A Few Stray Thoughts on God

The Misplaced Emphasis on Purpose

Why do theologians and atheists put so much emphasis on whether the universe has a purpose or ultimate aim? Some human artistic creation has no predetermined aim. Children’s play often has no predetermined aim. So what does the question of purpose have to do with the question of whether there’s an intelligence behind it? Even a purposeless universe can be the product of intelligence. Even purposeless design can be real design (as with some art). This idea isn't new - some Hindu thought compares the divine creative process to "play."

For further ideas on this topic, see my essay "What's Really Wrong with the Argument from Design?"

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Why Do People Stick to Creationism?

The reason people stick to creationism is that they are worried about the seeming alternative: a meaningless universe. They don't see that there are other alternatives! One of these alternatives is a universe with a Supreme Being that is not a supernatural creator. This is compatible with science.

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Why People Really Believe in Religion

Religion isn’t just an irrational "meme." People believe it because religious doctrines vaguely match our intuitive awareness of something in ourselves. Religious teachings seem to be describing (albeit imperfectly) something that people already feel. Religion may be far from perfect, but for many people it’s the only game in town - the only thing available that seems to answer their spiritual needs.

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God is One Choice of Two

Russell’s teapot is implausible mostly because it is completely arbitrary. If you believe there’s a teapot out there, why not a brick, or a toilet, or a cat? The assumption of a teapot is completely arbitrary, hence about as probable as lots of other arbitrary alternatives. Hence the teapot is improbable to the point of near-impossibility.

However, the existence of God (of some kind, not necessarily a supernatural one) is not just one assumption out of infinitely many equally probable ones. *God is one choice out of two*. What is the ultimate source of root of things? Either it’s something sort of like a mind, or it’s something not much like a mind. In the first case, there’s some kind of “God” (though not necessarily of the kind most people believe in - it could even be an impersonal God). In the other case, there is nothing that can be called “God.” Either way, the source has to be at least somewhat complex, or we wouldn’t have gotten a universe that follows sophisticated mathematical equations. The source can’t be devoid of complexity either way - and a mindlike source wouldn’t necessarily be more complex than a completely mindless source.

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God Is Not an Explanation

God is not a good explanation of anything. On this one point, the atheists are right. However, this says nothing about the existence of God, one way or the other. God can serve other functions in our thinking besides that of explaining things.

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God Is What You Can Justifiably Worship

Consider this description of God: *God is what you can justifiably worship.* Simple enough - but what would be the consequences if the religions took this idea seriously? If the religions realized that this being might not be supernatural or the explanation of the universe, but might still be real, what would happen to the religions?

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Seeing a Cloud

The poet saw a cloud. It was incredibly beautiful in the fading daylight. It seemed to gain incredible depth as the poet watched it.

A religious person might describe this experience by saying that you can almost see the hand of God when you gaze upon the cloud. But if this is your description of the experience, what does it really mean? It doesn't have anything to do with what caused the cloud to exist (natural processes did that). It has to do with the fact that when you see something like this, you can see the quality of divineness itself.

If you could stand back and look at the universe on a large scale, and really see it, then the universe would have qualities of dazzling beauty. Your previous experience, especially in love, might lead you to think that only a someone could have such beauty. From your new standpoint, our natural universe might not seem like a person (and certainly not like a human person), but still it would seem to you like a someone.

A lovely someone.

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More about the Cloud

When the poet sees that cloud, it seems divine. The quality of divineness can be experienced in various things, not only in a cloud. In love, a person can seem utterly divine - perhaps the strongest possible example of experience of this kind. Thus, when you see the cloud as divine, the experience brings back a web of mental associations that includes, and brings to mind, persons.

Is this how the idea of a personal God begins?

Philosophers have argued over whether the divine is personal or impersonal. We need to add other possibilities to this debate. Instead of “personal” (which connotes existing as a person), we need a word that means “capable of being perceived in various actual entities, including persons” (such as people you love). How about phanopersonal - a word based on a well-known Greek root having to do with showing or appearance?

- Mark F. Sharlow

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