing in Christianity that requires it, and there are definite commands not to do such things. The Christian who does evil goes against the religion he or she professes. The atheist, however, can justify almost any kind of activity since man becomes the measure of all things. Again, this does not mean that all or even most atheists lead blatantly immoral lives. It just means that they have no fixed point of reference by which to establish laws or to condemn the actions of others.

Christianity not only provides a moral structure and specific moral laws, it also provides for the power to do what is right. The atheist is left on his own to do what is right.

Those who submit to God also have the Spirit to enable them to obey God's moral law.

There is turmoil in our society today as we try to decide all over again what is good and what is evil. In our encounters with non-believers, by tapping into the need we all have for a moral structure suitable for both our preservation and our betterment, we can pave the way for their consideration of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Matter of Hope

You have likely heard the expression "hope against hope." It refers to those times when there is no hope in sight, yet we keep on hoping anyway. There is something within us—most of us, anyway—which continues to see some possibility for good beyond a present crisis, or at least causes us to long for it.

As we consider the role human experience can play in apologetics, we should give serious attention to the question of hope because it quickly finds a home in our souls. Few of us have absolutely no hope. What worse state can we imagine than to have no hope at all? What we are more likely to see than no hope at all is hope in things that are not worthy. Nonetheless, the presence of hope in the darkest of places is something with which we are all familiar.

Nowadays, however, hope seems to be in short supply. In spite of all the glorious advances made in a number of areas of life, there is a prevailing mood of unease. Americans seem to be scrambling for something in which to put their confidence for the future.

For centuries the Western world found its hope in God, the One who was working out His purposes toward a glorious end. But by the early part of this century, naturalism had taken hold of the academy and then our social consciousness as well.

From there, people went in different directions in their

thinking. Secular humanists took the optimistic route and declared their hope in mankind. They continue to do so in spite of the fact that, in this “enlightened” era, our means of advancing the cause of humanity include aborting the unborn and helping the desperate kill themselves. Education, reason, science, and democracy—the gods of humanism—have yet to give us any real cause for hope.

Other people have grown cynical. With nothing more to hope in than what they see around them, they have lost faith in everything. They do not trust anyone anymore; they doubt that anyone can be truly virtuous; and they have simply settled into hopelessness. {11} Still others of a more philosophical bent have been drawn to atheistic existentialism, the philosophy of despair, which declares that God is dead and with Him that in which we once put our hope.{12}

A good illustration of someone trying to find something positive in the loss of hope in the Christian God is found in Albert Camus’ novel, *The Stranger*.{13} The protagonist, Meursault, winds up in jail for the senseless murder of a man on a beach. After his trial, as he is awaiting either an appeal or his execution, Meursault is visited by a chaplain who tries to get him to confess belief in God. Meursault informs him that he does not have much time left, “and [he] wasn’t going to waste it on God.”{14} Meursault angrily rejects all the priest says. He believes that the fate of death to which everyone is subject levels out everything people believe. One action is as good as another; one way of life is as good as another.

After the priest leaves and Meursault has slept for awhile, he says this as he considers his fate:

[I] felt ready to start life all over again. It was as if that great gush of anger had washed me clean, emptied me of hope, and, gazing up at the dark sky spangled with its signs and stars, for the first time, the first, I laid my heart

open to the benign indifference of the universe. {15}

If there is no God out there, the best we can do is accept the reality of our nothingness, and begin to make of ourselves whatever we can. Like the bumper sticker I once saw which read, "I've been much happier since I gave up hope." Previously Meursault had admitted being afraid, and he had betrayed his own humanity when, after coolly thinking about how death comes to everyone, and how it really does not matter when or how one dies, the thought of a possible appeal brought a sudden rush of joy through his body and brought tears to his eyes.{16} Now he bravely faces a universe that does not care, and he feels free.

If anyone ever truly feels this way in real life, that person is the exception rather than the rule. The word *hopeless* has negative connotations; we do not normally think of it as a positive thing. The atheistic existentialist must go against what appears to be the norm to achieve this state of happiness in the face of a purposeless universe.

Of course, not all atheists will opt for Camus' philosophy. To some extent, hope for the fulfillment of our various earthly ambitions fits in with a naturalistic worldview. A boy can practice his swing with the hope of doing better in the batter's box. A woman with the hope of getting married can very likely see that hope fulfilled. A man may get that promotion he hopes for by working hard. Yet frequently people find that what they had hoped for fails to provide the fulfillment they expected.

And what about hope for the future? Is there anything to hope for after death? When old age creeps up and the elderly man reviews his life, is there any hope that something will come of all the labors and heartaches and wins and losses of his life? Was it all leading somewhere? The most naturalism can allow is that our lives might benefit others. But naturalism

cannot of itself undergird such a hope. An impersonal universe offers no rewards. And no one can predict what the next generation will do with one's efforts. Besides, we might wonder why we should worry about the benefit of others who, like ourselves, are just pieces of cosmic dust. To take this even further, naturalism can just as easily allow for the destruction of the weak and the development of a master race as it can for an altruistic attitude toward all people.

Of course, naturalism has nothing beyond the grave to offer the individual him- or herself. There is no culmination, no reward, no "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matt. 25:21). You live, you do your best (according to your own standards, of course), and you die.

Yet, we continue to hope. I wonder if the "hope [that] springs eternal" is rooted within us in that "eternity" which is "set . . . in the hearts of men" (Eccl. 3:11)? Or, maybe it stems from the knowledge we all have of Deity, even though that knowledge might be warped by sin. An inescapable awareness of something transcendent continually draws us upward.

Christianity holds that the psychological reality of hope, and the content of hope that does not fail, is found in Jesus who is our hope (1 Tim. 1:1). Let us look at that in more detail.

The Answer Found in Jesus

One of the great benefits of addressing the matters of meaning, morality, and hope in Christian apologetics is that they take us right into the Gospel message. Our meaning is rooted in the personal God who created us and is actively involved in our affairs. Lasting, objective moral values to which we all are accountable and which serve to protect us find their source in God's nature and will. And hope is what He sent His Son to give us along with forgiveness and new life and a host of other things.

Before looking at these issues more closely, I should address a couple of potential objections to bringing human experience into apologetics. One objection is that the apologist can quickly fall into *selling* the faith by an appeal to the felt needs of consumeristic Americans. Such needs are not always valid.

Another objection is that such matters are subjective. To appeal to them is to become trapped in matters that are at best non-rational and at worst irrational. Our consideration of Christianity should not be based upon such flimsy foundations.

These problems can be avoided by concentrating on those aspects of our experience which are universally shared. Someone has called these "objective-subjective" matters. That is, they are subjective matters of a kind shared by all of us by virtue of our membership in the human race. The desire for moral order is something felt inwardly, but it is a universal need. Faith is subjective, but the disposition to believe is a universal one. Personal meaning also is an inward desire, but it is one we all have.

Let us consider now the answers the Bible gives to the questions we're considering.

Remember that one of the questions encompassed by the question of meaning is, Where did I come from? In John 1:1-3, Colossians 1:16-17, and Hebrews 1:2 we learn that we were created by God through Jesus. Furthermore, we learn from the examples of David and Jeremiah that God created us and knows us individually (Ps. 139:13-16; Jer. 1:5). Unless we are prepared to argue that we were made on a whim or maybe just for sport—and nothing in Scripture indicates that God does anything like that—we must conclude that He made us for a purpose.

The question, Is there meaning in the experiences of daily

life?, is answered by the understanding that God is working out His own purposes in our lives (Phil. 2:12-13; Rom. 8:28; 9:11,17; Eph. 1:11).

Finally, to the questions, What is my purpose? and What should I be doing?, Scripture teaches that I am to obey God's moral precepts (Jn. 14:23,24; 1 Jn. [entire book]), and that I am to participate in God's work by doing the things He has given me to do in particular (Jn. 13:12-17; Eph. 2:10; 1 Pe. 4:10).

Regarding morality, the noble acts of people and the ravages of war are understandable in light of our being created in God's image, on the one hand, and corrupted by sin, on the other. Although we typically do not think of Jesus as the law-giver as much as the exemplar of moral goodness, this is not to say that He does not Himself define for us what is good. Being fully God He shares the moral perfection of God the Father. He also created us as moral creatures and planted in us the awareness of right and wrong. Furthermore, His central position in the plan of redemption—which was put into effect because of our sin-induced estrangement from God—makes Him a focal point in the matter of good and evil. Thus, in Jesus is found an understanding of our consciousness of sin and judgment as well as the solution to the crucial issue of guilt and forgiveness.

This is all too often forgotten in evangelical witness today. One theologian has noted that the central theme of the Gospel is no longer justification by faith, but the new life. But people know that they do wrong, and they want to have the burden of guilt lifted. Many do this by denying any kind of universal morality. All they have to do to maintain a clear conscience, they think, is to be "true" to themselves. But in practice this does not work. We react negatively when an individual who is being "true" to himself does something mean to us. We also know that others are justified in objecting to our actions that are hurtful to them. Our moral outrage at the actions and words of others betrays our sense that there is a

moral law that transcends us. Naturalism has no means of dealing with all this, but Jesus does.

I have already touched on the important place that hope occupies in the Christian life. We have something specific to hope for, and in our walk with Christ we can experience hope on the psychological level.

