

# Some Notes on the Philosophy of Religion: Peter Misselbrook<sup>1</sup>

## A Personal Prefix

I admit to having been hesitant to prepare something for you on the philosophy of religion. This was not because I am hesitant about my belief in God or fearful that such belief cannot rationally be defended. Rather, it is because my Christian faith is not based on Philosophical argument. I find most religious philosophical argument – particularly philosophical arguments seeking to prove the existence of God – sterile and tedious in the extreme. If such arguments can be said to prove anything, they seem to argue for the existence of a God whose character I find it hard to recognise.

I am reminded of an incident recorded in the book of Acts in the Bible. Paul, the great preacher and advocate for the Christian faith came to Athens where he came across Stoic and Epicurean philosophers and an intelligentsia who loved nothing so much as discussing new ideas. Paul met with them in their public debating forum on Mars Hill. He told them that he had noticed that their city was full of statues and shrines devoted to countless gods. But he noted also that they had an altar inscribed "To the unknown god."<sup>2</sup> Paul told them that he was going to speak to them about the God they did not know – the God their philosophy had failed to comprehend.

Nevertheless, "religion" or "religious belief" can be viewed and discussed from a philosophical viewpoint just as we have done with art. And this is what I shall attempt to do.

## Starting Point

Some form of religious belief seems to be practically universal among humankind. Peter Berger, who once argued that societies would become increasingly secularised as they develop, has now conceded that religious belief will not wither away. He now suggests that the secularisation that marks Central and Western Europe is the exception that requires explanation rather than religious belief. It is "a curious case of deviance that requires explanation."<sup>3</sup>

Tim Mawson begins his book, *Belief in God: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, with the observation, "I start with a – roughly speaking, psychological – claim ... At some stage in your life, the physical world considered as a whole – the planet on which you live; the stars you see in the sky: the whole lot – has presented itself to your intellect as something close to a question. The physical universe has struck you as a phenomenon in need of an explanation."

Let me remind you of a passage from that key philosophical text, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. The most powerful computer in the universe, Deep Thought, a computer that is the size of a planet, has been churning away for thousands of years seeking to work out the answer to the meaning of life, the Universe and Everything. Finally the computer has come up with an answer but before giving it to those who anxiously await the result, it warns them that they are not going to like the answer. It doesn't matter, the enquirers insist, we must know it. "The Answer to the Great Question of Life, the Universe and Everything Is ..." said Deep Thought and paused. "Forty-two".

By way of contrast, the great monotheistic religions share the conviction – you might not like it – that the Answer to the Great Question of Life, the Universe and Everything Is God.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was prepared for a U3A philosophy group and was initially presented to that group on 28<sup>th</sup> June 2018

<sup>2</sup> This is recorded in Acts 17:16-32. "the unknown god" may have been a reference to the one supreme god whom the philosophers considered to be beyond human comprehension – though it may simply have been an attempt to cover all bases, i.e. "and here's an altar for any gods we have left out".

<sup>3</sup> Peter Berger, "Secularisation and de-secularisation", in *Religions in the Modern World*, Edited by Linda Woodhead, Psychology Press, 2002, p.340

Many, particularly in the West, dissent from this view. Some will argue that the universe as a whole needs no explanation – to request an explanation is, indeed, at least unscientific and at worst irrational. The universe just is what it is. To quote Richard Dawkins, "In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe we observe has precisely the properties we would expect if there is, at the bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good. Nothing but blind, pitiless indifference. DNA neither knows or cares. DNA just is. And we dance to its music."<sup>4</sup>

There are those who argue that there is nothing but the physical constituents of the universe and that science, in principle, is able to provide a complete explanation of the world. Anything beyond the scope of physical scientific investigation and description is just so much mumbo-jumbo. Alvin Plantinga describes this view as follows:

According to a semi-established consensus among the intellectual elite in the West, there is no such person as God or any other supernatural being. Life on our planet arose by way of ill-understood but completely naturalistic processes involving only the working of natural law. Given life, natural selection has taken over, and produced all the enormous variety that we find in the living world. Human beings, like the rest of the world, are material objects through and through; they have no soul or ego or self of any immaterial sort. At bottom, what there is in our world are the elementary particles described in physics, together with things composed of these particles.<sup>5</sup>

This might be called 'physicalism' (or 'materialist-naturalism', the term used by Thomas Nagel), and it constitutes what we may call a particular worldview.

