

The Important Questions: a Dialogue

between

Cary Smith

and

Ph.D Candidate

Editors Note: The following Article was composed as an assignment in Prof. John Frame's Apologetics course at RTS Orlando in the Fall of 2002. Subsequently, Prof. Frame decided it was worthy to receive the prestigious "Hall of Frame" award for excellence in writing.

Introduction

God's hand led me to a perfect stranger online – Brad Dale*, who expressed great interest in participating in this project. Brad is a Ph.D. candidate in philosophy at the University of South Florida. I asked him for a brief summary of his views on some of "the important questions of life" – God, truth, purpose and morality. I also asked him how he would summarize what he perceived to be the central message of Christianity. I then sent a response to each of his entries. Our dialogue continues, and will for some time. [*name changed]

Much of it had to be cut out of this paper for the sake of space. I deleted the last section (which was the most gospel-oriented) and trimmed all but the necessities, hoping that the flow of thought would not appear disjointed.

One of Brad's entries is presented, followed by my response, and so on.

Brad on Truth

The question of truth I take to be "What is the nature of truth?" I think that "truth" designates ideas that allow us to explain events and predict them with reliability. Of course, we all have an idea that the truth can't change, but it is clear that our explanatory ideas DO, so don't I mean that there's something more to it? Well, certainly I believe that there's an objective SOMETHING beyond just our IDEAS about how the world works, but it doesn't seem so important to me because it is inconceivable as to how we could ever know this truth. Ever since Descartes, we've known that we can't get outside our

own heads, epistemologically speaking. Everything I think I know may actually be wrong (excepting, of course, Descartes' notable exception of one's own existence). Even if Descartes and his philosophical descendants didn't convince you, you must at least be convinced by "The Matrix," yes?

Response to Brad on Truth

First, let us discuss a one aspect of epistemology. In all fairness, I did not ask you specifically for your epistemological stance (though the topic "truth" provided somewhat of an arena). Nevertheless, I will attempt to respond to your thoughts on knowledge based on what you wrote. I listed below some of your statements (out of context, of course, but the points I want to respond to are clear enough). Some are from your section on God, but they are relevant here:

✍️ "Well, certainly I believe that there's an objective SOMETHING beyond just our IDEAS about how the world works, but it doesn't seem so important to me, because it is inconceivable as to how we could ever know this truth."

✍️ "I figure that the best we can do in this regard is simply to observe this environment and try to come up with reliable ways of explaining and predicting it. What more could one expect to achieve?"

✍️ "If I do not consider the world on the basis of what my brain tells me about it, I do not consider the world at all."

From the statements above, it seems like you consider your brain as your ultimate authority. I would not classify you as a full-blown rationalist (yet), but it does seem like you rely, in the final assessment, upon your reasoning. Your mind is an autonomous evaluator of your experience. And you assume your autonomy in all that you evaluate (I mean that, in all your investigation, there is no source of epistemological authority besides you). That perspective leaves you very little of which to be sure – something you obviously accept.

The Christian epistemological assumption is much different. God is, and God spoke. He therefore is the ultimate source of all truth – He alone can explain what really is. I came to this conclusion, not by mere deductive reasoning, but because the more I heard from God's primary source of communication (the Scriptures), the more the world made sense only in it's light. It became impossible to deny, because its truth was necessary for

anything in life to make any sense at all. So the Scriptures function at all times as my ultimate and final authority and criterion of truth. That does not minimize the role of my mind – for how would I understand the phrase, “Jesus is Lord” unless I inherently knew that Lord and non-Lord are not compatible concepts? It does not neglect the role of my senses – for how would I perceive God’s communication unless I had ears to hear and eyes to see? It does not neglect the role of my heart – for why would I have sought God, if I had not been so empty during the years that I so blatantly disobeyed his commands? But as each of these areas functions properly in my unified personality, they function in obedience to what God has said.