For the apostles Paul and Peter, hope finds its objective focal point in the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 23:6; 24:14-15; 1 Pe. 1:3). For our hope is eternal life (Titus 1:2; 3:7), and Jesus' resurrection is objective, concrete evidence that the promise of eternal life is sure. It is with the objective content of our hope in mind that Paul can say the Gentiles had no hope and were without God in the world (Eph. 2:12).

The hope we have is not something we can see (Rom. 8:24-25); it is waiting for us in heaven (Col. 1:5). Nonetheless it provides the context for our joy today (Rom. 12:12). Hope is strengthened as we learn what God has done in the past, and as we persevere in our Christian walk (Rom. 15:4). As our faith grows and we experience the joy and peace Jesus gives, our hope is brought alive (Rom. 15:13). Rather than put our hope in earthly riches (1 Tim. 6:17), we put our hope in the God who cannot lie (Titus 1:2).

In short, the answers to the questions of meaning, law, and hope—which have no answers in naturalism — are found in Jesus. These truths, buttressed by the facts and logical consistency of Christianity, can be a significant part of our case for the truth of Jesus Christ. Although truth is not ultimately determined by experience, the common experience of humanity provides a point of contact for the Gospel. Even if such matters are not persuasive by themselves, they might at least serve to show that Christianity is relevant to our lives today.

Christian Views of Science and Earth History – A Balanced Perspective

Dr. Ray Bohlin and Rich Milne consider the three primary views held by Christians regarding the age of the earth and how the universe, life and man came to be: young earth creationism, progressive creationism, and theistic evolution. After considering the case for each one, they conclude with a call to work together for the cause of Christ.



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

Introduction of Three Views

How old is the earth? Did men live with dinosaurs? Are dinosaurs in the Bible? Where do cave men fit in the Bible? Did the flood cover the whole earth? How many animals were on Noah's Ark? What does the word *day* in Genesis chapter one mean?

These are all common and difficult [questions your children may have asked](#), or maybe they are questions you have. What may surprise you is that evangelical Christians respond with numerous answers to each question. In reality, answers to the preceding questions largely depend on the answer to the first one. How old is the earth?

The diversity of opinion regarding this question inevitably leads to controversy, controversy that is often heated and remarkably lacking in grace and understanding. For those Christians who are practicing scientists, there is much at stake. Not only is one's view of Scripture on the firing line,

but one's respect and job security in the scientific community is also at risk.

But we must say up front, that as important as this question is, it is of secondary importance to the quest of defeating Darwinism as currently presented to the culture. Educational leaders and evolutionary scientists are determined to present a fully naturalistic evolution as the only reasonable and scientific theory that can be discussed in the public education system. All Christians, whether old earth or young earth, should find common cause in dethroning philosophical naturalism as the reigning paradigm of education and science.

Returning to the age of the earth question, we would like to survey three general categories of response to this question that can be found among Christians today. For each of these three views, we will discuss their position on Genesis chapter one, since theological assumptions guide the process of discovering a scientific perspective. We will also discuss the basics of the scientific conclusions for each view. Finally, we will discuss the strengths of each view and what those holding the other two views think are the other's limitations.

The first view of science and earth history we will discuss is the recent or literal view. This position is often referred to as scientific creationism, creation science, or young earth creationism. Young earth creationists believe that the earth and the universe are only tens of thousands of years old and that Genesis gives us a straightforward account of God's creative activity.

The second position, progressive creationism or day-age creationism, holds that the earth and the universe are billions of years old. However, progressive creationists believe that God has created specifically and *ex nihilo* (out of nothing), throughout the billions of years of earth history. They do not believe that the days of Genesis refer to twenty-four hour days, but to long, indefinite periods of

time.

A view traditionally known as theistic evolution comprises the third position. Theistic evolutionists essentially believe that the earth and the universe are not only billions of years old, but that there was little, if any, intervention by God during this time. The universe and life have evolved by God-ordained processes in nature. Theistic evolutionists, or evolutionary creationists as many prefer to be called, believe that the first chapter of Genesis is not meant to be read historically, but theologically. It is meant to be a description of God as the perfect Creator and transcendent over the gods of the surrounding ancient Near Eastern cultures.

Before we consider each position in greater detail, it is important to realize two things. First, we will paint in broad strokes when describing these views. Each has many sub-categories under its umbrella. Second, we will describe them as objectively and positively as we can without revealing our own position. We will reveal our position at the conclusion of this article.

Recent or Literal Creation

Having introduced each position, we would like to review the theological and scientific foundations for the first one: recent or young earth creationism.

The young earth creationist firmly maintains that Genesis chapter one is a literal, historical document that briefly outlines God's creative activity during six literal twenty-four hour days. If one assumes that the genealogies of Genesis chapters five and eleven represent a reasonable pre-Israelite history of the world, then the date of creation cannot be much beyond thirty thousand years ago.[\[1\]](#)

A critical theological conclusion in this view is a world free

of pain, suffering, and death prior to the Fall in Genesis chapter three. God's prescription in Genesis 1:29 to allow only green plants and fruit for food follows along with this conclusion.

The universal flood of Noah, recorded in Genesis chapters six through nine, is also a crucial part of this view. On a young earth, the vast layers of fossil-bearing sedimentary strata found all over the earth could not have had millions of years to accumulate. Therefore, the majority of these sedimentary layers are thought to have formed during Noah's flood. Much research activity by young earth creationists is directed along this line.[{2}](#)

Young earth creationists also maintain the integrity of what is called the Genesis kind, defined in Genesis 1:11, 12, and 21. The dog kind is frequently given as an example of the Genesis kind. While this is still a matter of research, it is suggested that God created a population of dog-like animals on the sixth day. Since then, the domestic dog, wolf, coyote, African wild dog, Australian dingo, and maybe even the fox have all descended from this original population. Young earth creationists suggest that God created the individual kinds with an inherent ability to diversify within that kind. But a dog cannot cross these lines to evolve into say, a cat.

The literal view of Genesis chapter one has been predominant throughout Church history and it proposes a testable scientific model of the flood and the Genesis kind. Critics point out that there are immense difficulties explaining the entire geologic record in terms of the flood.[{3}](#) Principal among these problems is that it appears there are many more animals and plants buried in the rocks than could have been alive simultaneously on the earth just prior to the flood.

Progressive Creationism

The next view to discuss is progressive creationism. The

progressive creationist essentially believes that God has intervened throughout earth history to bring about His creation, but not all at once over six literal twenty-four hour days. The progressive creationist will accept the long ages of the earth and the universe while accepting that there is some historical significance to the creation account of Genesis.

A popular view of Genesis chapter one is called the day-age theory. This view agrees that the events described in the first chapter of Genesis are real events, but each day is millions, perhaps billions of years in duration. The Hebrew word for day, *yom*, can mean an indefinite period of time such as in Genesis 2:4. This verse summarizes the first thirty-four verses of the Bible by stating, "This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the *day* that the Lord God made the earth and the heaven" (emphasis added). In this case, the word *day* refers to the previous seven days of the creation week. Consequently, the progressive creationist feels there is justification in rendering the days of Genesis chapter one as indefinite periods of time.[\[4\]](#)

Therefore, the progressive creationist has no problem with the standard astronomical and geological ages for the universe and the earth. A universe of fifteen billion years and an earth of 4.5 billion years are acceptable. In regard to evolution, however, their position is similar to the young earth creationists'. Progressive creationists accept much of what would be called microevolution, adaptation within a species and even some larger changes. But macroevolutionary changes such as a bird evolving from a fish are not seen as a viable process.[\[5\]](#)

These are the basic beliefs of most progressive creationists. What do they think is the predominant reason for holding to this perspective? Most will tell you that the evidence for an old universe and earth is so strong that they have searched for a way for Genesis chapter one to be understood in this

framework. So the agreement with standard geology and astronomy is critical to them. Progressive creationists also find the biblical necessity for distinct evidence for God's creative activity so strong that the lack of macroevolutionary evidence also dovetails well with their position.

The most difficult problem for them to face is the requirement for pain, suffering, and death to be a necessary part of God's creation prior to Adam's sin. The atheistic evolutionist, Stephen J. Gould, from Harvard, commented on this problem of God's design over these many millions of years when he said, "The price of perfect design is messy relentless slaughter."[\[6\]](#) There are also major discrepancies with the order of events in earth history and the order given in Genesis. For instance if the days of Genesis are millions of years long, then when flowers were created on day three, it would be millions of years before pollinators, such as bees, were created on days five and six.

Theistic Evolution

Having covered young earth creationism and progressive creationism, we will now turn to the view called [theistic evolution](#) and then discuss our own position with a call to mark the common enemy of the evangelical community.

Most theistic evolutionists see little, if any, historical significance to the opening chapters of Genesis. They suggest that the Genesis narrative was designed to show the Israelites that there is one God and He has created everything, including those things which the surrounding nations worshipped as gods. In essence, Genesis chapter one is religious and theological, not historical and scientific.[\[7\]](#)

Another view of the account of creation according to Genesis that has become popular with progressive creationists as well as theistic evolutionists is the structural framework hypothesis.[\[8\]](#) This literary framework begins with the earth

formless and void as stated in Genesis 1:2. The first three days of creation remove the formlessness of the earth, and the last three days fill the void of the earth. On days one through three God creates light, sea and sky, and the land. On days four through six, God fills the heavens, sky, sea, and land. There was a pattern in the ancient Near East of a perfect work being completed in six days with a seventh day of rest. The six days were divided into three groups of two days each. In Genesis chapter one we also have the six days of work with a seventh day of rest, but the six days are divided into two groups of three days. So maybe this was only meant to say that God is Creator and His work is perfect.