Those with religious beliefs beg to differ; they have a different worldview based on a different set of premises. In the words of Tim Mawson, "Religions I define as those systems of thought that view physicalism as false, that claim then that there is something outside the physical world that accounts for it: there is something beyond the world that natural science describes and that something explains why there is a world for us to describe and why there is an us to do the describing." (op. cit.)

In this paper on the Philosophy of Religion, I am not seeking to *prove* that there is a God, nor am I seeking to *disprove* physicalism. I am seeking, rather, to provide reasons for a theistic world view and to show that such a view is not irrational – it can be examined and assessed using the faculty of reason. This is far from an exhaustive presentation. Rather, I am focussing on a few points which I think are significant.

## **The universe as a place of order that lends itself to understanding**

It is totally false and disingenuous to suggest that the 'religious' and 'scientific' views of the world are fundamentally opposed. Let me quote John C. Lennox:

As Alfred North Whitehead and others have pointed out, there is strong evidence that the biblical worldview was intimately involved in the meteoric rise of science in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. C. S Lewis summarises as follows: "Men became scientific because they expected law in nature and they expected law in nature because they believed in a lawgiver." More recently, Oxford's Professor of Science and Religion, Peter Harrison, has argued an impressive case for a sharpening of Whitehead's thesis. He shows that it was not

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Dawkins, *River out of Eden*, New York, Basic Books, 1992, p.133

<sup>5</sup> In a review of Nagal's *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False*, available online at <https://newrepublic.com/article/110189/why-darwinist-materialism-wrong>

only theism in general, but also the particular principles of biblical interpretation used by the Reformers that made a significant contribution to the rise of science.<sup>6</sup>

We can turn this point around and ask with John Lennox, "On what evidence do scientists base their faith in the rational intelligibility of the universe?" In his book *The Grand Design*, Stephen Hawking wrote:

The fact that we human beings – who are ourselves mere collections of fundamental particles of nature – have come close to an understanding of the laws governing us and our Universe is a great triumph.<sup>7</sup>

But the Atheist John Gray demonstrates the absurdity of this assertion when he writes:

Modern humanism is the faith that through science humankind can know the truth and so be free. But if Darwin's theory of natural selection is true this is impossible. The human mind serves evolutionary success, not truth.<sup>8</sup>

Alvin Plantinga, as might be expected, expresses the point even more forcefully:

If Dawkins is right that we are the product of mindless unguided natural processes, then he has given us strong reason to doubt the reliability of human cognitive faculties and therefore inevitably to doubt the validity of any belief that they produce – including Dawkins' own science and his atheism. His biology and his belief in naturalism would therefore appear to be at war with each other in a conflict that has nothing at all to do with God.

Lennox presents his conclusion from the perspective of theism:

By contrast, biblical theism is coherent in its explanation of why the universe is (scientifically) intelligible. It teaches that God is ultimately responsible as Creator, both for the existence of the universe and the human mind. Human beings are made in his image: the image of a rational, personal Creator; and that is why they can understand the universe, at least in part. It is not surprising, therefore, that there is a close link between this belief and the rise of modern science in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>9</sup>

It was from this perspective that Johannes Kepler wrote concerning his discoveries concerning the laws of planetary motion, "I was merely thinking God's thoughts after him<sup>10</sup>. Since we astronomers are priests of the highest God in regard to the book of nature, it benefits us to be thoughtful, not of the glory of our minds, but rather, above all else, of the glory of God."

The existence of an amazingly complex universe which is nevertheless susceptible of human reason is evidence that it is the product of intelligence and that we, also endowed with intelligence, thus have power – in our more limited fashion – to understand its workings.

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<sup>6</sup> John C. Lennox, *Gunning for God: Why the New Atheists are Missing the Target*, Oxford, Lion Books, 2011, p.28. He is referring to Peter Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism and the Rise of Science*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design*, London, Bantam Press, 2010, p.181

<sup>8</sup> John Gray, *Straw Dogs*, London, Granta Books, 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Lennox, *Gunning for God*, p.55.

<sup>10</sup> I shall be using the male pronouns – he, him – in reference to God for the sake of convenience. God is without gender nor does 'he' show preference for the male gender.

