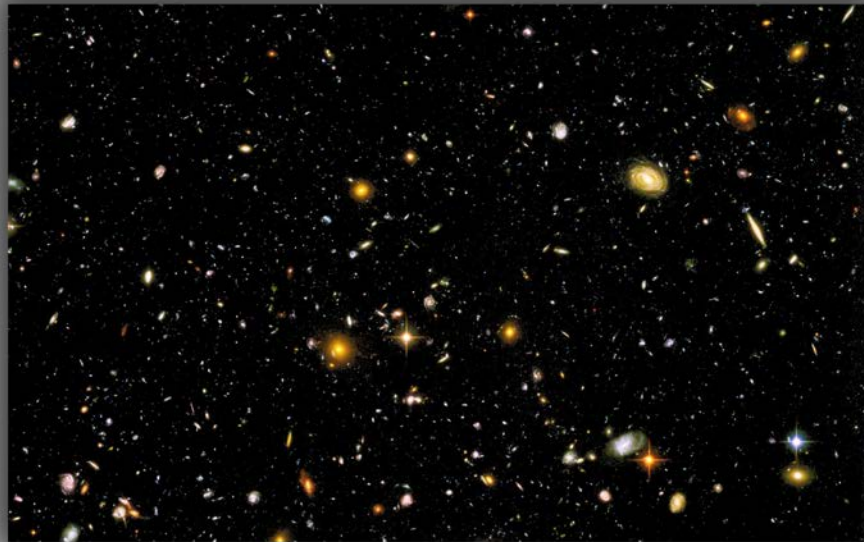


There is No Place that is Empty:

A Collection of Thoughts and Musings
Upon Subjects in Philosophical Theology



Dr. C. Scott Fowler

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**There is No Place that is Empty:
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Preface

It is important for the reader of this private collection of thoughts to understand the process whereby the thoughts and reflections herein have been achieved.

No real attempt has been made to exhaust the philosophical, theological, or scientific sources necessary to “shore up” or defend, as it were, any of the thoughts that are put forward here as the author’s. On the contrary, these reflections are what they are and may or may not represent even a modern view of things. For example, while some of the reflections in the first section attempt to dialogue with Descartes, the author is aware that some of Descartes ideas would have been refuted by research since he first wrote them down. However, in an attempt to simply follow the process of original reflection, the author has allowed himself to simply follow his own instincts to see where they lead rather than to prepare something acceptable to scholars.

The reader is invited to post responses, criticisms, suggestions, or his or her own original reflections on these subjects at:

<https://philotheo.org/>

God Exists

God exists. I would not know about it except that He created me with the capacity to entertain the notion of His existence. From that vantage point, I can make the observation that God has created and, in doing so, has intentionally declared His existence. I would not be able to make that observation were it not for the fact that what He has created is visible and noisy and tangible: presenting itself to my capacity to see and hear and feel, etc. Only an all-powerful God could produce and sustain creation yet would not need to since He would be complete in Himself. And yet He has done it.

God is good. We know this because in His self-revelation, we have observed Him to be inclined toward life. Our ability to determine what is good and what is not is traced back to the image of God in which we have been created. Further, we cannot rightfully imagine what things might have been like had God been evil instead of good, for, in a scenario where God was evil, there would be no life since, as God, He would be *purely* evil in His nature and, consequently, would not be life sustaining. Pure evil arrays itself against life. It is not reasonable to postulate a universe created and sustained by an evil God.

God would communicate. Having begun His divine self-disclosure through creation, even to the extent of creating beings capable of knowing Him, He would continue that Self-disclosure to His own satisfaction. However, being good and predisposed towards life, He would not be content to remain dispassionate but would be intentional and specific. Being perfect, He would not tolerate that which is less than perfect even though everything outside of Himself would be destined to be so. However, being good, and perfect, and intentional, He would not start what could not be brought to completion. That would be inconsistent with His nature.