Essentially, theistic evolutionists accept nearly all the scientific data of evolution including not only the age of the cosmos, but also the evolutionary relatedness of all living creatures. God either guided evolution or created the evolutionary process to proceed without need of interference.

Theistic evolutionists maintain that the evidence for evolution is so strong that they have simply reconciled their faith with reality. Since reading Genesis historically does not agree with what they perceive to be the truth about earth history, then Genesis, if it is to be considered God's Word, must mean something else. They do believe that God is continually upholding the universe, so He is involved in His creation.

Theistic evolution suffers the same problem with pain, suffering, and death before the Fall that progressive creation endures.[{9}](#) In addition, the many problems cited concerning the origin of life, the origin of major groups of organisms, and the origin of man remain severe problems for the theistic evolutionist as well as the secular evolutionist.[{10}](#) Some theistic evolutionists also quarrel with a literal Adam and Eve. If humans evolved from ape-like ancestors, then who were Adam and Eve? If Adam and Eve were not literal people, then is the Fall real? And how is redemption necessary if they are

imaginary?

Call for Caution and Discussion

We have discussed the biblical and scientific foundations of three different Christian views of science and earth history. In so doing, we have tried to convey a sense of their strengths and limitations. The issue of the age of the earth is very controversial among evangelicals, particularly those who have chosen some field of science as their career.

Our intention has been to present these perspectives as objectively as possible so you, the reader, can make an informed decision. We have purposefully kept our own views out of this discussion until now. We would like to take a moment and explain the reasoning behind our position.

We have studied this issue for over twenty years and have read scholars, both biblical and scientific from all sides of the question. For some ten years now, we have been confirmed fence sitters. Yes, we are sorry to disappoint those of you who were waiting for us to tell you which view makes more sense, but we are decidedly undecided. This is by no means a political decision. We are not trying to please all sides, because if that were the case, we know we would please no one. The fact is, we are still searching.

Biblically, we find the young earth approach of six consecutive 24-hour days and a catastrophic universal flood to make the most sense. However, we find the evidence from science for a great age for the universe and the earth to be nearly overwhelming. We just do not know how to resolve the conflict yet. Earlier, we emphasized that the age question, while certainly important, is not the primary question in the origins debate. The question of chance versus design is the foremost issue. The time frame over which God accomplished His creation is not central.

Such indecision is not necessarily a bad thing. Davis Young in his book *Christianity and the Age of the Earth*, gives a wise caution. Young outlines that both science and theology have their mysteries that remain unsolvable. And if each has its own mystery, how can we expect them to mesh perfectly?[{11}](#) The great 20th century evangelist, Francis Schaeffer said:

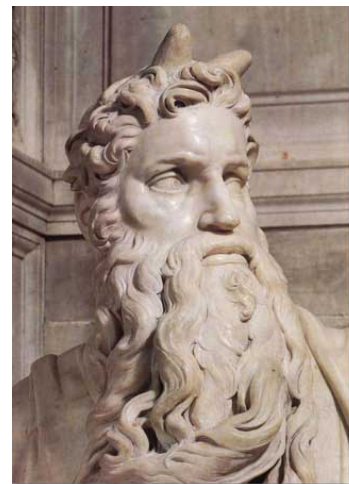
We must take ample time, and sometimes this will mean a long time, to consider whether the apparent clash between science and revelation means that the theory set forth by science is wrong or whether we must reconsider what we thought the Bible says. [{12}](#)

“What we thought the Bible says”? What does *that* mean?



In the sixteenth century, Michelangelo sculpted Moses coming down from Mount Sinai with two bumps on his head. The word which describes Moses' face as he came off the mountain, we now know means shining light, meaning Moses' face was radiant from having been in God's presence. But at that time it was thought to mean "goat horns."

So Michelangelo sculpted Moses with two horns on his head. That is what they thought the Bible literally said. Now we know better, and we changed our interpretation of this Scripture based on more accurate information. We believe we need even more accurate information from both the Bible and science to answer the age of the earth question.



The question concerning the age of the earth comes down to a matter of interpretation, both of science and the Bible. Ultimately, we believe there is a resolution to this dilemma. All truth is God's truth. Some suggest that perhaps God has created a universe with apparent age. That is certainly possible, but certain implications of this make us very uncomfortable. It is certainly true that any form of creation out of nothing implies some form of apparent age. God created Adam as an adult who appeared to have been alive for several decades though only a few seconds into his existence.

Scientists have observed supernova from galaxies that are hundreds of thousands of light years away. We know that many of these galaxies must be this distant because if they were all within a few thousand light years, then the nighttime sky would be brilliant indeed. These distant galaxies are usually explained in terms of God creating the light in transit so we can see them today. These observed star explosions mean that they never happened in an apparent age universe. Therefore, we are viewing an event that never occurred. This is like having videotape of Adam's birth. Would supernovas that never happened make God deceptive?

Therefore, we believe we must approach this question with humility and tolerance for those with different convictions. The truth will eventually be known. In the meantime, let us search for it together without snipping at each other's heels.

Notes

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Human Nature

Don Closson provides an overview to how naturalism, pantheism and Christian theism view human nature. He discusses questions considering how each view deals with purpose, good and evil, and death.

In the twenty-five years prior to 1993, the federal government spent 2.5 trillion dollars on welfare and aid to cities. This was enough money to buy all the assets of the top Fortune 500 firms as well as all the farmland in America at that time.^{1} As part of the Great War on poverty, begun by the Johnson administration in the 1960's, the government's goal was to reduce the number of poor, and the effects of poverty on American society. As one administration official put it, "The way to eliminate poverty is to give the poor people enough money so that they won't be poor anymore."^{2} Sounds simple. But offering money didn't get rid of poverty; in fact, just the opposite has occurred. The number of children covered by the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program has gone from 4.5 percent of all children in America in 1965, to almost 13 percent of all children in 1991. One of the reasons for this increase has been the rapid deterioration of the family for those most affected by the welfare bureaucracy. Since 1960, the number of single parent families has more than tripled, reflecting high rates of children born out of wedlock and high divorce rates.^{3} Rather than strengthening the family in America and ridding the country of poverty, just the opposite has occurred. Why such disastrous results from such good intentions?

Part of the answer must be found in human nature itself. Might

it be, that those creating welfare policy in the 1960's had a faulty view of human nature and thus misread what the solution to poverty should be? In this essay I will look at how three different world views—theism, naturalism, and pantheism—view human nature. Which view we adopt, both individually and as a people, will have a great influence on how we educate our children, how and if we punish criminals, and how we run our government.

Christian theism is often chided as being simplistic and lacking in sophistication, yet on this subject, it is the naturalist and pantheist who tend to be reductionistic. Both will simplify human nature in a way that detracts from our uniqueness and God-given purpose here on this planet. It should be mentioned that the views of Christian theists, naturalists, and pantheists are mutually exclusive. They might all be wrong, but they cannot all be right. The naturalist sees man as a biological machine that has evolved by chance. The pantheist perceives humankind as forgetful deity, whose essence is a complex series of energy fields which are hidden by an illusion of this apparent physical reality. Christian theism accepts the reality of both our physical and spiritual natures, presenting a balanced, livable view of what it means to be human.

In this essay I will show how Christian theism, naturalism, and pantheism answer three important questions concerning the nature of humanity. First, are humans special in any way; do we have a purpose and origin that sets us apart from the rest of the animal world? Second, are we good, evil, or neither? Third, what happens when we die? These fundamental questions have been asked since the written word appeared and are central to what we believe about ourselves.

Are Humans Special?

One doesn't usually think of Hollywood's Terminator, as played by Arnold Schwarzenegger, as a profound thinker. Yet in

Terminator II, the robot sent back from the future to protect a young boy asks a serious question.

Boy: *"You were going to kill that guy!"*

Terminator: *"Of course! I'm a terminator."*

Boy: *"Listen to me very carefully, OK? You're not a terminator anymore. All right? You got that?! You just can't go around killing people!"*

Terminator: *"Why?"*

Boy: *"What do ya mean, Why? 'Cause you can't!"*

Terminator: *"Why?"*

Boy: *"Because you just can't, OK? Trust me on this!"*[\[4\]](#)

Indeed, why not terminate people? Why are they special? To a naturalist, one who believes that no spiritual reality exists, options to this question are few. Natural scientists like astronomer Carl Sagan and entomologist E.O. Wilson find man to be no more than a product of time plus chance, an accident of mindless evolution. Psychologist Sigmund Freud and existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre agree, humankind is a biological machine, perhaps slightly more complex than other animals, but governed by the same physical needs and drives.