Expressing a similar sentiment to that of Kepler, the inscription over the doors of the Cavendish Laboratory, the home of the Department of Physics in Cambridge (built in 1973) is, "The works of the Lord are great; sought out of all them that have pleasure therein."

## The Goldilocks Enigma

I now want to move on to what might be considered a second indication of an intelligence behind the universe. I want to look at what has sometimes been called 'The Goldilocks Enigma'<sup>11</sup>, or perhaps, more scientifically, the fine tuning of the Universe.

The very existence of the universe may cause us to question why there is something rather than nothing. Does not the universe demand some form of explanation? But in addition to its existence, the universe exhibits a large number of fundamental constants or relationships which are fine-tuned to support life. If they were slightly different, the universe would be a very different place and life would not exist. In particular:<sup>12</sup>

### Fine-tuned constants

*The strength of gravity, when measured against the strength of electromagnetism, seems fine-tuned for life. If gravity had been absent or substantially weaker, galaxies, stars and planets would not have formed in the first place. If gravity had been slightly stronger, stars would have formed from smaller amounts of material and would have been much smaller and more short-lived.*

*The strength of the strong nuclear force, when measured against that of electromagnetism, seems fine-tuned for life. Had it been stronger by more than about 50%, almost all hydrogen would have been burned in the very early universe. Had it been weaker by a similar amount, few, if any, elements beyond hydrogen would have formed.*

*The difference between the masses of the two lightest quarks – the up- and down-quark – seems fine-tuned for life. Small changes in this difference would drastically affect the stability properties of the proton and neutron.*

*The strength of the weak force seems to be fine-tuned for life. If it were weaker by a factor of about 10, there would have been many more neutrons in the early universe and long-lived stars such as the sun would not exist.*

*The cosmological constant characterizes the energy density  $\rho_v$  of the vacuum. Only values of  $\rho_v$  a few orders of magnitude larger than the actual value are compatible with the formation of galaxies.*

### Fine-tuned conditions in the early universe

*The global cosmic energy density  $\rho$  in the very early universe is extremely close to its so-called critical value  $\rho_c$ . Had  $\rho$  not been extremely close to  $\rho_c$  in the very early universe, life could not have existed: for slightly larger values, the universe would have re-collapsed quickly and time would not have sufficed for stars to evolve.*

*The relative amplitude  $Q$  of density fluctuations in the early universe, seems fine-tuned for life. If  $Q$  had been smaller by about one order of magnitude, the universe would have remained essentially structureless. If  $Q$  had been significantly larger, galaxy-sized structures would have formed early in the history of the universe and soon collapsed into black holes.*

*The initial entropy of the universe must have been exceedingly low. According to Penrose, universes "resembling the one in which we live" populate only a minuscule part of the available phase space volume.*

What are we to make of such fine tuning which suggests that the chances of the universe being suitable for life should be vanishingly small? There are several suggestions:

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<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, Paul Davis, *The Goldilocks Enigma: Why is the Universe Just Right for Life?*, Penguin, 2007

<sup>12</sup> This information can be seen and is documented in <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/fine-tuning/>

- Some suggest that this is just the way the universe is and that it is pointless to seek an explanation.
- Others suggest that there may be scientific explanations of which we are currently ignorant.
- Some suggest that there may or must be multiverses in which all the different parameters and combinations of parameters are found. We necessarily inhabit the one that has parameters fine tuned for life since we (life) could have existed in no other.

Personally, I find these suggestions unsatisfactory. In particular, the appeal to multiverses seems to me to be a counsel of despair – a deliberate, desperate and well-nigh irrational flight from acknowledging the existence of the Creator. In my view, the fine-tuning of the universe seems to argue strongly for a designer and to be the strongest form of the argument from design indicating the existence of God.<sup>13</sup>

## Consciousness and Mind

This paper is only a few notes outlining what I consider to be evidences for the existence of God. It is necessarily (and perhaps woefully) incomplete. It might be good to have inserted here a section on the emergence of life and of DNA. However, I am going to move straight on to the fascinating subject of mind and of consciousness.

This point is related to a previous point concerning "The universe as a place of order that lends itself to understanding", though it is slightly different. Here I want to suggest that human consciousness and the human power of cognition and self-aware intellectual activity are phenomena that defy materialist explanations.

