God, Death, and Religious Teaching

Essays on the Philosophy of Religion

By

William Charlton

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Preface

The essays collected here were written over period of nearly thirty years. 'Moral Absolutes' appeared in March 1994, 'Defining Death' in September 2022. The topics with which they deal, though they can now be classed as belonging to the philosophy of religion, were discussed by philosophers long before the modern concept of religion emerged. What we count as philosophical discussion starts with Plato's Socratic dialogues. His earliest Socratic dialogues are attempts to define good qualities of human behaviour like courage and temperance, and among them is the *Euthyphro*, in which Socrates is represented as asking Euthyphro to define a quality, the Greek word for which has no exact equivalent, but which is usually translated 'piety' or 'holiness' (the opposite of what is sometimes called 'uncleanness'). Euthyphro is prepared to identify actions of this kind with actions that the gods like, and Socrates asks him whether they are good because the gods like them, or liked by the gods because they are good.

Questions of ethics have probably arisen whenever human societies have had leisure for debate, without any need being felt to refer them to religious authorities. Not only our word 'soul', but the contrasts it is used to express, come from the Greeks, and philosophers were discussing the relation of soul and body and the possibility of life after death before these became religious issues. I have written elsewhere about mind and body as topics in the philosophy of mind, and about good and evil in philosophising about language. In these essays, however, I have focussed on them from the standpoint of a philosopher of religion, and one of Christian background. A philosopher of religion, of course, is not dispensed from using philosophical methods of argument, and mine are those of what is called 'analytical' philosophy. The modern concept of religion is itself a topic for philosophical discussion. It is analysed in the fifth of these essays and I touched on its history in Chapter 4 of my book *Society and God* (Cambridge, James Clarke & Co.. 2020)

The essays here cover a wide range of topics, which may be divided into five groups Those in the first fall in the area of dogmatic theology, of teaching about God. The word 'God' in the Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions is used as a proper name to denote a person who is conceived as the unique source of the whole spatio-temporal universe. It is also used as a common noun to signify things that seem to pay a part in other cultures similar to that played by God in cultures with those traditions. 'The Doctrine of Creation' deals with the notion of God as such a unique source. The doctrine is that God *created* the universe, and did so on purpose The essay distinguishes creation from causation and what theologians have called 'Intelligent Design'; and goes to ask what reasons there might be for thinking the doctrine correct. It advocates an approach more like that of barrister in court trying to establish intention than that of a scientist trying to identify a cause.

'Theological atomism' contrasts two ways of doing theology. These correspond in some measure to the two ways of proceeding which neuroscientists today like Ian McGilchrist attribute to the two hemispheres of the human brain. One, which I call 'atomistic', is by dividing God's action in the created world into independent episodes, and studying each on its own, and by identifying God's relations with mankind with his relations with each individual. The other, which I call 'holistic', and for which I express preference, is seeing his action in the created world as a developing continuum, and his relations with human individuals as relations with beings who are essentially social.

'Two Theories of Soul' distinguishes two conceptions of a human being which are incompatible with one another, but both of which have found favour with orthodox theologians. One, foreshadowed by Plato, is dualistic. A human being is two things, a spiritual soul inhabiting a physical body, and the soul is immortal while the body can be destroyed. The other, dominant in the Bible and philosophically more attractive, is monistic: we are intelligent, purposive agents composed of physical, bodily parts. The tension between these two conceptions runs all through theology, and surfaces when I return to dogmatic questions in the essays 'Defining Death, 'Purgatory' and 'Heaven. To reconcile the monistic

conception with the doctrine of life after death, I recommend an holistic rather than an atomistic approach to theology.

'The Real Presence' addresses an issue which divided Western Christians at the Reformation: the way in which Christ is present in the sacrament of the Eucharist. This issue is peculiar to Christians of the West; it was not divisive in the East, and neither the philosophers of Ancient Greece nor the Jews of the Old Testament had any idea of the Eucharist at all. Western theologians before the Reformation, however, tackled it with the aid of philosophical tools, particularly concepts of form, matter and substance, taken from Aristotle. My essay offers an account which keeps the Eucharistic Presence real and not merely 'symbolic', but which might be less unacceptable than others to some parties to the dispute.

The next five essays deal with ethical questions that engage moral theologians. 'Religion, Society and Secular Values', besides analysing the concept of religion as that of a kind of subsociety within a larger society, develops the idea that human beings are essentially social. I distinguish societies for specific limited purposes from societies for life generally, and consider the role of customs in societies for life and the interplay in any culture, religious or secular, of general, theoretical beliefs about what is the case and ethical convictions about what is right and wrong. The essay ends with some doubts about multiculturalism as a social ideal.

The two essays that follow concern moral rules. 'Moral Absolutes' is a relatively brief general consideration of the place of moral rules in the ethics of a culture. It starts from Plato's assertion in *The Statesman*, endorsed by Aristotle, that no rule can lay down what is best for everyone at all times, and sets this against the fact that exceptionless rules are necessary for social life, and against modern claims, not only in religious cultures, that there are some acts, specifiable in rules, from which it is always right to refrain. I touch on Locke's suggestion that for an act to be wrong is simply for it to be against the law, and on Freud's suggestion that fear of breaking rules about sex can be traced to the Superego, an irrational element in human nature.