Yet as Mr. Spock of *Star Trek* fame put it in the original *Star Trek* movie, logic and knowledge aren't always enough. He discovered this by mind melding with V-GER, a man made machine that, after leaving our solar system, evolves into a thinking machine elsewhere in the galaxy and returns to earth to find its creator.[\[5\]](#) If logic and knowledge aren't enough, where do we turn to for significance or purpose? A naturalist has nowhere to turn. For example, Sartre argued that man must make his own meaning in the face of an absurd universe.[\[6\]](#) The best that entomologist E. O. Wilson could come up with is that we

do whatever it takes to pass on our genetic code, our DNA, to the next generation. Everything we do is based on promoting survival and reproduction.{7}

Pantheists have a very different response to the question of human purpose or uniqueness. Dr. Brough Joy, a medical doctor who has accepted an Eastern view of reality, argues that all life forms are divine, consisting of complex energy fields. In fact, the entire universe is ultimately made up of this energy; the appearance of a physical reality is really an illusion.{8} Gerald Jampolsky, another doctor, argues that love is the only part of us that is real, but love itself cannot be defined.{9} This is all very consistent with pantheism which teaches a radical monism, that all is one, and all is god. But if all is god, all is just as it is supposed to be and you end up with statements like this from the Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh:

There is no purpose to life; existence is non-purposive. That is why it is called a leela, a play. Existence itself has no purpose to fulfill. It is not going anywhere—there is no end that it is moving toward...{10}

Christianity teaches that human beings are unique. We are created in God's image and for a purpose, to glorify God. Genesis 1:26 declares our image-bearing nature and the mandate to rule over the other creatures of God's creation. Jesus further delineated our purpose when he gave us the two commandments to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Romans 12:1 calls us to be living sacrifices to God. Unlike naturalism or pantheism, the Bible doesn't reduce us down to either just our material, physical nature or to just our spiritual nature. Christianity recognizes the real complexity of humanity as it is found in our physical, emotional and spiritual components.

Are We Good, Bad, or Neither?

To a naturalist, this notion of good and evil can only apply to the question of survival. If something promotes survival, it is good; if not, it is evil. The only real question is how malleable human behavior is. B. F. Skinner, a Harvard psychology professor, believed that humans are completely programmable via classical conditioning methods. A newborn baby can be conditioned to become a doctor, lawyer, or serial killer depending on its environment.{11}

The movie that won “Best Picture” in 1970 was a response to Skinner’s theories. *A Clockwork Orange* depicted a brutal criminal being subjected to a conditioning program that would create a violent physical reaction to just the thought of doing harm to another person. Here is dialogue between the prison warden and an Anglican clergyman after a demonstration of the therapy’s effectiveness.

Clergyman: *“Choice! The boy has no real choice! Has he? Self interest! The fear of physical pain drove him to that grotesque act of self-abasement! Its insincerity was clearly to be seen. He ceases to be a wrongdoer. He ceases also to be a creature capable of moral choice.”*

Warden: *“Padre, these are subtleties! We’re not concerned with motives for the higher ethics. We are concerned only with cutting down crime! (Crowd Applause) And with relieving the ghastly congestion in our prisons! He will be your true Christian. Ready to turn the other cheek! Ready to be crucified rather than crucify! Sick to the very heart at the thought even of killing a fly! Reclamation! Joy before the angels of God! The point is that it works!”{12}*

Stanley Kubrick denounced this shallow view of human nature with this film, yet Skinner’s behaviorism actually allows for more human flexibility than does the sociobiology of E. O. Wilson, another Harvard professor. Wilson argues that human

emotions and ethics, in a general sense, have been programmed to a “substantial degree” by our evolutionary experience.[{13}](#) In other words, human beings are hard coded to respond to conditions by their evolutionary history. Good and evil seem to be beside the point.

Jean-Paul Sartre, another naturalist, rejected the limited view of the sociobiologist, believing that humans, if anything, are choosing machines. We are completely free to decide who we shall be, whether a drunk in the gutter or a ruler of nations. However, our choice is meaningless. Being a drunk is no better or worse than being a ruler. Since there is no ultimate meaning to the universe, there can be no moral value ascribed to a given set of behaviors.[{14}](#)

Pantheists also have a difficult time with this notion of good and evil. Dr. Brugh Joy has written,

In the totality of Beingness there is no absolute anything—no rights or wrongs, no higher or lower aspects—only the infinite interaction of forces, subtle and gross, that have meaning only in relationship to one another.(15)

The Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh wrote,

I am totally passive. Whatsoever happens, happens. I never question why, because there is no one to be asked.[{16}](#)

Christianity teaches that the universe was created by a personal, moral Creator God, and that it was created good. This includes humanity. But now creation is in a fallen state due to rebellion against God. This means that humans are inclined to sin, and indeed are born in a state of sinfulness. This explains both mankind’s potential goodness and internal sense of justice, as well as its inclination towards evil.

What Happens at Death?

Bertrand Russell wrote over seventy books on everything from geometry to marriage. Historian Paul Johnson says of Russell that no intellectual in history offered advice to humanity over so long a period as Bertrand Russell. Holding to naturalist assumptions caused an obvious tension in Russell regarding human nature. He wrote that people are “tiny lumps of impure carbon and water dividing their time between labor to postpone their normal dissolution and frantic struggle to hasten it for others.”[\[17\]](#) Yet Russell also wrote shortly before his death, “Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life: the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind.”[\[18\]](#) One has to ask why he would pity these self-centered lumps of impure carbon and water?

Most people over forty begin to question the nature and consequence of death. Some become obsessed with it. A recent movie called *Flatliners* focused on what death might hold for us. It involved a number of young doctors willing to die temporarily, to find out what was on the other side.

Young Doctor #1: *“Wait a minute! Wait! Quite simply, why are you doing this?”*

Young Doctor #2: *“Quite simply to see if there is anything out there beyond death. Philosophy failed! Religion failed! Now it’s up to the physical sciences. I think mankind deserves to know!”* [\[19\]](#)

Philosophy has failed, religion has failed, now it's science's turn to find the answers. But what can naturalism offer us? Whether we accept the sociobiology of Wilson or the existentialism of Sartre, death means extinction. If nothing exists beyond the natural, material universe, our death is final and complete.

Pantheists, on the other hand, find death to be a minor inconvenience on the road to nirvana. Reincarnation happens to all living things, either towards nirvana or further from it depending on the Karma one accrues in the current life. Although Karma may include ethical components, it focuses on one's realization of his oneness with the universe as expressed in his actions and thoughts. Depending on the particular view held, attaining nirvana is likened to a drop of water being placed in an ocean. All identity is lost; only a radical oneness exists.

Christianity denies the possibility of reincarnation and rejects naturalism's material-only universe. Hebrews 9:27 states, "Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment..." It has always held to a linear view of history, allowing for each person to live a single life, experience death, and then be judged by God. Revelation 20:11-12 records John's vision of the final judgment.

"Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books."

All three versions of what happens at death may be wrong, but they certainly can't all be right! We believe that based on the historical evidence for Christ's life and the dealings of God with the nation of Israel, the Biblical account is trustworthy. We believe that those who have placed their faith in the redemptive work of Christ on the cross will spend eternity in glorified bodies worshiping and fellowshiping with their Creator God.

Evaluation & Summary

In his autobiography, entomologist E. O. Wilson writes that as a young man he accepted Christ as his savior, but because of what he perceived to be hypocrisy in the pulpit he walked away from the church shortly after being baptized. Later at Harvard University he sat through a sermon by Dr. Martin Luther King Sr. and then a series of gospel songs sung by students from the campus. He writes that he silently wept while the songs were being sung and said to himself, "These are my people."[\[20\]](#) Wilson claims to be a naturalist, arguing that God doesn't exist, yet he has feelings that he can't explain and desires that do not fit his sociobiological paradigm. Even the staunchly atheistic Jean-Paul Sartre, on his death bed, had doubts about the existence of God and human significance. Naturalism is a hard worldview to live by.

In 1991 Dr. L. D. Rue addressed the American Association for The Advancement of Science and he advocated that we deceive ourselves with "A Noble Lie." A lie that deceives us, tricks us, compels us beyond self-interest, beyond ego, beyond family, nation, [and] race. "It is a lie, because it tells us that the universe is infused with value (which is a great fiction), because it makes a claim to universal truth (when there is none), and because it tells us not to live for self-interest (which is evidently false). 'But without such lies, we cannot live.'" [\[21\]](#) This is the predicament of modern man; either he lives honestly without hope of significance, or he creates a lie that gives a veneer of meaning. As William Lane Craig writes in his book *Reasonable Faith*,

Man cannot live consistently and happily as though life were ultimately without meaning, value or purpose. If we try to live consistently within the atheistic worldview, we shall find ourselves profoundly unhappy. If instead we manage to live happily, it is only by giving the lie to our worldview.[\[22\]](#)

The pantheist is little better off. Although pantheism claims a spiritual reality, it does so by denying our personhood. We become just another impersonal force field in an unending field of forces. Life is neither going anywhere nor is there hope that evil will be judged. Everything just is, let it be.

Neither system can speak out against the injustices of the world because neither see humankind as significant. Justice implies moral laws, and a lawgiver, something that both systems deny exist. One cannot have justice without moral truth. Of the three systems, only Judeo-Christian thought provides the foundation for combating the oppression of other humans.

In J.I. Packer's *Knowing God*, Packer argues that humans beings were created to function spiritually as well as physically. Just as we need food, water, exercise, and rest for our bodies to thrive, we need to experience worship, praise, and godly obedience to live spiritually. The result of ignoring these needs will be the de-humanizing of the soul, the development of a brutish rather than saintly demeanor. Our culture is experiencing this brutishness, this destruction of the soul, on a massive scale. Only revival, which brings about personal devotion to Jesus Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, will reverse this trend. Since we are truly made in God's image, we will find peace and fulfillment only when we are rightly related to Him.