And here I would seek to make use of the highly provocative and seminal work of the self-confessed atheist, Thomas Nagel. Nagel's views are fully expounded in a book with a snappy title, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False*. But, for those who want a summary rather than wrestling with the whole book, Nagel has provided it for us in a New York Times article available online at <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/08/18/the-core-of-mind-and-cosmos/>

Nagel writes,

The physical sciences can describe organisms like ourselves as parts of the objective spatio-temporal order – our structure and behaviour in space and time – but they cannot describe the subjective experiences of such organisms or how the world appears to their different particular points of view. There can be a purely physical description of the neurophysiological processes that give rise to an experience, and also of the physical behaviour that is typically associated with it, but such a description, however complete, will leave out the subjective essence of the experience – how it is from the point of view of its subject – without which it would not be a conscious experience at all.

So the physical sciences, in spite of their extraordinary success in their own domain, necessarily leave an important aspect of nature unexplained. Further, since the mental arises through the development of animal organisms, the nature of those organisms cannot be fully understood through the physical sciences alone. Finally, since the long process of biological evolution is responsible for the existence of conscious organisms, and since a purely physical process cannot explain their existence, it follows that biological evolution must be more than just a physical process, and the theory of evolution, if it is to explain the existence of conscious life, must become more than just a physical theory...

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<sup>13</sup> See, Swinburne, Richard, 2003, "The argument to God from fine-tuning reassessed", in *God and Design: The Teleological Argument and Modern Science*, (Edited by Manson, Neil A.), London, Routledge, 2003, pp.105–123. Swinburne asserts, "It is crazy to postulate a trillion (causally unconnected) universes to explain the features of one universe, when postulating one entity (God) will do the job."

Even though the theistic outlook, in some versions, is consistent with the available scientific evidence, I don't believe it, and am drawn instead to a naturalistic, though non-materialist, alternative. Mind, I suspect, is not an inexplicable accident or a divine and anomalous gift but a basic aspect of nature that we will not understand until we transcend the built-in limits of contemporary scientific orthodoxy. I would add that even some theists might find this acceptable; since they could maintain that God is ultimately responsible for such an expanded natural order, as they believe he is for the laws of physics.<sup>14</sup>

Nagel is arguing that mind and consciousness cannot be irreducibly explained in terms of physical processes and materialistic evolution. There is something truly mind-boggling about the human mind and the self-awareness of consciousness, something that refuses all analysis and explanations in terms of purely materialistic processes<sup>15</sup>. One might think that Nagel should be persuaded that mind and consciousness are pointers to the existence of God, but this is a step too far for him. Rather, he considers that mind or intelligence is a fundamental aspect of all things – right down to fundamental particles at the beginning of time. Human consciousness has emerged because mind and intelligence were inherent in (or with) the physical universe and have come to their fullest current expression in the human mind.

For myself, I cannot concede that mind and human consciousness are a mere epiphenomenon. I know that my consciousness is real and there really is something that it is like to see the colour red or to taste a fine wine or to love another human being. These are not susceptible of reductionist explanations in terms of the firing of neurons.

For myself, I find the existence of God, the ultimate mind and intelligence as well as the Creator of the universe, a simplest and most satisfactory explanation for the human mind and our self-conscious being. God has created us in his image.

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<sup>14</sup> This from the NY Times article cited above

<sup>15</sup> Will Self, however, presents a rather dystopian view of consciousness in his Radio 4 Talk, "Mindless Replicants" for "A Point of View" broadcast on 22/6/18. He writes, "Our reliance on the computational metaphor for our own intelligence may prove to have been as pernicious as our reliance upon computers themselves, both leading to a catastrophic breakdown in the sense of who we are, which, when you come to think of it, is synonymous with sanity itself."

Will Self describes a scene from Westworld in which one of the sentient androids becomes fully aware that it is a machine which is being continually rebooted. This awareness of its true condition leads it to blow its own hardware to pieces with a shotgun.