God would create beings with free will. Creating beings without the capacity to freely love Him or reject Him would only bring about a Self-worship which He would not be interested in. Further, and seeing that all things outside of Himself are necessarily imperfect, the creation of free will beings would necessarily lead quickly to a fall away from God's perfection and into a sin nature. Therefore, from eternity, God knew how He would make it possible for a necessarily imperfect free-will creature to enter into eternal fellowship with Himself.

There is No Place that is Empty

On page 178 of W. t. Jones, *Hobbs to Hume*, Jones gives the following excerpts of Rene Descartes “Principles of Philosophy”:

Principle XVI. *That it is contrary to reason to say that there is a vacuum or space in which there is absolutely nothing . . .* It is evident that [a vacuum] cannot exist, because the extension of space or internal place, is not different from that of body

Principle XVII. *That a vacuum, in the ordinary sense, does not exclude all body.* And when we take this word vacuum in its ordinary sense, we do not mean a place or space in which there is absolutely nothing, but only a place in which there are none of those things which we expect to find there. Thus because a pitcher is made to hold water, we say it is empty when it contains nothing but air.

Principle XXI. *That extension of the world is . . . indefinite.* We likewise recognize that this world, or the totality of corporeal substance, is extended without limit, because wherever we imagine a limit we are not only still able to imagine beyond that limit spaces indefinitely extended, but we perceive these to be in reality such as we imagine them, that is to say that they contain in them corporeal substance indefinitely extended. For, as has been already shown very fully, the idea of extension that we perceive in any space whatever is quite evidently the same as the idea of corporeal substance.

Reading these triggered this response as I reflected . . .

If there can be said to be something called “space” where planets, asteroids, comets, and stars exist and where they are held there “in place” as it were, then it would seem to support the case for a universe filled with a substance which surrounds the objects we see, a kind of matter that we cannot see but matter nonetheless. In this way we cannot say that there was empty space and then the so-called Big Bang, at least not in the space that we think we would observe sans planets, stars, comets, etc. Even the so-called empty place had to be created in order to hold other objects in place. Further, we must ask what substance holds what we know as space in its place? It is not the same substance as what we now call space for it must differ if it serves to hold in place that which holds in place the stars, planets, asteroids, etc.

Descartes said that [my words] the corporeal substance of a planet is in keeping with the substance of the extension [what I take to mean space as we would refer to it today]. But for me it does not follow that we can in any way say that the extension continues infinitely simply because we imagine it to be so. Whatever we decide is the nature of that which is holding that which is extended in place, is itself being held in place by that which makes it possible to remain in place for the objects that depend on it.

Therefore, in keeping with the idea of Primary substance, we must postulate that, beyond the universe we see, and beyond the continuation of what we see (but cannot to the point where it must of necessity leave off where that which holds it in place takes up), there we must posit some substance primary to it, and beyond that, primary to *it*, etc., until we at last arrive at that substance which is necessarily primary to all else. This we call God. Incidentally, this logic is important in response to, even in rebuttal to the postulation of previous universes or other universes. All must stem from a Primary substance.

There is no place that is empty.

Put more simply . . . If I can imagine reaching the end of what we call “space” and find there a wall where space ends (I’m not saying that we would find a wall, just imagining something that would mark the far-

theft reach of the known universe), I conclude that something must be beyond the wall—at least something must be holding up the wall! It may be something completely different than anything I have imagined but it must be, in some way, space that is occupied by that which allows for there to be a wall and space as we know it. Whether space and the universe is upheld by whatever is on the other side of the wall, or to the contrary, if that which is on the other side of the wall is upheld by what we call space, or even if the two compartments as it were are held in equal balance—neither one upholding or contributing to the other being upheld—in any case I must posit that there is something and not nothing beyond the wall, even if, as Descartes stated, we do not find there what we expected to find.

Therefore, as per Aristotle in his *Categories* (5: par. 3), “If the primary substances did not exist it would be impossible for any of the other things to exist,” and since, as per Aquinas, this arrangement “cannot go on to infinity,” we arrive at the place where we must posit something within which all of this must exist, something to which there is no end but also no further wall to be found.