'Natural Law, Aquinas and the Magisterium' has a more limited target. The Catholic Church 's Magisterium claims that its ethical teaching, especially on sex, is based upon natural law. My essay looks through the history of European thinking about natural law from Pre-Socratic philosophy, through Roman jurisprudence to modern times, and finds no authority there for the Church's later teaching on sex before the Middle Ages. I examine Aquinas's teaching on natural functions and on divine and natural law in the two *Summae*, and compare it with Enlightenment teaching on law and morals by Protestant and Catholic writers. I note the emergence of the concept of a faculty of will, which is further discussed in the essays 'Temptation' and 'Purgatory'. I contrast Aquinas's treatment of natural law with the modern theories of Germain Grisez and John Finnis. Finally I show how principles of practical reasoning from 'is' to 'ought' can be formulated to correspond to the elements Plato distinguished in human nature.

'Questions of Life and Death' deals with two specific issues that are sources of ethical controversy today in many societies, abortion and euthanasia. In both cases the debate is conducted in terms of rights. Over abortion, one side argues that a woman has rights over her body which include the right to choose whether to bear a child she has conceived or to have her pregnancy ended; on the other side it is argued that an unborn child has a right to life from the moment of conception. Over euthanasia one side argues that a human being has a right to die, and indeed to die with dignity, while the other argues that no right can justify either killing oneself or requesting, let alone employing, someone else to perform that service for one. My essay examines the notion of a right which is used in these debates, and also the notion of life as a gift for which we should be grateful.

People often of their own free will, without being coerced, do things they know or believe to be morally wrong and even to be against their own best interests as individuals. They also sometimes fail to do things they think good. In some cultures this is thought of as yielding to temptation, in others ascribed to weakness of will. The essay 'Temptation' considers this problematic behaviour. While not denying that intelligent agents do sometimes deliberately tempt one another to do what is wrong and

distract one another from doing what is good, it questions whether we cannot yield to temptation without there being someone who tempts us, and even whether the story of Adam and Eve in *Genesis* is rightly interpreted as describing a successful temptation. I also return to the concept of a faculty of will, and indicate how ancient philosophers explained the behaviour we call 'weak-willed' without postulating such a faculty.

In the three essays that follow I return to dogmatic theology, but to that area of it called 'eschatology', the study of 'the last things', death and what comes after it. In 'Defining Death' I begin with medical definitions of death, which give rise to ethical questions concerning heart-transplants, but move on to a philosophical definition of it as the end of existence for living organisms. This raises theological problems to do with doctrine that there is life after death, even for those who take a dualistic view of human beings as immortal souls living in human bodies, at least if they wish to say Christ's resurrection was a resurrection from death. My essay considers whether spatio-temporal continuity is necessary for personal identity, and also how, on a monistic view of human beings, existence after death can be understood as dependent on faith.

The doctrine of Purgatory became a divisive topic at the Reformation partly because was viewed as a source of revenue to the clergy. My essay 'Purgatory' ignores that aspect of it and first considers whether we can form a coherent concept of a temporal post mortem purgatorial process. I then ask whether, in line with the connection of Enlightenment and modern ideas of punishment with the idea of a faculty of will, purgation should be considered primarily as punishment, and if not, how, in the absence of a body, it could be painful. I consider also how it can be fitted into the idea of a continuous passage from a natural into a supernatural existence.

Christians who believe in a life after death may be uneasy both about the prospect of endless time and about our relations with other human beings in heaven. The speculations offered in 'Heaven' are related to these anxieties. They are about how, after death, the blessed might share in Christ's divine life; and I use as a model, not the sharing of guests in the

life of their host, but the sharing of branches in the life of their tree. Christ's divine life, I suggest, should be conceived as creative and non-temporal, but how dead persons participate in it might depend on the personalities and interests they have developed in life on earth.

In the first four essays in this collection I took it for granted that the teaching of things to be believed has a place in religion. 'The Doctrine of Creation' and 'Two Theories of Soul' introduced fundamental religious subjects, and in 'Theological Atomism' I contrasted two ways in which teachers can tackle them. In the two last of the essays collected here I consider the limits of dogmatic theology. 'What is Infallibility For' does not deny that Christ authorised his followers to teach doctrine, but criticises the Catholic doctrine that the Church cannot err in what it teaches on philosophical grounds. I point out the difference between this and other doctrines, and argue that the fact that the Church teaches something cannot be held a rational ground for thinking it true. 'Faith' is an attempt to show how faith can be seen as complementing doctrinal teaching. It starts with the traditional claim that faith is one of three 'divine' or 'theological' virtues, the other two being hope and charity. Following Aquinas, it classifies faith as a quality rather of intellect than of character, as a kind of knowledge which differs, however, from naturally acquired knowledge in depending on two supernaturally added beliefs: belief in the existence of God and in the divinity of Christ. I examine the difference between these and beliefs acquired independently of supernatural help, and argue that while they do not require believers to abandon standards of rationality, they require a respect for creation and a love of other living creatures that is inseparable from the 'divine' virtue of charity.