"The reason the scene in Westworld is so disturbing is that it is perfectly reasonable to imagine it in reverse with, instead of an android becoming aware of the artificial nature of its own consciousness, a biological human becoming aware of ... well, aware of exactly the same thing. Because if the huge advances in cognitive science have taught us anything over the past 30 years it is that our consciousness is, for the most part, epiphenomenal – a side effect of the vast processing capacities we need to simply manipulate our clumsy meat-puppet bodies in and out of cars, offices and homes. Moreover, we all say we are Darwinians, but rather than believing evolution by natural selection to be an underlying feature of organic reality, what would it be like to consciously feel that you were nothing but a robotic phenotype pre-programmed to replicate its own genotypic code then become, quite often violently, obsolete? As for time, if we really are good Einsteinians, we also know that this is a pure illusion, another aspect of our user interface. And moreover, while we may, subjectively, have the experience of our days possessing great variety and richness, the truth is we live a humdrum and repetitive existence, the vast majority of our actions dictated to us by a tiny hierarchy of needs. Looked at this way, the strange and singular moment when the first artificial intelligence becomes fully conscious may have horribly banal and universal consequences for its creators, for, rather than that intelligence, by its irrational whimsicality validating our own, instead, its very existence may confirm us in our underlying and psychic sense that our own consciousness is pretty much by-the-by, since we are little more than mindless replicants ourselves."

But why would the arguments of a "Mindless Replicant" commend themselves to us?

## Beauty and the eye of the beholder

I began this paper with the suggestion by Tim Mawson that when we look at the world (or universe) in which we live, it seems to call for an explanation. Let me now quote from another noted writer, though perhaps not quite an academic, Bill Bryson. Bryson, in his book *Notes from a Big Country*, writes about Fall in New England:

In autumn, as you will recall from your school biology lessons (or, failing that, from Tomorrow's World), trees prepare for their long winter's slumber by ceasing to manufacture chlorophyll, the chemical that makes their leaves green. The absence of chlorophyll allows other pigments, called carotenoids, which have been present in the leaves all along, to show off a bit.

The carotenoids are what account for the yellow and gold of birches, hickories, beeches and some oaks, among others. Now here is where it gets interesting. To allow these golden colours to thrive, the trees must continue to feed the leaves, even though the leaves are not actually doing anything useful except hanging there looking pretty.

Just at a time when a tree ought to be storing up all its energy for use the following spring, instead it is expending a great deal of effort feeding a pigment that brings joy to the hearts of simple folk like me but doesn't do anything for the tree.

What is even more mysterious is that some species of trees go a step further and, at considerable cost to themselves, manufacture another type of chemical called anthocyanins, which result in the spectacular oranges and scarlets that are so characteristic of New England. It isn't that the trees of New England manufacture more of these anthocyanins, but rather that the New England climate and soil provide exactly the right conditions for these colours to bloom in style.

In climates that are wetter or warmer, the trees still go to all this trouble – have done for years – but it doesn't come to anything. No one knows why the trees make this immense effort when they get nothing evident in return.<sup>16</sup>

Why is there such beauty in nature – sometimes apparently extravagant and otherwise pointless beauty? Why do we have faculties that not only can recognise the various species of tree but can recognise and appreciate beauty? What is the purpose of wonder?

Again, I want to suggest that these things are more simply comprehended from a theistic worldview than a materialistic one. As the beauty of a piece of art feeds our appreciation of the artist, so the beauty of creation should (I suggest) promote an appreciation its Creator and even prompt worship.

## Revelation and the person of Jesus Christ

Now here I come to a more personal perspective. I mentioned at the start of this paper that I have little time for traditional philosophical arguments for the existence of God. I find them tedious and unconvincing. If God exists, would he not have sought to make himself known?

As a Christian, I believe that God's clearest and most definitive revelation of himself, his existence and his character, is in Jesus Christ. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus present, for me, compelling evidence – evidence that should not be ignored and evidence that demands a verdict.<sup>17</sup> It is the person and character of Jesus that shapes my own understanding of the nature of God.

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<sup>16</sup> Bill Bryson, *Notes from a Big Country*, New York, Doubleday, 1988. This from a chapter entitled "Fall, its enough to turn me into John Denver". The chapter is available online at <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/brysons-america-fall-its-enough-to-turn-me-into-john-denver-1122660.html>

<sup>17</sup> See *inter alia* the polemical works of the Oxford philosopher, Richard Swinburne, particularly perhaps, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate*, Oxford University Press, 2003

As with many of the other points cited above, I do not expect this to be a compelling argument for those who deny the existence of God. But, as Tim Mawson says toward the beginning of his book, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, those who are atheists will not feel that they need a Philosophy of Religion.

The issues I have been raising are not proofs for the existence of God, let alone for Christian belief. They are intended as pointers, indicative of the fact that "There are more things in heaven and earth ... than are [often] dreamt of in [our] philosophy."