The universe cannot be infinite. Though some speak of *infinite* in terms of how long it will exist—its spatial dimensions (a question which seems mute since nothing that was created could be called infinite as far as time since it had a beginning), I speak of it in terms of how big it is. The two may be sides of the same coin since travelling infinitely would take an infinite amount of time.

For the universe to be infinite in a spatial sense would mean that God Himself could not exist outside of it, otherwise it would not be infinite. If the universe *were* infinite, one would never be able to travel to its ends even if one could dedicate an eternity to it. But this in itself would not require it to itself be eternal. For an entity to be able to extend its force or power to create something infinite, it itself would have to be infinite. But neither does this prove an infinite universe.

If the universe were indeed spatially infinite it would also then be a place inside which God would have to exist.

God's Eternal Knowing

If it is agreed that, due to His omniscience, God cannot have a new thought, and if it be agreed that God exists eternally as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and that as far as we can understand, He must have existed eternally for all eternity past before ever creating, and that since He cannot have a new thought, and since He existed for eternity past, He must have always known, then, from eternity that He would create all that we are able to discern as having been created (which is everything we know except for Himself), then, by implication, it must also be true that He has always known and has always had in His eternal plan the creation of humanity. Consequently, given the nature of what we now understand about DNA and its implications for the unique nature of every creature, and given what we understand about eschatology and the idea that at some point human procreation will end, it can be said that, from eternity past, God knew specifically that He would create every given individual and creature that has been created, and that the number of created human entities will, at last, be a finite number.

All these assertions being accepted, can we not surmise, then, that the human soul, the sum total of which, past and present, currently estimated by some to be around 100 billion, possesses breathtaking significance, suggesting a purpose higher than we have imagined? That is, since God knows all and has always known all, and since the number of human souls is and will finally be a finite number, God has always known that He would create humans (as a general category of creation) and each human in particular, thus making it clear that the existence of each specific human is intentional, and based on the reflection that the Judeo-Christian God is one of love, power, and purpose, and that, therefore, the existence of any given human is of extreme significance and value.

Such a theory does not suggest for humanity a deified nature or that we are in any wise of the same substance with God, or any difference for that matter as it pertains to the substance of humanity as we have always understood it. But rather that there is a purpose breathed into humanity by virtue of the fact that God chose to breath into His dusty creation and that each individual human has been chosen to live; that God was intentional in the creative process, a massive understatement.)

This theory has other important implications as well that answer the "Plan B" view that seems inherent with the way we perceive the fall of mankind in the garden, the purpose of the Incarnation, life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and His being slain before the foundation of the world, namely the inference that somehow God's original plan was thwarted when Adam and Eve succumbed to temptation in the Garden of Eden, and that God was forced to come and die for us in order to make amends to His broken plan. Such a view has God being caught by surprise, operating in problem-solving mode. If all that has been said above about God's eternal nature and omniscience is true, then what can be said about God's ultimate intention in this epic He has invited us into? Could we say that within God's nature is sacrificial love? What is the message if not "I am unsurpassably, unreachably holy, I am love, I am unselfish, I will love, I will sacrifice so that those I love may be made able to love also." The message in the end must have been the message in the beginning, indeed, from eternity! So, far from the shock we imagine He must have felt as His creation fell, it was an inevitable step on the path toward a universal realization by all creation that God is Holy and there is none beside Him. That God is love and there is nothing He won't do to reach us (barring a violation of His own nature and character) even unto death! Can we see the entire story as God's way of introducing Himself to us? Could it be that from eternity God's plan was to invite His special creation into fellowship with Himself and the only way that that fellowship could be lasting would be for creation to take an epic journey in which it would discover Who God is and how it could enter into fellowship with Him? "I want you to know that I am Holy, I am Love, and I am willing to die in order to fellowship with you because I created you! I am Trinitarian in my nature and have invited you into that Trinitarian fellowship, and the best way for you to reach Me as Father is through My Son, Jesus Christ through the agency of My Holy Spirit."