Now before you start drawing syllogisms and pointing out fallacies, please recognize that the previous paragraph was not intended as an explicit argument for Christianity (though I’d be happy to answer any objections to the above). It is a personal foundation that you need in order to understand the rest of my comments. The best apologetic for the faith, I believe, is to point out how non-biblical views fall contrary to what God has revealed, and to show how only God’s truth supplies sufficient grounds to function as normal human beings. Having said that, my friend, let us get into it. You first.

Brad on God

People have different ideas about what essential things a conception of a god must have to still be legitimately categorized as a god. Must a god have a personality to be considered a god? Must a god be immaterial? Must a god be worshipped? Must a god be the legislator of morality? Must a god create the universe from nothing?

Well, I can at least tell you what I think about a very general conception of god. I do not believe in an immaterial, omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent monarch of the universe whose primary occupation is with what's going on in human life. I think that most people would probably consider me an atheist on these grounds. If you'd like further ideas of mine on a more specific idea of god, perhaps you could restrict your question a bit?

Incidentally, I don't really see the question of "God" as one of those "important questions of life." People mostly tell me that finding out about god is crucial because if I do not, I will not reap a reward (or avoid a punishment) in the afterlife. But I figure it like this: If god doesn't exist, trying to come to know him is fruitless for, I think, obvious reasons.

If god does exist and uses the afterlife as a way of regulating morality (and here I also, for simplicity's sake, consider unusual acts such as "accepting Jesus as my Lord and Savior" as falling under the category "moral acts") the important thing seems to be as moral as possible. But God gave me one instrument and one instrument only for figuring out the best way to be as moral as possible – my brain – and my brain is already very hard at work trying to figure out what is moral, per my genuine desire to be a moral person. If I do not consider the world on the basis of what my brain tells me about it, I do not consider the world at all. I must therefore be constantly critical of, but ultimately accept, my own best reasoning about how to be moral if I want to maximize my chances of being moral (which I do).

If so, what sense would it make to punish me, even if I am utterly immoral every hour of every day, if what I say is true: that I earnestly aspire and work to be moral? If it would make no sense to punish me for my faulty brain, and I earnestly aspire and work to be moral what need have I to worry more about the question of God?

So, the way I see it, whether or not there is a god, the REALLY important question is not, "Is there a god and if so, what kind of god is it?" but rather, "How might I best be moral?" since by far our primary reason for needing to know about god has to do with adjusting our behavior.

Response to Brad on God

First, you said, "I do not believe in an immaterial, omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent monarch of the universe whose primary occupation is with what's going on in human life." Good...I don't either. I do believe in an immaterial, omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent monarch of the universe whose primary occupation is with

manifesting His own glory in all that He does. God's concern with humanity derives from His choice to manifest His image in humanity and aspects of His character (like love, justice, grace, sovereignty, etc.) through His interaction with His creatures. All things find their meaning in Him. If He found His significance in something less than Himself, He would not be God.

“Must a god be...?” Yes. But I affirm this only because God has *said* that He is all the things that you mentioned, and if He is, then He is by nature (for He has also said that He never changes). That's not very persuasive to someone in your shoes, but it's not meant to be – I just wanted to answer your question. My arguments will come a little later.

You said, “Incidentally, I don't really see the question of ‘God’ as one of those ‘important questions of life.’” Your justification of this ambivalence seemed to be a refutation of the only reason that others have offered to you for considering the question of God as important, namely, that there are consequences for morality in the afterlife. Sadly, I do not have space to respond to your refutation point-by-point. I will, instead, offer an argument trusting that you will see the correlation to some of your statements.