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'Two theories of Soul': *New Blackfriars* 90 1028 (2009) 424-40
'The Real Presence': *New Blackfriars* 82 962, (2001) 160-174
'Religion, Society and Secular Values': *Philosophy* 91 375 (2016) 321-43

'Moral Absolutes': *New Blackfriars* 75 880, (1994) 149-55
'Natural Law, Aquinas and the Magisterium': *New Blackfriars* 96 1063 (2015) 326-44
'Questions of Life and Death': *New Blackfriars*, 89 1023 (2008) 49-507
'Temptation': *New Blackfriars* 99 1081 (2018) 277-88
'Defining death': *New Blackfriars* 103 1107 (2022) 607-21
'Purgatory': *New Blackfriars* 102 1099 (2021) 339-51
'Heaven': *New Blackfriars* 97 1071 (2016) 547-59
'What Is Infallibility For?: *New Blackfriars* 87, 1007 (2006) 36-42
'Faith': *Faith* 41 4 (2009) 18-22

I am grateful to the editors of these journals for permitting them to be re-used.

The essay here entitled 'Faith' originally appeared under the title 'The Divine Virtue of Faith'. I used that, however, as the title of Chapter 5 of *Society and God*, along with the first paragraph of the article and the short paragraph in it that follows the quotation from the 'penny' catechism. I am grateful to James Clarke & Co., the publishers of the book for permission to re-use these paragraphs here.

These essays were published in conformity with the style of the journals in which they were published, so some began with abstracts and lists of keywords. I have tried to standardise them by supplying introductions to those that did not have them, and replacing lists of keywords with an index of words and names. I have also standardised footnotes and references, but otherwise there are only a few minimal changes from how they first appeared.

Chapter One
The Doctrine of Creation

Introduction

We are often told that the doctrine of creation has not been refuted by modern science, but we cannot judge whether that is true unless we know exactly what the doctrine is, and that is seldom explained. I first offer an interpretation of the doctrine, then defend this as an interpretation, and finally argue that we should use not scientific but forensic methods to decide whether the doctrine, so interpreted, is true.

1

We are often told that the doctrine that God created the heavens and the earth is not in conflict with what scientists say about the origins of the universe and of living things. Unless, however, we know exactly what the doctrine amounts to, we cannot be sure there is no conflict, and positive explanations of it are rare or exiguous. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*[1], for example, is content to make the negative points that God 'needs no pre-existent thing or any help in order to create, nor is creation any sort of necessary emanation from the one substance,' and then to quote the declaration against the Albigenses made at the Lateran Council IV in the year of Magna Carta that God created (*condidit*) 'out of nothing'. If we are not sure what the word 'create' means, this will not help us. The earliest Christian creeds express belief in a Father who is almighty (*pantokrator*) but not in a creator. The first century Jewish writer Philo, however, speaks of a divine maker (*poiêtês*),[2] this word appears in fourth century Christian creeds, and the Latin equivalent *factor* is used in Western professions of faith. Christian philosophers writing in Greek sometimes call God the divine Craftsman or Demiurge, so Justin Martyr

[1] London, Geoffrey Chapman, revised ed. 1999

[2] *Treatise on Moses's kosmopoia,* ss. 1-2.

in his *Dialogue with Trypho.* The words we now translate 'create', *ktizein* and *condere*, were originally used for founding cities.

Theologians say that creating something is making it out of nothing. We are not asked, however, to believe that there *was* something which was nothing, and that God made the universe out of that. Rather we are to understand that *there was not anything* out of which he made it. When you or I make something, say a pot, there is something out of which we make it, and we make it by acting upon this pre-existent thing. God is responsible for the existence of the universe, we are told, without having made it in this way. Yet this is the way in which craftsmen make things. That is why today we use the word 'creation'. Paradoxical as it may appear, the assertion that God *created* the universe is a denial that he *made* it, as making is ordinarily understood.

What may seem even stranger, it is a denial that God stands to the universe in the relation of a cause. Our concept of a cause is taken from human craftsmanship and skill. We want to know *what we must do to what* to bring about a desired result, and we extend the idea to natural phenomena and ask, for example, what the Sun does to what so as to cause rainbows. The English word 'cause' covers three things: first, an agent (whether a conscious agent like us or something mindless like the Sun) that acts upon something else, secondly the action of such an agent, for instance pushing or heating, and thirdly the conditions under which such action is effective. Suppose that one dry summer I drop a lighted cigarette in a forest and thereby start a fire: I cause the fire as causal agent, my dropping the cigarette is the causal action responsible, and the dry summer is a causal condition. If God did not make the universe by doing anything to anything, he is not responsible for it as a causal agent, and since he is obviously not a kind of causal action or a causal condition, he is not a cause at all.

To look at the matter from the other end, causes operate within the natural order; they explain occurrences as natural or inevitable under the laws of nature. There can be no causal explanation, therefore, of the natural order itself, the whole universe complete with its laws. If we say that God brought the universe into being by some kind of causal action,

for instance by uttering or thinking the words 'Let there be light', we must suppose that there was already a natural order with a law according to which that action would have the result that there was a Big Bang.