Now, imagine the **profound recklessness of a God** who is willing to create free-will beings—not robots: some pre-programmed to worship, some to murder, some to intentionally create and worship false gods—with the capacity to experience the depths of His love or the depths of hell; with the capacity to worship, murder, idolize; all for the sake of displaying His holiness, sharing the unsearchable riches of His love, compassion, joy, and the opportunity to share pure relational connection with the objects of His love!

At the heart of this theory is the picture of a God Who is Holy and wants to share that Holiness. A God Who is love and wants to share that love.

But what is to be said about God's foreknowledge that, even though it was not predestined to be so, some *would* murder and ultimately choose not to be with Him? What is to be said about God's willingness to bring beings into existence that would live forever, knowing that some of those beings would, in the end, experience eternal punishment and separation? How precious and awesome must be the fellowship that God has in store for those who freely worship Him that He would risk such pain?

Our bottom-up human logic questions the fairness of such an act. It asserts that maybe some have not had a fair opportunity to avoid such an end. And yet our acceptance that God is love demands that we accept that He has done right. That He has given that opportunity to all. That somehow, whether we see it or not, He has done right.

So, what are the implications of this line of thought? We must say that the message at the end is the message from eternity. If the message now is that There is a God who exists in three persons who has invited humanity into intimate fellowship with Himself, and the that the access into that fellowship is through the shed blood of Jesus Christ, then we must concur that this was also the message from eternity.

The LaCugna book has brought light to others who have said that love is the reason for creation. That love is the driving factor for God' decision to create.

Another idea is that it begins to be hard to avoid a doctrine of eternal creation when you ask "If God is omniscient and eternal, how long did He exist before He "chose" to create? The idea applying to my theory that based on God's omniscience and eternal existence we have to agree that at no time were we ever not in His thoughts or intentions for creation. This could lead to a doctrine of eternal creation. But if a man and a woman have the thought and the desire and the intention to procreate, their desires to procreate do not constitute the existence of children. Their intentions will have to be consummated. So with God, His eternal intention to create us does not constitute our existence. Relatedly, if God is all knowing and eternal, and you consider eternity past that God existed eternally before creating then it is not a reach to wonder how the fact of our creation ever came to be at all. Why? Because eternity is an endless time. It is like saying someone literally waited for eternity before doing something. If they finally do it then we cannot say that they waited for eternity. So, you almost have to postulate that somehow God created eternally which cannot be. So, we are left with the realization that we do not understand the existence of God outside of time. If God is perfect and dwells forever from eternity past How can He act? To act would mean there is a future for God; that somehow in the midst of eternity God decides to act. How is it that God's desires do not materialize as instant action? We could almost assert that the fact of God's desiring a thing is practically the fact of that thing's existence. Yet here we have to agree that God has created people with free will which is to say that God has "chosen" to allow freedom, (can we say this?) that exists outside of God's control, if that were possible.

Every now and then I catch a profound glimpse of the eternity of God. I am not claiming that my "glimpse" is adequate, but it is mindboggling. In fact, when my thoughts turn to this subject I come nearest

to those philosophers that I make fun of who question that anything exists at all. As I attempt to capture my thoughts on this page I will make assertions that I will almost immediately rescind.

In thinking about the origins of the universe it is simply illogical and foolish to imagine that it randomly came to be, out of nothing, without a cause. Of course it had a beginning and nothing that exists has existed for eternity. Everything has a beginning. Except God. God exists from eternity.

It is not logical that God should exist, having no beginning. So, the logic which tells us that everything that is must have a beginning betrays us when we consider God. When it comes to God we have to leave that kind of logic behind and allow that somehow God has always been.

If we use the logic that says nothing can exist without a cause, even God, then we have to imagine a time when there is nothing at all—not even God. This demands that there was a time when there was absolutely nothing at all—no matter, no God. This, of course, cannot be. It is not possible for there to be absolutely nothing and for something to arise out of the nothingness. So, no matter how far back one can imagine, no matter how many gods of gods of gods one can postulate, ultimately, God is necessary. Because there is something instead of nothing, it is necessary that god exists.