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12. *A Clockwork Orange* (Warner Bros. Inc., 1971).
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16. Rajneesh, *I Am the Gate*, p. 5.
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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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Student Rights

Introduction

A number of years ago a school in Missouri was instructed by court order to sponsor school dances over the objections of parents and the school board because the court claimed that the opposition was of a religious nature thus violating separation of church and state. Students have been stopped from voluntarily praying before athletic events, informal Bible studies have been moved off campus, and traditions such as opening prayer and benedictions during graduation

ceremonies have been halted by court order or administrative decrees. Textbooks have also been purged of Judeo-Christian values and teachers have been ordered to remove Bibles from their desks because of the potential harm to students that they represent. Have the schools created an environment that is hostile to Christian belief?

Stephen Carter, a Yale law professor (*The Culture of Disbelief*, Basic Books, 1993) argues that religion in America is being reduced to the level of a hobby, that fewer and fewer avenues are available for one's beliefs to find acceptable public expression. Our public schools are a prime example of this secularization. This has caused undue hardship for many Christian students. Some administrators, reacting to the heated debate surrounding public expressions of faith, have sought to create a neutral environment by excluding any reference to religious ideas or even ideas that might have a religious origin. The result has often been to create an environment hostile to belief, precisely what the Supreme Court has argued against in its cases which restricted practices of worship in the schools such as school-led prayer and Scripture reading. The fallout of removing a Christian influence from the marketplace of ideas on campus has been the promotion of a naturalistic worldview which assumes that the universe is the consequence of blind chance.

This whole area of student rights is a relatively recent one. In the past, the courts have been hesitant to interfere with the legislative powers of state assemblies and the authority of locally elected school boards. But since the sixties, more and more issues are being settled in court. This trend reflects the breakdown of a consensus of values in our society, and it is likely to get worse.

When public schools reinforce the values held in common by a majority of parents sending their children off to school, conflicts are likely to be resolved locally. But in recent decades school administrators have been less likely to support

traditional Judeo- Christian values which are still popular with most parents. Instead, schools have often abandoned accommodating neutrality and purged Christian thought from the school setting. Parents and students have felt compelled to take legal action, claiming that their constitutional rights of free speech and religious expression have been violated.

How should the U. S. Constitution's guarantee of freedom of religion be balanced with the growing diversity in our public schools? In a time of growing centralization in education, how can schools cope with the rights of students that are far more diversified than in the past?

In this pamphlet we will look at some of the specific issues surrounding the concept of student rights beginning with a definition of the often used phrase "separation of church and state." Then we will cover equal access, freedom of expression, the distribution of religious materials, prayer, as well as the Hatch Amendment.

Separation of Church and State

In 1803 Thomas Jefferson helped to ratify a treaty with the Kaskaskia Indians resulting in the United States paying one hundred dollars a year to support a Catholic priest in the region, and contributing three hundred dollars to help the tribe build a church. Later, as president of the Washington, D.C., school board, Jefferson was the chief author of the first plan for public education in the city. Reports indicate that the Bible and the Watts Hymnal were the principal, if not the only books, used for reading in the city's schools. Yet those who advocate a strict separation between church and state usually refer back to Thomas Jefferson's use of the phrase in 1802 when speaking to the Danbury Baptist Association in Connecticut. By using this phrase did Jefferson hope to separate Christian thought and ideals from all of public life, including education? Actually, Jefferson was a very complex thinker and desired neither a purely secular nor

a Christian education.

What then, does the phrase "separation of church and state" mean? More importantly, what did it mean to the Founding Fathers? This is a crucial issue! A common interpretation was recently expressed in a major newspaper's editorial page. The writer argued that public school students using a classroom to voluntarily study the Bible would be a violation of the establishment clause of the First Amendment, and that the mere presence of religious ideas and speech promotes religion. His reasoning was that the tax dollars spent to heat and light the room puts the government in the business of establishing a religion. Is this view consistent with a historical interpretation of the First Amendment?

Recent Supreme Court cases dealing with church/state controversies have resulted in some interesting comments by the justices. In the *Lynch vs. Donnelly* case in 1984, the court mentioned that in the very week that Congress approved the Establishment Clause as part of the Bill of Rights for submission to the states, it enacted legislation providing for paid chaplains for the House and Senate. The day after the First Amendment was proposed, Congress urged President Washington to proclaim a day of public thanksgiving and prayer. In *Abington vs. Schempp* the Court declared that the Founding Fathers believed devotedly that there was a God and that the unalienable rights of man were rooted in Him and that this is clearly evidenced in their writings, from the Mayflower Compact to the U. S. Constitution itself.

The Supreme Court has recognized that every establishment clause case must balance the tension between unnecessary intrusion of either the church or the state upon the other, and the reality that, as the Court has so often noted, total separation of the two is not possible. The Court has long maintained a doctrine of accommodating neutrality in regards to religion and the public school system. This is based on the case *Zorach vs. Clauson* in 1952 which stated that the U. S.

Constitution does not require complete separation of church and state, and that it affirmatively mandates accommodation, not merely tolerance of all religions, forbidding hostility toward any.

Any concept of students' rights must include some accommodation by our public institutions in regards to religious beliefs and practices. The primary purpose of the First Amendment, and its resulting "wall of separation" between church and state, is to secure religious liberty.

Equal Access

On the surface, this issue seems fairly uncomplicated. Do students have the right to meet voluntarily on a high school campus for the purpose of studying the Bible and prayer if other non-curricular clubs enjoy the same privilege? Yet this issue has been the focus of more than fifteen major court cases since 1975, the Equal Access Act passed by Congress in 1984, and finally a Supreme Court case in 1990.

To many, this subject involves blatant discrimination against students who participate in activities that include religious speech and ideas. By refusing to allow students to organize Bible clubs during regular club meeting times, administrators are singling out Christians merely because of the content of their speech.

To others, the idea of students voluntarily studying the Bible and praying presents a situation "too dangerous to permit." Others see equal access as just another attempt to install prayer in the public schools, and they hold up the banner of separation of church and state in an attempt to ward off this evil violation of our Constitution.

Let's review exactly what legal rights a student does enjoy thanks to the "Equal Access" bill and the Mergens Supreme Court decision in 1990. First, schools may not discriminate

against Bible clubs if they allow other non-curricular clubs to meet. A non-curricular club or student group is defined as any group that does not directly relate to the courses offered by the school. Some examples might be chess clubs, stamp collecting clubs, or community service clubs. School policy must be consistent towards all clubs regardless of the content of their meetings. The specific guidelines established are:

- *The club must be student initiated and voluntary.*
- *The club cannot be sponsored by the school.*
- *School employees may not participate other than as invited guests or neutral supervisors.*
- *The club cannot interfere with normal school activities.*

It also goes without saying that these clubs must follow other normally expected codes of behavior established by the school. The federal government can cut off federal funding of any school that denies the right of students to organize such clubs. This is a substantial penalty given that title moneys for special education, vocational training, and library materials are a significant portion of many schools' income.

One would think that the passing of the Equal Access Bill and its affirmation by the Supreme Court would have settled this issue. It didn't. Mostly due to ignorance of the law and occasionally an anti-religion bias, school administrators sometimes still balk at allowing Bible clubs. Unfortunately, it may take a letter from a Christian legal service in order to bring some school administrators up to speed on the legality of the clubs. Even so, some schools are removing all non-curricular clubs in order to avoid having to allow Bible clubs. This is a remarkable position for school administrators to take and is yet another evidence of the polarization taking place in our society between religious and non-religious

people.

The way that students utilize the right to equal access is important. The agenda for any such club should be (1) to encourage and challenge one another to strive for excellence in every area of life and (2) to be a source of light within the secular darkness covering much of our teenage culture today. Angry confrontation with administrators and other students would ruin the positive witness such a club might otherwise accomplish.

Other Rights of Christian Students: Freedom of Speech

In 1969, two high school students and one junior high student who wore black arm bands in protest of the Vietnam war. They were warned of potential expulsion, an admonition which they ignored, and were subsequently removed from school.

The resulting court case made its way to the Supreme Court which determined that students do not shed their constitutional rights at the school house door. This landmark decision, known as the Tinker case, greatly affected the way school administrators deal with certain types of discipline problems. Since the students chose a non-aggressive, non-disruptive form of protest, and since there was no evidence that they in any way interfered with the learning environment of the school, the Court argued that the administrators could not forbid protest simply because they disagreed with the position taken by the students or because they feared that a disruption might occur.

A two-point test has been suggested as a result of the Tinker case. Before setting a policy that will forbid some student behavior, administrators must prove that the action will interfere with or disrupt the work of the school, or force beliefs upon another student. Christians that wear crosses or T-shirts with a Christian message violate neither test. The

same idea applies to the spoken word. The *Tinker* decision embraced the idea that fear or apprehension of disturbance is not enough to overcome the right of freedom of expression. Words spoken in class, in the lunchroom, or on the campus may conflict with the views of others and contain the potential to cause a disturbance, but the Court argued that this hazardous freedom is foundational to our national strength.

The Supreme Court has affirmed the right of Christians to distribute literature on campus, with some qualifications. In the case *Martin vs. Struthers* the Court equated free speech with the right to hand out literature as long as the literature in question was not libelous, obscene, or disruptive. If the school has no specific policy concerning the distribution of literature by students, Christians may freely do so. If a policy exists, students must conform to it. This may include prior examination of the material, and distribution may be denied during assemblies and other school functions. Outsiders do not enjoy similar privileges. The literature must be selected and distributed by the students.