What is called 'Intelligent Design' theory does not deal with creation or with the source of the natural order, but only with the emergence of life within it. As William A Dembski, one of its leading proponents, states emphatically: 'Creation is always about the source of being in the world. Intelligent design is about arrangements of pre-existing materials that point to a designing intelligence.'[3] Since, however, it is highly controversial,[4] its supporters and opponents exchanging charges of bigotry bordering upon intellectual dishonesty, I may point out that the part played by the Intelligent Designer in it is still strictly causal. Neither Dembski nor Michael J Behe, whose book *Darwin's Black Box*[5] effectively introduced the theory, recognises any kind of explanation other than causal. 'When trying to explain anything,' says Dembski, 'we employ three broad modes of explanation, *necessity*, *chance* and *design*.' Behe argues that the fundamental forces of nature together with natural selection, cannot account for the species of animal and plant we see around us; they cannot account for wholes consisting of parts that perform complementary functions; and therefore that these living organisms were 'designed by an intelligent agent', design, here, being understood as 'the purposeful arrangement of parts.'[6] These writers offer no analysis of intelligence or purpose, but their model for an intelligent agent is a human craftsman[7] or musician; God might 'interact with the universe' as a musician plays an instrument.[8] They concede, though they dislike the phrase, that their Designer is a 'God of the gaps'[9], and the gap is causal: nature does not possess 'the causal powers necessary to produce living forms.'[10] How a

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[3] *The Design Revolution* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004) p. 38.

[4] See Mary Midgley, *Intelligent Design Theory and other ideological problems* (Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain, 2007).

[5] New York: The Free Press, 1996.

[6] Behe, *Darwin's Black Box*, p. 193.

[7] Behe, *Darwin's Black Box*, p 195.

[8] Dembski, *The Design Revolution* p. 149.

[9] Dembski, *The Design Revolution* pp 213-4.

[10] Dembski, *The Design Revolution* p. 146; cf p. 45 'There exist natural systems that cannot be adequately explained in terms of undirected natural causes.'

non-material designer can act upon matter, of course, Behe and Dembski can no more tell us than Descartes could tell Princess Elizabeth how a non-material mind can act upon the pineal gland.[11]

But to say God created the universe is surely to say he is responsible for it somehow: if not as a cause, then how? The answer is simple. He is responsible for it as we are responsible for our actions. We say that some of our movements are the carrying out of our desires; that is, they occur because we want them to. This does not mean that they are caused by desires. A desire is neither an agent that acts upon things nor a kind of causal action. (Philosophers sometimes claim that desires are causes, but they then have to say, either that desiring something is really a physical process in the brain, or that it is some kind of non-physical action by a non-physical agent upon the brain.) In fact, however, we conceive a movement made on purpose not as the effect of a desire but as the fulfilment or carrying out of a desire. If I walk in order to visit the corner shop, it is true to say that my limbs move because I want to reach that shop, but that means that their movement is a carrying out of the desire to reach it. The claim that God created the universe is the claim that the universe exists, and natural processes generally go on, because that is God's will, because that is what God thinks best. Our responsibility for what we do on purpose is called 'moral' responsibility, and if God is the creator of the universe he is responsible morally for natural processes generally and for those consequences for which he wants them to go on.[12]

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[11] See *Descartes, Philosophical Writings*, translated and edited by Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Thomas Geach (London: Nelson, 1954), pp. 277-8. Behe is content to say 'The conclusion that something was designed can be made quite independently of knowledge of the designer (op. cit. p. 197); Dembski suggests that the Designer might avoid violating conservation laws by taking advantage of indeterminacy at the quantum level (op. cit. pp. 154-5), but 'the precise activity of a designing intelligence' at the points at which design is introduced 'will require further investigation *and may not be answerable*' (p. 179, my emphasis, cf. p. 157).

[12] In ordinary speech the expression 'morally responsible' is sometimes used for a reduced or indirect kind of responsibility; I might be said to be morally responsible for your going upstairs if you go in order to fetch something for me, or if your reason for going is something I have said. But I am using the phrase in the strict sense in which I am morally responsible for what I do knowingly and of my own free will.

That is the interpretation of the doctrine of creation I propose. Two questions arise. First, is it satisfactory as an interpretation - is it intelligible, I mean, and does it give believers the doctrine what they want? Secondly, how are we to decide if it is true? A third question, of course, is *whether* it is true, but if my answer to the second is correct, this third question is not one for the philosopher of religion.

2

Many philosophers today feel that causal explanation is the only kind of explanation we can conceive for matters of fact. If 'He is walking because he wants to,' does not mean something like 'A desire is causing him to walk,' then, they fear, it is totally unintelligible. The truth, however, is that understanding something as the carrying out of a desire is primitive: it is where human intelligence starts. We think that the people and animals around have aims and act to achieve them long before we look for causal explanations of natural phenomena; causal thinking begins, as I said, with acquiring skills and considering how to bring about effects we desire, and presupposes the notion of acting for a purpose.