### **A foundation for Moral Order**

Philosophers, even Christian philosophers, seem to disagree over the question of whether without God there is any basis for morality<sup>18</sup>. Sartre reluctantly embraces the consequences of his own philosophy when he writes:

The existentialist... thinks it very distressing that God does not exist, because all possibility of finding values in a heaven of ideas disappears along with Him; there can no longer be an *a priori* Good, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it. Nowhere is it written that the Good exists, that we must be honest, that we must not lie; because the fact is that we are on a plain where there are only men. Dostoyevsky said, "If God didn't exist, everything would be permitted." That is the very starting point of existentialism. Indeed, everything is permissible if God does not exist, and as a result man is forlorn, because neither within him nor without does he find anything to cling to.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, it is evident that many atheists behave ethically and that many atheistic philosophers have sought to present arguments for morality and behaving well<sup>20</sup> – not all share the pessimism of Sartre. It is equally evident that some theists behave badly, some indeed very badly!

I don't intend, therefore, to try to prove that morality *demand*s belief in God<sup>21</sup>. It could be argued that law based ethics (deontology) is easier to maintain if one believes in a supreme being who is a lawgiver and to whom all persons are answerable. However, I want to present a more personal perspective. The Christian is one who professes to follow Christ. Morality for such is not simply following a set of rules or laws but seeking to follow Jesus Christ in living a life of love for and sacrificial service of others. For the Christian, ethical behaviour is irreducibly Christocentric: it is a response to his call, "Follow me" and is an aspect of worship.

Nor do I believe that evolution can provide an adequate explanation for moral or ethical behaviour. It may be possible to argue that survival favoured the development of a "selfish gene". It could be argued that the preservation of the genetic material of our particular tribe or species can be advanced through sacrificial acts by which the life of another is preserved even at the cost of one's own life. But the any evolutionary ethics which sought to defend altruism in this way would have no

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<sup>18</sup> An online search will quickly show just how much of a hot topic this has become in the field of contemporary philosophy of religion as well as indicating the variety of views and the vehemence with which they are held.

<sup>19</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism*, 1947

<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the philosopher Michael Ruse even asserts, "There are those – and I am one – who argue that only by recognising the death of God can we possibly do that which we should, and behave properly to our fellow humans and perhaps save the planet that we all share." See his Guardian article, "God is dead. Long live morality", available online at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2010/mar/15/morality-evolution-philosophy>

<sup>21</sup> Though Marilynne Robinson in *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (New York: Picador, 2005) writes, "The modern fable is that science exposed religion as a delusion and more or less supplanted it. But science cannot serve in the place of religion because it cannot generate an ethics or a morality. It can give us no reason to prefer a child to a dog, or to choose honourable poverty over fraudulent wealth. It can give us no grounds for preferring what is excellent to what is sensationalistic. And this is more or less where we are now." (p.71)

explanation for self-sacrificial actions which sought to preserve the life of the weak or the elderly or of others who do not belong to our own 'tribe'. It could support the philosophy of Nietzsche and explain the popularist racism that characterises parts of contemporary society but could never provide a foundation for the compassionate and caring society that saw the development of health care, abolition of slavery, prison reform, abolition of child labour and provision of universal education<sup>22</sup>.

It is Christian belief, I would suggest, that has provided a clear vision of what the world *should* be like and of what *I* should be like, along with the call to become what we were created to be.

### **But What about the Problem of Evil?**

In closing, I want to consider what is sometimes considered to be the philosophical nail in the coffin of theistic belief, the so called "Problem of Evil". It may be formulated as follows:

- God is omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good
- Evil is that which is to some extent and in some respect bad
- God, being omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good, could never be compelled or have any reason to bring about or allow to be brought about something that was to any extent and in any respect bad, i.e. evil
- So, if there were such a God, then there would be no evil.
- There is evil
- So there is no God.<sup>23</sup>

In broad terms, 'evils' fall into two types. Firstly there are evils which one person (or set of people) perpetrates upon another (or others) such as theft, oppression and violence, murder, slander etc. Secondly there are natural evils such as disease, famine, earthquake, shipwrecks, volcanic eruptions, etc. Doubtless, there may be 'evils' which do not neatly fall into one category or another, but, for the purpose of our arguments, this rough division will do.