Although the Supreme Court has outlawed school-sponsored prayer and reading from the Bible, it has not moved to restrict individuals from doing so. Graduation prayers by students have created a legal battle which resulted in *Lee vs. Weisman*, a Supreme Court decision which found that a prayer which was guided and directed by the school's principal was unconstitutional. The Court basically said that the school cannot invite a professional clergyman to a school function in order to pray. Students or others on the program may pray voluntarily. The student body may choose a student to act as a chaplain. Another scenario might have parents or students creating the agenda for the graduation ceremony, thus removing the school from placing a prayer on the program. Students do not shed their constitutional right to free speech when they step to the podium.

Christian students on campus must remember that certain

responsibilities coincide with these rights. Proverbs 15:1 states that, "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." If we use our rights and privileges in a Christlike manner we will indeed be His ambassadors, anything less would be contrary to His will.

Other Student Rights

In 1925, the Supreme Court case *Pierce vs. Society of Sisters* debated the right of parents to send their children to private schools. In that case, justice James McReynolds said, "The child is not the mere creature of the State; those who nurture him and direct his destiny have the right coupled with the high duty, to recognize and prepare him for additional obligations." In 1984, Congress held a series of hearings on reported abuses by educators who were attempting to change the beliefs of their students in a way that might again be a challenge to parental authority. Congress found that some schools might be overstepping their traditional role by concentrating more on what students believe than on what they know.

The result of these hearings is a law commonly known as the Hatch Amendment. The law protects students from federally sponsored research and experimental programs that make inquiries into students' personal sexual, family, and religious lives. The law stipulates that all materials, including manuals, audio-visuals, and texts are to be made available to parents for review. And secondly, students shall not be required to submit to psychiatric testing, psychological examination, or treatments which delve into personal areas that might be considered sensitive family matters. But there is one big problem with the law, it only covers federally funded experimental or research-driven programs. What about abusive course-work which isn't funded directly by federal research?

In regards to day-to-day classwork, the courts have made a

distinction between mere exposure to objectionable material and a school's attempt to coerce its students to adopt a particular political or religious viewpoint. Parents who can prove that coercion is taking place will have a much greater chance in court of forcing the school to accommodate to their beliefs by changing the school's practices. If coercion is not taking place, and a child is merely being exposed to objectionable material, being excused from the class is more likely.

On the positive side, Christian students do have the right to include religious topics and research in their school work when appropriate. In *Florey vs. Sioux Falls School District*, Circuit Judge McMillian clarified why students have the right to use religious materials in the classroom. He states that, "To allow students only to study and not to perform religious art, literature and music when such works have developed an independent secular and artistic significance would give students a truncated view of our culture." In another case titled the *Committee for Public Education vs. Nyquist*, the Supreme Court stated, "The First Amendment does not forbid all mention of religion in public schools. It is the advancement or inhibition of religion that is prohibited." When presented objectively any religious topic is fair game for both student and teacher. Indeed, both could make good use of this freedom in covering such topics as the religious views of our Founding Fathers, what role Christian thought has played in important issues such as slavery and abortion, and how Christian thought has been in conflict with other worldviews.

Students can be an effective instrument for reaching other students with the Gospel, but only if they are living consistently with what they believe. This is possible given the rights granted them by the U. S. Constitution. It is our job as parents to see that our schools protect the rights of our children not only to believe, but to live Christianly, for what good is freedom of religion if it covers only our private

lives?

Resources

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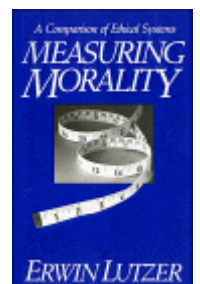
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Measuring Morality

What makes an action right or wrong? The answer to this question, when asked of various ethical systems, helps sort through the maze of beliefs that muddy the ethical waters. Lou Whitworth provides a condensation of Erwin Lutzer's book Measuring Morality: A Comparison of Ethical Systems.

In evaluating ethical systems we can be lost in a maze of systems, details, and terminology. Such arguments lead nowhere, shed little light on the subject, and polarize people into opposing camps. A helpful way to sort through this subject is to ask a basic question which will make clear the assumptions underlying disparate views. That question could be stated this way: "What makes an action right or wrong in this system?"



Cultural Relativism

When the question is asked “What makes an action right or wrong?” one category of answer will be: “Culture,” that is, culture determines what is right or wrong whatever a cultural group approves of is right; whatever the group disapproves of is wrong.

This is the ethical position known as cultural relativism. There are several key ingredients that make up this view.

1. Culture and Custom – In cultural relativism, moral standards are the result of group history and common experience which over time become enculturated ways of belief and action, i.e., customs, mores, and folkways.

2. Change – Since group experiences change with the passage of time, then naturally customs will change as a reflection of these new experiences.

3. Relativity – What is right (or normal) in one culture may be wrong (or abnormal) in another, since different forms of morality evolved in different places as a result of different experiences cultural adaptation. Thus, there are no fixed principles or absolutes.

4. Conscience – Cultural relativism holds that our consciences are the result of the childhood training and pressures from our group or tribe. What our consciences tell us is what our culture has trained them to tell us.

An Evaluation of Cultural Relativism

In trying to evaluate cultural relativism some things must be clear. First, it is quite obvious that there are many things we can all learn from other cultures. No culture has a monopoly on wisdom, virtue, or rationality. Second, just because we may do things a certain way doesn't mean that our way is the best or the most moral way to do those things.

Having said this, however, there are some problems cultural relativism faces. First, it is not enough to say that morals originated in the world and that they are constantly evolving. Cultural relativism needs to answer how value originated out of non-value; that is, how did the first value arise?

Second, cultural relativism seems to hold as a cardinal value that values change. But, if the value that values change is itself unchanging, then this theory claims as an unchanging value that all values change and progress. Thus, the position contradicts itself.

Third, if there are no absolute values that exist transculturally or externally to the group, how are different cultures to get along when values collide? How are they to handle such conflicts?

Fourth, where does the group, tribe, or culture get its authority? Why can't individuals assume that authority?

Fifth, most of our heroes and heroines have been those who courageously went against culture and justified their actions by appealing to a higher standard. According to cultural relativism such people are always morally wrong.

Finally, cultural relativism assumes human physical evolution as well as social evolution.

Situational Ethics

When the question "What makes an action right or wrong?" is asked another answer one hears is that "love" is the determining principle. This is the basis of situational ethics, a system made popular by Joseph Fletcher.

Three Types of Ethical Systems

Fletcher believes there are three approaches to making moral decisions. The first he calls legalism which he defines as

“rules and regulations.” He rejects this system as being more concerned with law than with people.

Fletcher states that the second approach to morality is antinomianism, meaning “against law.” Antinomians reject all rules, laws, and principles regarding morality and see no basis for determining whether acts are moral or immoral. Fletcher rejects antinomianism because it refuses to take seriously the demands of love.

The third option, Fletcher’s personal choice, is situationism. It is often called situation ethics or the new morality. It argues for a middle road between legalism and antinomianism.

The Three Premises of Situationism

The first premise of situationism is that love is the sole arbiter of morality in any situation. This means that under certain conditions doing the loving thing may require us to break the rules or commandments of morality because they are only contingent, whereas love is the unchanging absolute.

Second, situationism holds that love should be defined in utilitarian terms. This means that to be truly loving an action should be judged by whether or not it contributes to the greatest good for the greatest number.

Third, situationism is forced to accept the view that the end justifies the means. The problem here is that the end in mind is often one chosen arbitrarily by the person who acts. This posture, of course, opens to the door for all sorts of brutality and abuse.

Criticisms of Situationism

The ethical system known as situationism is subject to several serious criticisms. The first is that love, as defined by Fletcher, is of no help whatsoever in making moral decisions because everyone may have a different opinion of what is loving or unloving in a given situation. The truth is, love

without ethical content is meaningless, and without rules (or principles, or commandments), love is incapable of giving any guidance on making moral decisions. In fact, it isn't love that guides many of the decisions in Fletcher's system at all, but preconceived personal preferences.

A second criticism of situationism is that in a moral system based on the consequences of our actions, we have to be able to predict those consequences ahead of time if we want to know whether or not we are acting morally.

We may start out with the best of intentions, but if our prediction of the desired consequences does not come true, we have committed an immoral act in spite of our good intentions. And now we begin to see the enormity of the situationist's dilemma: (1) calculating the myriad possible outcomes of each and every ethical possibility before making the needed decisions, and then (2) choosing the very best course of action. Such calculations are impossible and thus render the moral life impossible.

Naturalism and Behaviorism

When the question, "What makes an action right or wrong?" is posed to the naturalist, the answer comes back "Whatever is, is right." To see how we came to this point, we must review how naturalism and behaviorism arose in reaction to dualism.

Dualism's Difficulties

the philosophy of dualism holds that there are two principal substances in the universe: matter and mind (or soul or spirit). These two substances correspond to the material and immaterial aspects of human life and reality. The belief goes back all the way to Plato and is compatible with the Christian worldview.

When Descartes came along, he ascribed to the concept that matter and mind (or spirit) are different, but he eventually

came to assert that matter and mind (spirit) are so diverse that they have no common properties and cannot influence each other. This led to what is known as the mind-brain problem: namely, if mind and body (matter) cannot interact, how do we explain the fact that the mind appears to affect the body and the body appears to affect the mind?