Non-philosophers do not think that explanation in terms of causal agents and causal action is the only genuine kind of explanation, but they think that if God is responsible for the universe in any way at all he must be a cause. They take the word 'cause' to signify what is common to every kind of responsibility, to everything that can be given as an explanation or introduced by 'because' or 'because of'. In fact, however, explanations in terms of purpose explain in a different sense of the word 'explain' from explanations in terms acting upon things; there is no common core of meaning.[13]

But given that human action is explained in terms of purpose, must not creation be quite different from human action? Human beings act only on materials that already exist; they do not bring things into existence. Surely

[13] Some readers of Aristotle have thought that his famous four 'causes,' matter, form, source of change and end, are different things that are causes in the same sense of 'cause', rather as whales, elephants, mice and human beings are different things that are mammals in the same sense of 'mammal'. I think this is a misinterpretation of Aristotle, but if it is not, then Aristotle was wrong.

what religious believers mean by 'creation' is the bringing into existence of the original materials out of which everything else is produced. If the universe had a beginning, if it has existed only for a finite time,[14] material must have come into being which did not arise out of anything that was there already, and to say that God created the universe is to say that he brought this primal material into being.

This objection is confused. In the first place, human beings do bring things into existence; potters bring pots into existence and parents children. It does not follow that a potter does not bring a pot into existence if he makes it out of something else or by acting upon something else. Secondly it does not follow, if the universe has existed only for a finite time, that it, or the most basic material in it, *came* into existence. Bertrand Russell defined change (in effect) as being different at different times,[15] and perhaps by this definition if anything exists after not having existed, it comes into being. But the definition is unsatisfactory and in any case does not apply in this case. There has been time only for as long as there has been a physical universe and physical change. So whether the universe has existed for a finite or an infinite time, it has existed for all the time there has been.[16] There could not be a time before there was a universe, and hence we cannot say that *before* there was a universe the universe did not exist. (Nor is it correct to say that God existed before there was a universe.)

Underlying these objections is a misunderstanding of what we mean by 'existence'. Coming into existence is not like coming into a stage; it is not a kind of event that befalls what comes into existence. The coming into being of a pot is an event that befalls the clay, not the pot. In general we

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[14] Some theologians, for instance Aquinas (*On the Eternity of the World*) and Maimonides (*Guide for the Perplexed*), have held that the universe might have existed always, for an infinite stretch of time, and still been created, but my own view (see, for instance. 'Aristotle's Potential Infinites' in *Aristotle's Physics,* Essays, ed. Lindsay Judson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 129-49) is that the notion of an infinite stretch of time is incoherent, and I think everyone who actually believes that God created the universe believes that it had a beginning.

[15] *Principles of Mathematics* s. 442: the definition reduces continuous motion to being at different places at a series of moments that is continuous like the series of real numbers.

[16] As Augustine oberves, though not for this reason, at *Confessions* 11.13.

think of something as coming into being when we think of a process in which something becomes something. When clay is shaped and baked into a pot we can say that it becomes or turns into a pot, but we cannot say that a pot is *become* by the clay. There is no such thing is being become (or 'absolute becoming' as it has been called). So if there was material out of which other things arose, which did not itself arise out of anything prior, that material did not come into being, and hence nothing could have brought it into being.

Not only is existence not like a room something can come into; it is not an activity 'like breathing only quieter' (as J.L. Austin put it ironically) or a kind of state or inactivity like sleep.[17] It is true that if particles interact, they must exist, but is not true that existence is something positive they must have or do as a precondition of interacting. There is no such real thing as existing; but there is such a way of thinking as thinking of things as existent. In fact there are two rather different ways of thinking that things exist. I think that *there are several* pythons in the zoo if I think that more things in the zoo than one are pythons; and I think of some particular python as having a physical existence when I think it is squeezing me. We think of particles as existent in this second way when we think of them as interacting. God is responsible for the physical existence of the universe if he is responsible for the basic physical interactions that take place in it.

But given that we are responsible for our purposive movements, can we really believe God is responsible in this way for the movements of things like stars and molecules? Certainly if we say 'Physical processes of every kind go on because that is the will of God,' we may be asked 'Why does he want them to go on? What is his purpose?' I go to the shop to buy food I need as a living organism. If we were to say that natural processes go on to supply needs the universe has as a kind of organism, we should be giving a pantheist answer, equating God with the universe. The Judaeo-Christian answer, however, is not pantheistic. It is that physical processes

[17] The scholastic idea that existence is a kind of activity, an *actus secundus*, seems to have arisen from a misunderstanding of Aristotle's saying that his word *energeia* is used in two different ways, for what stands to something as form to matter, and what stands to something as exercise to capacity exercised.

go on in order that living things may come into being and flourish; and that God wants this not because he needs meat and vegetables nor even because he needs a society in which he can practice the virtues of kindness and mercy, but simply for the benefit of the living creatures that arise.

To sum up this part of the discussion, there is no more to the existence of the universe than the going on of natural processes, so whatever is responsible for the latter exhausts responsibility for the former. If there is some purpose for which natural processes go on, then it follows there is some sort of creator – what sort, whether pantheistic or Judaeo-Christian, depends on the purpose. If there is no purpose for which they go on, then the universe has no creator; it exists, and has existed for a finite time, but its existence is inexplicable. This brings us to the question: how can we decide whether there is a purpose or not?