Reflections on the Literature of *Human Understanding*

So, at issue in the particular works by Descartes, Leibniz, Locke, Hume, and Kant that motivated them to write concerning human understanding seems to be arriving at an explanation for what can be considered real, what comes to us through our senses as opposed to what comes through empirically, and what this says about the universe, metaphysics, etc.

It is confusing to me that proving existence of ourselves, of objects, of the universe is so urgent. To some degree I wonder what these philosophers would say today in light of science. (I need to read Quine who seems to be the modern day heir of this line of inquiry.)

It does seem that a great part of the program is to try and arrive at a description of the above mentioned things without the need of God. A fool's errand. The trouble is that if you disallow God and try to find answers without Him or better said outside Him that will always lead to error.

Is it possible for me to formulate an idea completely unique from any prior influence or sense experience?

Contrasting Hume and Descartes

I recently discovered in my syntopical reading (as per Mortimer J. Adler) a stunning contrast between Descartes and Hume in their approaches to determining the truth of an argument.

In other cases, he proceeds with more caution: He weighs the opposite experiments: He considers which side is supported by the greater number of experiments: To that side he inclines, with doubt and hesitation; and when at last he fixes his judgment, the evidence exceeds not what we properly call *probability*. All probability, then, supposes an opposition of experiments and observations, where the one side is found to overbalance the other, and to produce a degree of evidence, proportioned to the superiority. A hundred instances of experiments on one side, and fifty on another, afford a doubtful expectation of any event; though a hundred uniform experiments, with only one that is contradictory, reasonably beget a pretty strong degree of assurance. In all cases, we must balance the opposite experiments, where they are opposite, and deduct the smaller number from the greater, in order to know the exact force of the superior evidence.¹

Further, supposing now that all were wholly open and candid, and never thrust upon us doubtful opinions as true, but expounded every matter in good faith, yet since scarce anything has been asserted by any one man the contrary of which has not been alleged by another, we should be eternally uncertain which of the two to believe. It would be of no use to total up the testimonies in favour of each, meaning to follow that opinion which was supported by the greater number of authors; for if it is a question of difficulty that is in dispute, it is more likely that the truth would have been discovered by few than by many.²

¹ David Hume, *Of Miracles*, from *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1998), 108.

² Rene Descartes, in *Rule 3* of his *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, Trans. By Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes, Volume 1*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 6.

In response to David Hume, “Of Miracles,” from An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding

In his essay, *Of Miracles*, which is part of the larger work, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume is at pains to describe how we as humans should go about trying to determine the veracity of any particular piece of evidence cited in support of a fact claim. He alludes to a balance between supporting and opposing experience and describes what could be pictured as a great scale leading to an equation, the solution to which reveals which evidence is to be considered superior over its detractors.

As pertains to an undeniable “infallible” experience of a particular event, a “wise man,” having experienced the event, considers his experience to be “full *proof*” that the event could happen again in the future (or repeatable, as it were). However,

In other cases, he proceeds with more caution: He weighs the opposite experiments: He considers which side is supported by the greater number of experiments: To that side he inclines, with doubt and hesitation; and when at last he fixes his judgment, the evidence exceeds not what we properly call *probability*. All probability, then, supposes an opposition of experiments and observations, where the one side is found to overbalance the other, and to produce a degree of evidence, proportioned to the superiority. A hundred instances of experiments on one side, and fifty on another, afford a doubtful expectation of any event; though a hundred uniform experiments, with only one that is contradictory, reasonably beget a pretty strong degree of assurance. In all cases, we must balance the opposite experiments, where they are opposite, and deduct the smaller number from the greater, in order to know the exact force of the superior evidence.³

Having established this foundation, Hume turns his attention to the value of *human testimony*. While human testimony is (or can be) quite important and useful—such an idea by Hume being supported by an arguably cheery (if unbelievable) view of humanity’s “inclination to truth . . . [and] sensibility to shame, when detected in a falsehood”—we should never overturn the maxim that two objects are disconnected simply because human testimony says otherwise.⁴ As with any other kind of evidence, human testimony of past events must be weighed with the variance of other human testimony about past events and with current experience and observation. Hume’s “equation” kicks in and we incline toward the side of the argument with the most believable evidence, doing so with an assurance that reflects the proportion of the evidence that was found superior to its opposition.