You did not define morality, but it is obviously not the biblical definition. Jesus said that all the commandments are summed up in two (a perspective completely consistent with Old Testament teaching) – to love God with all the heart, soul, mind and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself. Notice the priority. All morality is loving obedience not to an abstract principle(s), but to a Person (more on that later). Whatever one considers his/her amount of moral worth to be, it is worthless according to the Bible if not conducted for the sake of God. So if the biblical God exists, then your striving for morality apart from Him is no morality at all. But, you seemed to object, “How was I supposed to know this? If my only tool for morality (my mind) is faulty and leads me astray, then how can I be held accountable?” Well, I would respond that God did not give you “one instrument and one instrument only for figuring out the best way to be as moral as possible.” God has made His word available to us, which testifies of true morality. He gave us a conscience and a society of others with consciences that testify to

universal standards and a world that has consequences for immorality. Lastly, God has revealed that by our own choice our race has made ourselves incapable of true morality. Our mind, wills, emotions, etc. are all polluted with a natural desire to rule our own lives (the most irrational thing to do). So again, if the biblical God exists, then your autonomous and intellectual pursuits of morality will not justify you before Him. That possibility, I think, should weaken your confidence that the question is not so important.

You concluded, “So, the way I see it, whether or not there is a god, the REALLY important question is not, ‘Is there a god and if so, what kind of god is it?’ but rather, ‘How might I best be moral?’ since by far our primary reason for needing to know about god has to do with adjusting our behavior.” Not so. Morality and the consequences of the afterlife are not *the* distinctive reasons to pursue the Lord. If the scriptural Creator of the universe exists, then in Him is found ALL true purpose, significance and pleasure. Those are not possessions to wager in a game of chance. The Matrix did not convince me that I cannot know whether or not I perceive reality, but it did provide a great illustration that truth (if accessible) should be obtained at all costs.

Brad on Purpose

Of course, since I generally reject the notion of a god, I also reject the idea of grand purpose. I would like to suggest that the hunt for the final purpose is a sickness that results from the means-ends thinking we humans are so good at. Because everything else in [our] life has a justifying further purpose, [we] feel quite strongly that there MUST be some final justifying purpose at work, even though [we] can't tell just what it is.

I believe that this is a mistake. When we engage in means-ends thinking like this, we seem to do it with a quest in mind. That quest is for some final purpose, which both justifies all other purposes and needs no further purpose to justify itself. The way I see it, this is a tragic consequence of the radiant intelligence of the human brain.

Admittedly, this answer seems unsatisfying, but what can I say? It's the cost of being so damned intelligent as a species – we develop all kinds of horrible neurological side-

affects. In the case of the human tendency towards rampant means-ends patterns of thinking, we often suffer from one of two twin conceptual illnesses – grand delusions and existential angst. I have suffered from both sicknesses in my time and continue, a bit, to suffer from both, even though I DO think they're sicknesses.

Response to Brad on Purpose

My comments here will, by necessity, be brief. Interesting that you note a universal desire for all men to know their final purpose. You consider this a “sickness,” but do not seem to offer any reasoning for that conclusion (explanation, but not support). Based on your comments, I presume your logic goes this way: You do not generally believe in God. You therefore do not believe in any meta-purpose. You therefore see the substantial human longing for an ultimate purpose as a sickness of humanity (since no such purpose exists, and so many people are distraught by their search for it).

Might this human condition be evidence of the God whose assumed non-being is your basis for considering our search for purpose as a perversion? Might this not be testimony that He is the infinite, final purpose that will never be exhausted? Might not our refusal to acknowledge the only qualified Candidate for such a position be the root of our anxiety? Why do we humans live according to assumed universal principles of purpose, morality, love, etc., if only the finite exists? More on that in the next section.

Brad on Morality

I find that my moral thinking aligns fairly closely with that of the utilitarian school of thought. I do have some amendments to their orthodox position, but generally, I think they have the point of morality – making people happy and alleviating their suffering – correct.

I prefer the utilitarian position above all others because it is all-encompassing. How does one decide what to do in any given situation? Figure out how to maximize happiness.

Of course, figuring out specifically how to do that is problematic and has been well documented by conventional criticisms of utilitarianism. I have hope that the age of computers and utilitarian thinking will meet because the only way to do utilitarianism well is to do a lot of polls and crunch the numbers gained by those polls using complex statistical models.