3

I start with a negative point: it is no use asking scientists. The reason is that purpose falls outside the scope of science. Science is similar to skill. We can ask a cook 'What must I do to what to produce white sauce?' but not 'What must I do to what to produce white sauce on purpose?' There is nothing additional I have to do for my melting the butter and the rest to be for the purpose of making white sauce. Philosophers in the past have imagined there *is* something additional: I must perform a non-physical act of will which turns my physical action on the butter into purposive action; but these non-physical acts of will are chimerical.[18] Hence while it is a question for the cook, whether some given action (say melting margarine) will suffice for making white sauce, it is not a culinary question whether some white sauce was made intentionally or inadvertently. Similarly we can ask a scientist by what natural processes a rainbow is produced, or an organism of some particular species. But no additional process has to go

[18] A chimera is a biologically impossible mixture of different animals, a lion, a goat and a snake. These acts of will which are postulated by Descartes, Locke, Mill and others, and which are just like pushing or heating except that they are non-physical, are a logically impossible mixture of different ways of understanding, by causes and by purposes. What is causal is physical and vice versa.

on for these processes to go on for a purpose, and hence it is not a scientific question whether they go on for a purpose or not. If they go on for no purpose, science tells us by what mindless interactions planets and plants and animals arise; if they go on because God so wishes, it tells us how God brings planets and plants and animals into being on purpose; but which it is telling us, science cannot say. To put it another way, just as there is nothing special I must do for my white sauce to be made intentionally, so there is nothing special a creator has to do for natural processes to be a carrying out of his will. If God created the universe, then either 'How did he do it?' is precisely the question ordinary science answers, or it is not a genuine question at all.

So much on the negative side: we cannot settle the question whether the universe is created by scientific investigation. From this it follows that science cannot show that the doctrine of creation is false, but it does not, of course, follow that the doctrine is true. How, then, should we tackle the question of which it is?

Different kinds of statement need to be supported by different kinds of reason. Statements like 'There is no highest prime number' can be proved true only by deductive reasoning, and not, for instance, by observation or experiment. Science simply takes them for granted. Statements like 'Water contains oxygen' or 'That man's death was caused by a stab' *can* be proved true by observation and experiment. Statements about purpose like 'Macbeth stabbed Duncan on purpose' cannot be established either by mathematical or by scientific methods. On the other hand they are not questions about our feelings like 'Is Mozart's music pleasanter than Beethoven's?' or 'Which is more offensive, nudity or blasphemy?' They are questions of fact and we certainly think that they can be proved, since proving them is one of the chief aims of advocates in courts of law. The statement that the universe is created by God, I have just argued, is one about purpose. It is true if natural processes do indeed go on in order that living things may arise and thrive. So how can we prove it true or false?

There is no universally applicable way of showing that something done by a human being was intentional, but that does not matter too much because in general we do not need to prove this. If you stick a dagger into

someone we assume you do it on purpose unless you can show otherwise, unless you can point to some peculiarity of the case that excuses you. The burden of proof is on those who say that the action is *not* intentional – they have to show that it was done in ignorance, or because of some physical abnormality, or something like that. But this does not help the religious believer. God is not, like us, a causal agent within the universe, and the stars, subatomic particles and any other things the movements of which are supposed to be the fulfilment of his desires are not parts of him in the way our hands are parts of us. Hence the burden of proof is on the theist.

A model sometimes used is the *object trouvé*. Archaeologists dig up things which might have been produced on purpose, and decide that some are indeed artifacts even though the supposed artificers are long dead and have left no records. They reach their decision by asking 'Could these things arise without human intervention?' and 'How well adapted are they to human wants and needs?' Can we argue in the same way that the universe is created by God: pointing out that natural processes do enable living organisms to arise and thrive, and calculating that that this would be highly unlikely without divine intervention?[19] There is an important difference. Archaeologists have to choose between attributing what they find to human skill and attributing it to ordinary natural processes. But the issue over creation is whether the natural processes themselves go on because God wants them to. It is not whether God interferes with them or harnesses them as craftsmen and gardeners harness and interfere with natural processes. We think it improbable that, say, a black-figured ceramic vase should come into being without human intervention because we have some grasp of the natural laws governing clay and pigmentation; but we cannot estimate the probability that the laws of physics should foster the emergence of life because we do not know the laws governing

[19] So Richard Swinburne in *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), Ch. 8, especially pp. 144-5, and Ch. 14.. Earlier versions of what is sometimes called the argument *ex gubernatione rerum* argue that the existence of any natural laws at all are evidence of design; so Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, 2. 95-104, Aquinas *Summa Theologiae* 1a q. 2.a. 3. That the particular natural laws we have *do* favour life is argued by Paul Davies in *The Goldilocks Enigma: Why is the Universe Just Right for Life?* (London: Allen Lane, 2006).

laws of physics; indeed, it makes no sense to speak of such laws. The notion of probability can be applied only against an assumption of an existing natural order. Equally we know what skills human craftsmen have and the sort of tools they use; this gives us a basis for judging whether what we find in the excavated tomb was made on purpose. But while we may piously attribute infinite wisdom to God, this is not to attribute to him unlimited ability to shape the laws of nature, and the notion of such an ability, modelled on that of human skill, confuses creating with making.