Hume lists various aspects of human testimony that come into play when trying to determine superior evidence: contrary testimony/contradictory witnesses, witness character, the number of witnesses, the delivery of the testimony, or a mixture of all of the above.⁵ While these characteristics of human testimony can be seen in either a positive or negative light, Hume leans towards human testimony that is discounted due to the negative aspect of these characteristics: witnesses that don’t agree, that have questionable character, too few witnesses, witnesses who hesitate or who go overboard with their passionate claim.⁶

Hume continues to edge closer to his main thesis by raising an example of someone who testifies to a fact that “partakes of the extraordinary and the marvelous.”⁷ Because the fact, as it were, is considered to be extraordinary or marvelous (Hume is inching closer to the word *miracle* which he has invoked in passing

³ David Hume, *Of Miracles*, from *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1998), 108.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁷ *Ibid.*

only three times to this point⁸), the believability of the extraordinary claim suffers a reduction in proportion to the unusualness

⁸ David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, (London: Wordsworth Classics of World Literature, 2011), on 639 in Section Eight, *of liberty and Necessity*, and twice thus far in *On Miracles*, one in the voice of Dr. Tillotson (page 659) and the other on the same page as a general boast of the value of the argument he is about to pose on *On Miracles*. The point here is that it is obvious that Hume is working his way up to a full throated assault on the postulation of the miraculous.

Encouraged by Atheists?

Somehow, the mass of men have allowed themselves to become preconditioned to assume that philosophers and atheists are *super* intelligent. We expect to read their writings and be blown away by irrefutable logic and insights concerning, among other things, the existence of God. Many of these so-called intellectuals shroud themselves in complex sentences, four-dollar words, insults, and a fiery indignation creating the illusion that they know something we don't and that they know it so deeply that they are passionate about it. It is equivalent to the fallacy that equates truth with sincerity.

I admit that I like to read atheist arguments, mainly because I have yet to encounter any claim refuting the existence of God that was able to hold any water. Scratch the surface just a little bit and you discover angry apologists, many of whom are intellectually dishonest.

Bertrand Russell

Consider the noted twentieth century philosopher and atheist Bertrand Russell who, in his lecture-turned-essay, "Why I am Not a Christian," addressed the "first cause argument" for the existence of God. He wrote:

I for a long time accepted the argument of the First Cause, until one day, at the age of eighteen, I read John Stuart Mill's Autobiography, and I there found this sentence: "My father taught me that the question 'Who made me?' cannot be answered, since it immediately suggests the further question 'Who made God?'" That very simple sentence showed me, as I still think, the fallacy in the argument for the First Cause. If everything must have a cause, then God must have a cause. If there can be anything without a cause, it may just as well be the world as God, so that there cannot be any validity in that argument . . . There is no reason why the world could not have come into being without a cause; nor, on the other hand, is there any reason why it should not have always existed. There is no reason to suppose that the world had a beginning at all. The idea that things must have a beginning is really due to the poverty of our imagination.

Now, certainly one of the most well-known expressions of the First Cause argument is Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). In Volume I, Question 2, Article 3 of his *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas gave five arguments for the existence of God: 1) the argument from motion, 2) the nature of the efficient cause, 3) the argument from possibility and necessity, 4) the gradation of things, and 5) the governance of the world (design). His argument from *motion* goes like this:

Therefore, whatever is in motion must be put in motion by another. If that by which it is put in motion be itself put in motion, then this also must needs be put in motion by another, and that by another again. But this cannot go on to infinity, because then there would be no first mover, and, consequently, no other mover; seeing that subsequent movers move only inasmuch as they are put in motion by the first mover; as the staff moves only because it is put in motion by the hand. Therefore it is necessary to arrive at a first mover, put in motion by no other; and this everyone understands to be God.