The "Free will defence" argument is often used to justify how evil originating in human action can be consistent with theistic belief. According to this argument, humans created with free-will are therefore free to do evil. But had God made humans without such free will, had we been created as beings whose actions were governed strictly by law, we would be little different from sophisticated robots. Human freedom is a good which makes us free to love – though it also makes us free to hate. Alvin Plantinga sums up this argument in his book, *God, Freedom and Evil*, saying:

A world containing creatures who are significantly free (and freely perform more good than evil actions) is more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all. Now God can create free creatures, but He can't *cause* or *determine* them to do only what is right. For if He does so, then they aren't significantly free after all; they do not do what is right *freely*. To create creatures capable of *moral good*, therefore, He must create creatures capable of moral evil; and He can't give these creatures the freedom to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so. As it turned out, sadly enough, some of the free creatures God created went wrong in the exercise of their freedom; this is the source of moral evil. The fact that free creatures sometimes go wrong, however, counts neither against God's omnipotence nor against His goodness; for He could have forestalled the occurrence of moral evil only by removing the possibility of moral good.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> This point was prompted by an article by my brother, Professor David Misselbrook (Senior Lecturer in Family Medicine, RCSI Bahrain), entitled, "U is for Übermensch – why care?" on p.470 of *British Journal of Medical Practice*, 2014

<sup>23</sup> This is a version of the deductive steps set out in Mawson, *Belief in God*, Chapter 12: The Problem of Evil

<sup>24</sup> See summary of Plantinga's argument in

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alvin\\_Plantinga%27s\\_free\\_will\\_defense](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alvin_Plantinga%27s_free_will_defense)

The argument is appealing, but not without difficulties – quite apart from the arguments about whether the human will is truly free. The most serious objection from a theistic point of view is consequent upon the belief that one day God will institute a perfect world – or heaven – in which there will be no evils. In such a final world will humans still be free to rebel<sup>25</sup> or will they no longer be free? If a perfect world can be established by God – a world in which there is no further possibility of wrongdoing – why could it not be so established from the beginning? This appears to be a serious flaw with the free will defence argument.

Furthermore, the appeal to free will does not answer the problem for theism posed by 'natural evils'. In response, Mawson suggests:

My argument is that natural evils are a necessary result of there being free creatures living in a world governed by natural laws and that natural laws are necessary for there to be a world with agents who enjoy the freedom to be less than perfect to one another. Natural evils are the inescapable accompanying features of natural laws, natural laws being the necessary means to the good of this sort of freedom.

I remain less than convinced by this argument for the same reason I have given above regarding the free will defence. Will the final world of 'heaven' continue to contain such natural evils?

I readily acknowledge 'the problem of evil' as one which I am incapable of resolving. However, this does not require me to abandon theistic belief, let alone Christian belief. I am content to admit the limitations of my understanding and to hope that one day I will know even as I am fully known.

## In Conclusion

In 1997 the atheistic materialist, Richard Lewontin, Professor of Zoology of Harvard University wrote:

Our willingness to accept scientific claims that are against common sense is the key to an understanding of the real struggle between science and the supernatural. We take the side of science *in spite* of the patent absurdity of some of its constructs, *in spite* of its failure to fulfil many of its extravagant promises of health and life, *in spite* of the tolerance of the scientific community for unsubstantiated just-so stories, because we have a prior commitment, a commitment to materialism. It is not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world, but, on the contrary, that we are forced by our *a priori* adherence to material causes to create an apparatus of investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how counter-intuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. Moreover, that materialism is absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door.<sup>26</sup>

The theistic worldview and the materialistic are both foundational assumptions about the world rather than provable hypothesis. Each has its own view of the world and interprets the evidence in the light of its presuppositions. My purpose in this paper has not been to *prove* the one or to *disprove* the other but simply to demonstrate the rationality of the theistic view of the world, to highlight a few of those considerations which seem (to me) to count in its favour and to commend it to your consideration.

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<sup>25</sup> The Christian theologian Origen (circa 184-253), argued strongly that the human soul is inherently endowed with free will. He was accused of believing that even after the 'final judgment', when God has set up heaven as the abode of the righteous, there is no guarantee that there will not be another rebellion, fall and further need of redemption – though he denied advocating such a view.

<sup>26</sup> See Richard C. Lewontin, "Billions and Billions of Demons", available online at <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1997/01/09/billions-and-billions-of-demons/>

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