Intelligent Design theorists do not claim that the laws of nature are produced by intelligent design; on the contrary, their Designer supplements the inadequacy of natural forces produce life. But as I said earlier, they do not enquire what intelligence or purpose is. Employing only causal notions, they equate arguing that something is the work of a designer with arguing that it is intended or designed. The distinction between the two is unimportant to archaeologists. They want to know whether the various things they dig up are produced by the action of human craftsmen such as potters and smiths, or by the action of wind, rain and falling rocks. They reason 'We don't know how this object was produced, but since it has functional adaptation it was probably the work of a potter manipulating clay.' They do not reason 'This was clearly produced by a potter, and since it has functional adaptation, the potter was probably acting intentionally.' Either they assume that craftsmen act intentionally, or they refer the question whether they do to philosophers. But what the theist needs to show is not that animals and plants are produced by a superhuman craftsman, but precisely that the action by which they were produced was an exercise of thought or will. The arguments of Intelligent Design theorists, if successful, can show only that the complexity and functional adaptation of animals and plants must have been produced by agents other than those currently recognised by scientists, not that those agents must have been acting intentionally. That is the price they pay for claiming to be scientific.

Better models, I suggest, than the archaeologist's dilemma are the uncertainties of social intercourse and affection. How can I tell whether someone I know is a friend or an enemy? We usually assume our

acquaintances are benign unless their actions suggest otherwise. But if I like you, how do I know whether you consort with me because you enjoy my company, or just out of politeness or pity? Or suppose I am in love with you: how do I know you are true to me in my absence? I do not doubt you are a purposive agent, but I may wonder whether a particular action has a purpose, and if so, whether that purpose is to see someone else without my knowing. The way in which we try to read the behaviour of those we love is comparable to the way in which we view natural processes generally when we wonder if the universe is created by God. Believing it created is like trusting your beloved; thinking it is not, is like thinking you are not loved.

The question that prompted these comparisons was: 'What reasons are there to think it true that God created the universe?' What light do they shed?

In the first place, any reason for thinking this true must be a reason for thinking living organisms good enough for it to be worthwhile to create a universe for them. That is the starting point. Only if we already have some regard for them and wish them to flourish that we can usefully consider whether natural processes are in fact well adapted to their flourishing. Are all living things likeable, or are all or most of them hateful or disgusting? That may seem a subjective question, but most botanists and zoologists seem to care for the organisms they study. In a famous passage[20] Aristotle speaks of the delight in studying even the smallest and simplest forms of life. J.H. Fabre writes with real warmth about the wasps and spiders in his wilderness.[21]

Secondly these beliefs have practical implications. The belief that something is a human artifact depends on thinking it worth making. We do not judge something was done on purpose unless we see some good in doing it, and we do not see that unless we can share the purpose

[20] *On the Parts of Animals* 1 644b31-645a30.

[21] *Souvenirs entomologiques*; English translation by Alexander Teixeira de Mattos; and see *Fabre's Book of Insects*, retold by Mrs Rudolph Stawell (New York: Tudor Publishing Co., 1936), Ch. 1.

ourselves up to a point. If I think something was worth making, I treat it with care and try not damage it. Similarly if I think that living organisms are good, other things being equal I shall try not to harm them.

The early Christian Fathers were inclined to imagine that believing that God created the universe is simply a matter of being prepared to say he did.[22] But I may assent to a declaration without believing it true or even understanding it, if the consequences of dissent are frightening. Some people profess to be believers while exhibiting little concern even for other human beings, let alone for living creatures generally: whether they really believe that the world continues because God wants living creatures to thrive is quite questionable. On the other hand there are those who, while disavowing any religious beliefs, say we should keep up populations of threatened species like ospreys and sperm whales, not for any benefit to ourselves, not even the pleasure of seeing the ospreys swoop and the whales spout, but just for the sake of the eaglets and whale-calves that come into being. I wonder if it is consistent to think this and also think that natural processes go on for no purpose whatever, since if they have no purpose, perpetuating life may simply be perpetuating pain and misery.

Thirdly the decision whether the universe is good is like the decision whether someone returns your love. That is a difficult issue to settle, though it is surely one of fact. Every kind word and deed is evidence of love, but not a decisive proof. Believing that the universe is created by God involves judging that it is well adapted to the thriving of living things – that it is a good universe to be in. Natural beauty is evidence of this, and there is much beauty in clouds and rivers, rocks and forests. Actual happiness is evidence too, and there are many happy moments in many people's lives. But there is also suffering, and we can resist the conclusion that natural processes go on for our benefit without inconsistency.