I particularly like Aquinas' discussion of *possibility* and *necessity*:

We find in nature things that are possible to be and not to be, since they are found to be generated, and to corrupt,⁹ and consequently, they are possible to be and not to be. But it is impossible for these always to exist, for that which is possible not to be at some time is not. Therefore, if *everything* [emphasis mine] is possible not to be, then at one time there could have been nothing in ex-

⁹ Here, Aquinas is referring to the tendency of all things to suffer entropy, degradation, or to fall into disorder.

istence. Now if this were true, even now there would be nothing in existence, because that which does exist only begins to exist by something already existing. Therefore, if at one time nothing was in existence, it would have been impossible for anything to have begun to exist; and thus even now nothing would be in existence—which is absurd. Therefore, not all beings are merely possible, but there must exist something the existence of which is necessary. But every necessary thing either has its necessity caused by another, or not. Now it is impossible to go onto infinity in necessary things which have their necessity caused by another, as has already been proved in regard to efficient causes. Therefore we cannot but postulate the existence of some being having of itself its own necessity, and not receiving it from another, but rather causing in others their necessity. This all men speak of as God.

The principle behind the First Cause argument is simple: everything that is has to have been caused by something prior to it. However, we cannot rightly conceive of an infinite regression of cause and effect. Therefore, there must be a *necessary* “cause,” or a Prime Mover. That is, there must be some source, outside of the universe—outside of whatever is outside of the universe—that can be said to have been the initial cause of all that is. This requires that we must at least allow for the possibility of a necessary first cause that exists outside of our own understanding and scientific insights. There would be no reason to posit such a necessary force or being except that we *do see the universe*, we do *know it had to have a beginning*, we cannot credibly posit matter that exists eternally, and even if we choose to imagine a universe of universes, or a so-called “multiverse,” we only succeed in pushing the question of a Prime Mover further out. One may imagine as many aliens and universes as one likes: everything has to have a beginning.

The Rule Breaker

Now, that last statement must immediately be refuted in the case of one “thing” or being that must have been eternally present in order to be in position to cause the first things that was caused. At this realization we encounter the need for a leap of faith. That is, in order to allow for all that we see we must allow for a primary, necessary being or force that can be said to be the source of it all. This entity or force breaks the mold and does not conform to the rules that apply to everything else.

For the moment, I am content to bring the discussion just that far. If one wants to imagine some kind of necessary force other than God, particularly the Judeo-Christian God, one should have at it. However, my requirement is that one should have at it honestly and logically.

It is too bad, of course, that Russell was willing to give up his belief in God (if that’s what it was) at so young an age for such fragile reasoning as that which came through a book from someone else’s father. At first blush, one might think there is a debate to be had, for the argument that even God would have to have a beginning is a good first try at arguing against the First Cause concept. However, when Russell says, “There is no reason to suppose that the world had a beginning at all,” he speaks foolishness. Did Russell really think that it was possible that “the world” had always existed, not having a beginning?

One of the ways we know that we cannot posit an eternal matter is that we observe that everything decays. We have not encountered anything that can be said not to be in a state of decay. Therefore, we must imagine that matter is not eternal, has not the power to exist eternally, and therefore must have had its beginning at some point in time, just as it will have its ending.

If there is a God, He must, by definition, exist outside of all other things. The very definition of God is that He must be, if He exists, Self-existent and eternal. One must allow for God to be considered differently than that which He has made. Therefore, there is reason to assert that all created things would have a beginning but that He who created all things would not. Decrying the impoverished imagination of the hoi polloi, Russell used his to imagine an eternal universe but he could not allow, at least in this treatment, for

even a reasoned consideration of the existence of God. Maybe the kind of imagination needed is the kind Richard Dawkins demonstrated in his interview with Ben Stein.

Stein: What do you think is the possibility that intelligent design might turn out to be the answer to some issues in genetics or in Evolution?