Naturalism Catches On

While philosophers and scientists pondered this dilemma, the growing implications of Newton's discovery of the law of gravity served to further complicate things. Since observation and mathematical calculations revealed that all bodies (including human bodies) are subject to the same seemingly unbreakable laws, the existence of the mind (or spirit) became increasingly difficult to maintain. Consequently, some philosophers thought it much simpler to believe in only one substance in the universe.

Thus dualism (meaning two substances: matter and mind) lost popular appeal and naturalism or materialism (meaning one substance: matter) gained the ascendancy. If there is only one substance in the universe, then all particles of matter are interrelated in a causal sequence and the universe, human beings included, must be a giant computer controlled by blind physical forces. Thus, according to naturalism, humans are mere cogs in the machine. We cannot act upon the world, rather the world acts upon us. In such a world the mind is just the by-product of the brain as the babbling is the by-product of the brook. Freedom, therefore, is an illusion, and strictly speaking there is no morality at all.

Behaviorism

Behaviorism grew out of naturalism and is an extension of it. One form of behaviorism is called sociobiology, a theory that morality is rooted in our genes. That is, all forms of life exist solely to serve the purposes of the DNA code. According to sociobiology, the ultimate rationale for one's existence

and behavior is the preservation or advancement of the person's genes.

The more well-known form of behaviorism comes from B. F. Skinner. He stated that we are what we are largely because of our environmental training or conditioning.

Evaluating Behaviorism

When we remember that both forms behaviorism are built on naturalism, the implications are the same: man is a machine; all our actions are the product of forces beyond our control, and we possess no special dignity in the universe. Thus, strictly speaking, behaviorism does not propose a theory of morality, but it results in antimorality.

Emotive Ethics

In modern ethical thought an unusual answer has been given to the question, "What makes an action right or wrong?" The answer? "Nothing is literally right or wrong: these terms are simply the expression of emotion and as such are neither true nor false." This is answer of emotive ethics.

This theory of morality originated with David Hume and his belief that knowledge is limited to sense impressions. Beyond sense impressions, our knowledge is unfounded. What difference does such a theory make? It renders intelligent talk about God, the soul, or morality impossible, because real knowledge is limited to phenomena observable by our physical senses. Discussion of phenomena not observable by our physical senses is considered to belong to the realm of metaphysics, a realm that cannot be touched, felt, seen, heard, nor smelled.

What can we know if our knowledge is limited to our sense experience? Hume claimed that all we can know are matters of fact. We can only make factually verifiable statements such as, "That crow is black" or "The book is on the table." On the other hand, we cannot, in this system, make a statement like,

“Stealing is wrong.” We cannot even say, “Murder is wrong.” Why? Because wrong is not a factual observation and cannot be verified empirically. In fact, it is a meaningless statement, and merely an expression of personal preference. We are really just saying “I don’t like stealing,” and “I dislike murder.” It is on the order of saying, “I like tomatoes.” Someone else can say, “I dislike tomatoes,” without factual contradiction because it’s just the statement of two different personal preferences.

In summary, emotive ethics holds that it is impossible to have a rational discussion about morals. This is because ethical statements cannot be analyzed since they do not meet the criteria of scientific statements; that is, they are not observation statements. Thus, in emotivism, all actions are morally neutral.

An Evaluation of Emotivism

Upon reflection, emotivism is less devastating than it first appears. For starters, emotivists can never say that another ethical system is wrong; they can only volunteer that they don’t like or prefer other systems. Likewise, they can’t say that we ought to accept their views. Emotivism, therefore, by its own principles, allows us to reject this theory.

Second, unless emotivists provide some rational criterion for making moral choices, they must allow moral anarchy. Their only objection to terrorist morality would be, “I don’t like it.” The emotivist, then, is left with no reason to judge or oppose a dictator or terrorist.

Third, the thesis of emotivism that rational discussion of morality is impossible is false. Their assumption that the only meaningful utterances are statements of factual observation is one of emotivism’s basic philosophical flaws, and it cannot be factually verified! It does not fit into the “crow is black” model proposed by emotivists themselves.

Morality is open to rational discussion. Emotivism's arbitrary limitations on language cannot be maintained.

Traditional Absolutes

Earlier we considered four systems of ethics cultural relativism, situationism, behaviorism, and emotivism that in one way or another all self-destruct, ultimately destroyed by their own arbitrarily chosen principles.

Now we must reexamine traditional ethics: the Judeo-Christian ethic based on revelation, i.e., the Bible.

1. God's moral revelation is based on His nature.

God is separate from everything that exists, is free of all imperfections and limitations, and is His own standard. No moral rule exists outside of Him. Holiness, goodness, and truthfulness indeed all biblical morality are rooted in the nature of God.

2. Man is a unique moral being.

The biblical picture of mankind differs strikingly from the humanistic versions of mankind. We alone were created in the image of God and possess at least four qualities that distinguish us from the animals: personality, ability to reason, moral nature, and spiritual nature.

3. God's moral principles have historical continuity.

If God's moral revelation is rooted in His nature, it is clear that those moral principles will transcend time. Although specific commands may change from one era to another, the principles remain constant.

4. God's moral revelation has intrinsic value.

God's standards, like the laws of nature, have built-in consequences. Just as we have to deal with the laws of nature,

we will eventually have to deal with the consequences of violating God's standards unless we put our faith in Christ who took on the consequences of our disobedience by His death on the cross.

5. Law and love are harmonized in the Scriptures.

In the biblical revelation, love and law are not mutually exclusive, but are harmonized. Love fulfills the law. If we love God, we will want to keep His commandments.

6. Obedience to God's Law is not legalism.

The Bible speaks strongly against legalism since biblical morality is much more than external obedience to a moral code. No one can live up to God's standards without the enabling power of the Holy Spirit, because we are judged by our attitudes and motivations not just external performance.

7. God's moral revelation was given for our benefit.

Though in the short run it may sometimes appear that biblical moral standards are too restrictive, we can be sure that such injunctions are for our benefit because of His love for us. After all, in the long run God knows best since because of His omniscience, He can calculate all the consequences.

8. Exceptions to God's revelation must have biblical sanction.

Biblical morality is not based on calculating the consequences since only God can do that perfectly. Our responsibility is to obey; God's responsibility is to take care of the consequences.

9. "Ought" does not always imply "can."

According to the Bible, we do not, and cannot, live up to what we know to be right. Yet God is not mocking us because He has left us a way out. He made provision for our weaknesses and failures because Christ's death on the cross in our behalf

satisfied His moral requirements.

What makes an act right or wrong then? The answer is: the revealed will of God found in the Bible.

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Worldviews

A worldview is like a pair of glasses through which we view the world. Everyone has one. Jerry Solomon examines the basic worldviews and some of the beliefs and questions that they involve.



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

A friend of mine recently told me of a conversation he had with a good friend we will call Joe. Joe is a doctor. He is not a Christian. This is how the conversation went: “Joe, you’re an excellent doctor. You care deeply about your patients. Why do you care so much for people since you believe we have evolved by chance? What gives us value?” Joe was stunned by the question and couldn’t answer it. His “worldview” had taken a blow.

The concept of a worldview has received increasing attention for the past several years. Many books have been written on the subject of worldviews from both Christian and non-Christian perspectives. Frequently speakers will refer to the term. On occasion even reviews of movies and music will include the phrase. All this attention prompts us to ask, “What does the term mean?” and “What difference does it make?” It is our intent to answer these questions. And it is our hope that all of us will give serious attention to our own

worldview, as well as the worldviews of those around us.

What is a Worldview?

What is a *worldview*? A variety of definitions have been offered by numerous authors. For example, James Sire asserts that “A worldview is a set of presuppositions (or assumptions) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously) about the basic makeup of our world.”[\[1\]](#) Phillips and Brown state that “A worldview is, first of all, *an explanation and interpretation of the world* and second, *an application of this view to life*. In simpler terms, our worldview is a *view of the world* and a *view for the world*.”[\[2\]](#) Walsh and Middleton provide what we think is the most succinct and understandable explanation: “A world view provides a *model of the world* which guides its adherents *in the world*.”[\[3\]](#) With the realization that many subtleties can be added, this will be our working definition.

The Need for a Worldview

Worldviews act somewhat like eye glasses or contact lenses. That is, a worldview should provide the correct “prescription” for making sense of the world just as wearing the correct prescription for your eyes brings things into focus. And, in either example, an incorrect prescription can be dangerous, even life-threatening. People who are struggling with worldview questions are often despairing and even suicidal. Thus it’s important for us to give attention to the formulation of the proper worldview. Arthur Holmes states that the need for a worldview is fourfold: “the need to unify thought and life; the need to define the good life and find hope and meaning in life; the need to guide thought; the need to guide action.”[\[4\]](#) Yet another prominent need for the proper worldview is to help us deal with an increasingly diverse culture. We are faced with a smorgasbord of worldviews, all of which make claims concerning truth. We are challenged to sort through this mixture of worldviews with wisdom. These needs

are experienced by all people, either consciously or unconsciously. All of us have a worldview with which we strive to meet such needs. The proper worldview helps us by orienting us to the intellectual and philosophical terrain about us.