What intentions a person has is a question of fact, but our interpretations of people's behaviour are influenced by feelings. Anger, fear, gloom,

[22] This is shown by Jonathan Barnes in 'Belief is up to us', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 106 (2005/2006), pp. 189-206.

elation, and sensations of pain and pleasure can make us misread people's behaviour (this is one of the arguments for trial by jury, since the feelings of the jurors, we hope, are either disengaged or cancel each other out); and if we wish to reach the truth, we must try, as Aristotle puts it, to feel emotions rightly. That is not beyond our power: we can school ourselves to attend to some things and to ignore others, and we can act in ways conducive to reasonable moods and emotional responses. Lovers will be less prone to unreasonable suspicions if they form the habit of noticing kind acts by the beloved, and if they try to act affectionately and considerately themselves. To judge correctly whether nature continues for the benefit of living things we must attend to beauty and happiness, and act with regard for other living things.

To say that our judgement here is influenced by feelings is not to say that it itself is a matter of feeling rather than of rational thinking. Judgements about reasons and purposes are perhaps the highest form of rational thought; but like other forms, such as estimating quantities and probabilities, it can be distorted by feeling.

We have most hope of estimating correctly about purpose if in general we are of good character. A cynical or purely self-interested system of morality inclines people to overestimate the evil in the world and hence to see it as godless. When the Melians mentioned God in their plea to the Athenians for mercy, the Athenians, according to Thucydides, replied: 'We do not fear the disfavour of heaven, for we judge right and we do nothing beyond what men believe of the gods and wish for themselves. Of the gods we think, and of men we know, that by every necessity of nature they rule where they can.'[23] It is a very short step from this attitude to not believing in the gods at all.

Finally, the belief that a human being cares for you involves attributing to that human being the wish that you yourself should behave in certain ways and be a certain sort person; if you do not try to fulfil this wish, it becomes hard to believe that the other person does really care what becomes of you. Religious believers think that God wants intelligent

[23] Thucydides, *History*, 5. 105.

beings to get to know him, and to accept from him the gift of eternal life; according to the 'Penny' Catechism, that is part of the purpose of the natural order.[24] Pascal said that if we want to believe in God we should go to church and use holy water. This strategy may seem cynically self-manipulative, but a good deal of traditional religious worship, the annual cycle of feasts, the rogations, the psalms and so forth, is either based on the changing seasons or relates to the order of nature. People who do not take part in any of this will find it harder to judge that the natural order has a purpose.

We are unwilling to accept that a question can one of fact, yet hard to settle decisively; and hence people sometimes say that since it cannot be proved either that the Universe is created by God or that it is not, the question is one not of fact but of feeling. Our belief that it should be possible to settle a factual question is generated by the successes of science and mathematics since the seventeenth century. Fascinated by these disciplines we forget that most people spend most of their time thinking not about transfinite numbers or quantum mechanics but about human behaviour, and that though a person's intentions and purposes are matters of fact, judgements about them are at the mercy of feelings and cannot be proved right either mathematically or scientifically. Nevertheless they have their own standards of rationality, which our legal system tries to formulate and enforce. So has religious belief. The universe, we might say, is on trial, and we all make up the jury. In an English trial by jury, the verdict is given by the jurymen, not the judge, and although the judge may have a firm opinion upon the prisoner's guilt or innocence, he is limited to giving the jurymen directions about rationality: telling them what they should and should not take into consideration, and warning them against being unduly influenced by emotion. The question whether the universe is created by God is a

[24] 'Q: Why did God make you? A: To know, love and serve Him, in this world, and to be happy with Him for ever in the next.' The 'penny' catechism (still sold for one penny in my childhood) derived from pre-Reformation 'Primers', and expanded over the years; this quotation is taken from a slender version printed in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in 1790.

question for a jury, and the philosopher of religion must play the part of judge, not juror.

Chapter Two
Theological Atomism

Introduction

By 'atomism' I mean the idea, applicable in various fields, that explanation proceeds from small to large and part to whole. A theological atomist would see the salvation of mankind as the sum of the salvations of individuals and try to understand the Incarnation, the Last Supper, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection and the Ascension as successive episodes each making its own separate contribution. I argue that we are essentially social beings, and infer that God can communicate with us, and we can be united with him, only as forming a society. More controversially, I suggest that the Son of God became incarnate primarily in a society, and saved it by turning it into a single supernatural organism, living with divine life.

Atomists are people who hold that explanation should proceed from the small to the large, that the properties and behaviour of wholes are determined by those of the parts of which they consist or into which they can be divided. In itself atomism is a purely philosophical idea, belonging to metaphysics or the theory of knowledge. It may be applied in various fields. Physics deals with bodies interacting in space and time, and physical atomists hold that all the behaviour of every such object can be explained by the laws governing the behaviour of the entities – atoms, sub-atomic particles or what not – of which, ultimately, it consists. The social sciences deal with human societies, and a social atomist holds, in the words of Mill, that 'men in a state of society are still men; their actions and passions are obedient to the laws of individual human nature.'[25].Accordingly, 'However complex the phenomena, all their sequences and coexistences result from the laws of the separate elements. The effect produced, in social phenomena, by any complex set of circumstances amounts precisely to the sum of the effects of the

[25] *A System of Logic*, 6.7.1