Response to Brad on Morality

Well, I'm certainly glad to hear that you encourage morality, but I must admit that it seems inconsistent with your metaphysics. You seem to want a universal principle by which humanity might determine what is right and wrong, but what would your basis for that principle be (since, I assume from your thoughts on purpose, you don't believe in universals)? Why should anyone be obligated or even encouraged to follow a universal utilitarianism? Why does doing "good" your neighbor matter? Most would admit (if honest) that doing things to others that they themselves consider evil often maximizes their own pleasure – why should they give a flip about anybody else? Because it brings the most pleasure to the most people? What if they are not one of "the most"? Should they care what maximizes pleasure for others? If so, why?

I think it beyond question that all humans appeal to universal laws of morality. When someone skips you in line, you don't say, "That didn't maximize pleasure for the most people." You say, "That was wrong. You *should not* have done that." In essence, "You have done something that all of us (even you) realize goes against 'rightness.'" From whence comes this intuition that the transgressor had any obligation to obey any standard at all?

Look at the world outrage over the African woman who is to be stoned to death for having a baby out of wedlock. It is Muslim law in a Muslim society. Killing her maximizes pleasure for the most people in that nation. What is the appeal of the world? Human rights – universal human rights. They should not kill her, because it is *wrong* to transgress her *right* to live, we say. But why? To what standard are we appealing? If

there is no universal obligation, then all we can say is, “We do not happen to like your practice.” We cannot say it is wrong.

Believing in universal laws of morality is our basis for justice (though some philosophers of law would disagree). What right have we to punish someone for something that we (on our own authority) have decided was wrong? Why is our authority, simply because it is the majority vote, any more appropriate than theirs? It may be more pleasing to more people, but that is not the ground of justice. Justice is seeing that wrongs are righted and rights are not wronged – it is not oppressing the minority with our socio-cultural preferences. Right and wrong, *ought* and *ought not*, imply obligation, not preference – a universal obligation to which we all naturally appeal when we ourselves are wronged.

So it seems observable to me, that we all live our lives as if universal laws of morality exist and have meaning (no one denies that skipping in line to the detriment of another for no other reason than selfish gain is universally wrong). But if they (universal laws) do exist, they must come from an Ultimate Personality. Let me explain.

Universal laws cannot be based on anything finite. Something ultimate, something infinite, must be their source if they are binding on all humanity. But why must the source be a Personality? Because all obligation implies personality. Obligation implies both an authoritative source and a responsible/accountable recipient. We are not obligated by impersonal natural causes (such as the laws of physics). The law of gravity simply exists – it is. And there is a distinction between “is” and “ought.” Does gravity (or any other impersonal law) have “authority” to demand loyalty? Would anyone say that it is *morally wrong* to try to defy the law of gravity? There is no “ought,” there is only “is.” The existence of universal appeal to universal standards implies “oughtness,” which implies the authority of a subject and responsibility of an object. Authority and responsibility are purely personal. Both source and recipient must possess personality. So, obligation implies personality. Universal obligation implies Ultimate Personality.

This is the nature of biblical morality. The one true, perfect God is Ultimate Personality and exists as the standard of all right and wrong. He has made man in His image with an innate sense of obligation to the Creator's nature. Man, who has chosen to disobey, no longer desires such obedience, but nonetheless cannot escape His conscience. God has also made clear His standards through the written Scriptures.

In light of your comments, I sense that you might object that there could ever be a universal law like, "Thou shalt not kill." Are there not instances where this command must be legitimately broken – self-defense, necessary military action, etc.? Yes, but the commandment was not meant to be understood in such a strict sense. The command reflects the principle that the illegitimate taking of life is universally wrong (this is not merely a hermeneutic of common sense, but rather is derived from the other Scriptures). Knowing God's nature and understanding other commands and examples in Scripture provides a basis to know what is a legitimate exception (though not an exception in the technical sense) and what is not.