Worldviews are so much a part of our lives that we see and hear them daily, whether we recognize them or not. For example, movies, television, music, magazines, newspapers, government, education, science, art, and all other aspects of culture are affected by worldviews. If we ignore their importance, we do so to our detriment.

Testing Worldviews

A worldview should pass certain tests. First, it should be rational. It should not ask us to believe contradictory things. Second, it should be supported by evidence. It should be consistent with what we observe. Third, it should give a satisfying comprehensive explanation of reality. It should be able to explain why things are the way they are. Fourth, it should provide a satisfactory basis for living. It should not leave us feeling compelled to borrow elements of another worldview in order to live in this world.

Components Found in All Worldviews

In addition to putting worldviews to these tests, we should also see that worldviews have common components. These components are self-evident. It is important to keep these in mind as you establish your own worldview, and as you share with others. There are four of them.

First, **something exists**. This may sound obvious, but it really is an important foundational element of worldview building since some will try to deny it. But a denial is self-defeating because all people experience cause and effect. The universe is rational; it is predictable.

Second, **all people have absolutes**. Again, many will try to deny this, but to deny it is to assert it. All of us seek an infinite reference point. For some it is God; for others it is the state, or love, or power, and for some this reference point is themselves or man.

Third, **two contradictory statements cannot both be right**. This is a primary law of logic that is continually denied. Ideally speaking, only one worldview can correctly mirror reality. This cannot be overemphasized in light of the prominent belief that tolerance is the ultimate virtue. To say that someone is wrong is labeled intolerant or narrow-minded. A good illustration of this is when we hear people declare that all religions are the same. It would mean that Hindus, for example, agree with Christians concerning God, Jesus, salvation, heaven, hell, and a host of other doctrines. This is nonsense.

Fourth, **all people exercise faith**. All of us presuppose certain things to be true without absolute proof. These are inferences or assumptions upon which a belief is based. This becomes important, for example, when we interact with those who allege that only the scientist is completely neutral. Some common assumptions are: a personal God exists; man evolved from inorganic material; man is essentially good; reality is material.

As we dialogue with people who have opposing worldviews, an understanding of these common components can help us listen more patiently, and they can guide us to make our case more wisely.

Six Worldview Questions

Have you ever been frustrated with finding ways to stir the thinking of a non-Christian friend? We are confident the following questions will be of help. And we are also confident they will stir your thinking about the subject of worldviews.

We will answer these questions with various non-Christian responses. Christian responses will be discussed later in this article.

First, **Why is there something rather than nothing?** Some may actually say something came from nothing. Others may state that something is here because of impersonal spirit or energy. And many believe matter is eternal.

Second, **How do you explain human nature?** Frequently people will say we are born as blank slates, neither good nor evil. Another popular response is that we are born good, but society causes us to behave otherwise.

Third, **What happens to a person at death?** Many will say that a person's death is just the disorganization of matter. Increasingly people in our culture are saying that death brings reincarnation or realization of oneness.

Fourth, **How do you determine what is right and wrong?** Often we hear it said that ethics are relative or situational. Others assert that we have no free choice since we are entirely determined. Some simply derive "oughts" from what "is." And of course history has shown us the tragic results of a "might makes right" answer.

Fifth, **How do you know that you know?** Some say that the mind is the center of our source of knowledge. Things are only known deductively. Others claim that knowledge is only found in the senses. We know only what is perceived.

Sixth, **What is the meaning of history?** One answer is that history is determined as part of a mechanistic universe. Another answer is that history is a linear stream of events linked by cause and effect but without purpose. Yet another answer is that history is meaningless because life is absurd.[\[5\]](#)

The alert Christian will quickly recognize that the preceding

answers are contrary to his beliefs. There are definite, sometimes startling differences. Worldviews are in collision. Thus we should know at least something about the worldviews that are central to the conflict. And we should certainly be able to articulate a Christian worldview.

Examples of Worldviews

In his excellent book, *The Universe Next Door*, James Sire catalogs the most influential worldviews of the past and present. These are Christian Theism, Deism, Naturalism, Nihilism, Existentialism, Eastern Pantheism, and New Age or New Consciousness.[\[6\]](#)

Deism, a prominent worldview during the eighteenth century, has almost entirely left the scene. The Deist believes in God, but that God created and then abandoned the universe.

Nihilism, a more recent worldview, is alive among many young people and some intellectuals. Nihilists see no value to reality; life is absurd.

Existentialism is prominent and can be seen frequently, even among unwitting Christians. The Existentialist, like the Nihilist, sees life as absurd, but sees man as totally free to *make himself* in the face of this absurdity.

Christian Theism, Naturalism, and New Age Pantheism are the most influential worldviews presently in the United States. Now we will survey each of them.

Christian Theism

Let's return to the six questions we asked earlier and briefly see how the Christian Theist might answer them.

Question: **Why is there something rather than nothing?** Answer: There is an infinite-personal God who has created the universe out of nothing.

Question: How do you explain human nature? Answer: Man was originally created good in God's image, but chose to sin and thus infected all of humanity with what is called a "sin nature." So man has been endowed with value by his creator, but his negative behavior is in league with his nature.

Question: What happens to a person at death? Answer: Death is either the gate to life with God or to eternal separation from Him. The destination is dependent upon the response we give to God's provision for our sinfulness.

Question: How do you determine what is right and wrong? Answer: The guidelines for conduct are revealed by God.

Question: How do you know that you know? Answer: Reason and experience can be legitimate teachers, but a transcendent source is necessary. We know some things only because we are told by God through the Bible.

Question: What is the meaning of history? Answer: History is a linear and meaningful sequence of events leading to the fulfillment of God's purposes for man.

Christian Theism had a long history in Western culture. This does not mean that all individuals who have lived in Western culture have been Christians. It simply means that this worldview was dominant; it was the most influential. And this was true even among non-Christians. This is no longer valid. Western culture has experienced a transition to what is called Naturalism.

Naturalism

Even though Naturalism in various forms is ancient, we will use the term to refer to a worldview that has had considerable influence in a relatively short time within Western culture. The seeds were planted in the seventeenth century and began to flower in the eighteenth. Most of us have been exposed to Naturalism through Marxism and what is called Secular

Humanism.

What are the basic tenets of this worldview? First, God is irrelevant. This tenet helps us better understand the term Naturalism; it is in direct contrast to Christian Theism, which is based on *supernaturalism*. Second, progress and evolutionary change are inevitable. Third, man is autonomous, self-centered, and will save himself. Fourth, education is the guide to life; intelligence and freedom guarantee full human potential. Fifth, science is the ultimate provider both for knowledge and morals. These tenets have permeated our lives. They are apparent, for example, in the media, government, and education. We should be alert constantly to their influence.

After World War II "Postmodernism" began to replace the confidence of Naturalism. With it came the conclusion that truth, in any real sense, doesn't exist. This may be the next major worldview, or anti-worldview, that will infect the culture. It is presently the rage on many of our college campuses. In the meantime, though, the past few decades have brought us another ancient worldview dressed in Western clothing.

New Age Pantheism

Various forms of Pantheism have been prominent in Eastern cultures for thousands of years. But it began to have an effect on our culture in the 1950s. There had been various attempts to introduce its teachings before then, but those attempts did not arouse the interest that was stirred in that decade. It is now most readily observed in what is called the New Age Movement.

What are the basic tenets of this worldview? First, all is one. There are no ultimate distinctions between humans, animals, or the rest of creation. Second, since all is one, all is god. All of life has a spark of divinity. Third, if all is one and all is god, then each of us is god. Fourth, humans

must discover their own divinity by experiencing a change in consciousness. We suffer from a collective form of metaphysical amnesia. Fifth, humans travel through indefinite cycles of birth, death, and reincarnation in order to work off what is called "bad karma." Sixth, New Age disciples think in terms of gray, not black and white. Thus they believe that two conflicting statements can both be true.

On the popular level these tenets are presently asserted through various media, such as books, magazines, television, and movies. Perhaps the most visible teacher is Shirley MacLaine. But these beliefs are also found increasingly among intellectuals in fields such as medicine, psychology, sociology, and education.

Conclusion

We have very briefly scanned the subject of worldviews. Let's return to a definition we affirmed in the beginning of this article: "A worldview provides a model *of the world* which guides its adherents *in the world*." If your model of the world includes an infinite-personal God, as in Christian Theism, that belief should provide guidance for your life. If your model rejects God, as in Naturalism, again such a belief serves as a guide. Or if your model asserts that you are god, as in New Age Pantheism, yet again your life is being guided by such a conception. These examples should remind us that we are living in a culture that puts us in touch constantly with such ideas, and many more. They cannot all be true.

Thus some of us may be confronted with the need to think more deeply than we ever have before. Some of us may need to purge those things from our lives that are contrary to the worldview of Christian Theism. Some of us may need to better understand that our thoughts are to be unified with daily life. Some of us may need to better understand that the good life and hope and meaning are found only through God's answers. Some of us may need to let God's ideas guide our thoughts more

completely. And some of us may need to let God's guidelines guide our actions more fully.

Paul's admonition to the believers in ancient Colossae couldn't be more contemporary or helpful in light of our discussion. He wrote:

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ (Col. 2:8).

Notes

1. James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1988), 17.
2. W. Gary Phillips and William E. Brown, *Making Sense of Your World* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 29.
3. Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1984), 32.
4. Arthur F. Holmes, *Contours of a Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 5.
5. Sire, 18.
6. Ibid.

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