Dawkins: Well, it could come about in the following way, it could be that at some earlier time somewhere in the universe a civilization evolved by probably some kind of Darwinian means to a very very high level of technology and designed the form of life that they seeded onto perhaps this planet. Now that is a possibility and an intriguing possibility and I suppose it's possible that you might find evidence for that if you look at the details of biochemistry, molecular biology you might find a signature of some sort of designer. And that designer could well be a higher intelligence from elsewhere in the universe but that higher intelligence would itself have had to have come about by some explicable or ultimately explicable process. It couldn't have just jumped into existence spontaneously. That's the point.¹⁰

So, Dawkins can imagine aliens seeding life on this planet but he cannot imagine God: not just the Christian or Jewish God, but any god. Taken to its illogical conclusions, Dawkins believes against Aquinas that we *can* "go on to infinity" with a perpetual line of causes and movers, never ever getting back to a beginning! Aquinas says Dawkins is absurd.

Now, some godless scholar will no doubt reply, "Aquinas was an unenlightened scholar from the age of scholasticism. We have moved beyond such proofs." My answer to this is that the philosophes of the enlightenment have given us nothing worthwhile to replace Aquinas. Nor have Darwinists given us anything but dogs evolving into whales. Atheists have only given us Dawkins and Hitchens spewing out anger, bitterness, and diatribe against God in order to discount any voice that might want to tell them how to live.

Atheists demand proof of God's existence and then expect the masses to give up their belief in God over such unscientific, intelligence insulting assertions of a world with no beginning or of aliens seeding life on our planet.

A Final Word about John Mill's Influence on Russell

At the outset of this article, I quoted Russell's quote of John Stuart Mill and his father, James Mill, himself an historian, economist, political theorist, and philosopher. He was also an ordained minister of the Church of Scotland. Here is a reminder of Russell's statement:

I for a long time accepted the argument of the First Cause, until one day, at the age of eighteen, I read John Stuart Mill's Autobiography, and I there found this sentence: "*My father taught me that the question 'Who made me?' cannot be answered, since it immediately suggests the further question 'Who made God?'*" That very simple sentence showed me, as I still think, the fallacy in the argument for the First Cause.

Here is the *actual* quote from Mill's *Autobiography*:

It would have been wholly inconsistent with my father's ideas of duty, to allow me to acquire impressions contrary to his convictions and feelings respecting religion: and *he impressed upon me from the first, that the manner in which the world came into existence was a subject on which nothing was known: that the question, "Who made me?" cannot be answered, because we have no expe-*

¹⁰ Dialogue taken from the documentary on Intelligent Design, "Expelled," featuring Ben Stein (begin listening at 1:16:24).

*rience or authentic information from which to answer it; and that any answer only throws the difficulty a step further back, since the question immediately presents itself, "Who made God?"*¹¹

Russell's inaccurate quotation makes the elder Mill's position much meaner and seem more premeditated, seemingly grouping him in with atheism. However, according to Mill, his father was greatly influenced by and spoke with respect for a book called *Butler's Analogy*, which "kept him, as he said, for some considerable time, a believer in the divine authority of Christianity."

Mill's father wrestled with questions of creation and the inspiration of scripture. Mill's father struggled with the presence of evil in the world, hell, and the creed of Christianity which he considered to be evil, thus he struggled with institutional Christianity.¹² Ultimately, he found no "halting place in Deism [and] remained in a state of perplexity, until, doubtless after many struggles, he yielded to the conviction, that, concerning the origin of things nothing whatever can be known. This is the only correct statement of his opinion; for dogmatic atheism he looked upon as absurd; as most of those, whom the world has considered Atheists, have always done."

Finally, Mill's testimony above was that his father was committed to making sure that his son shared his own convictions in these matters. Interestingly, Mill characterized himself as "one who has not thrown off religious belief, but never had it: I grew up in a negative state with regard to it."¹³

¹¹ John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography*, Seventh Edition, (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1882), 43.

¹² *Ibid.*, 38-42.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 43.

The Universe Cannot Be Infinite

For the universe to be infinite would mean that God Himself could not exist outside of it, otherwise it would not be infinite. If the universe were infinite one would never be able to travel to its ends even if one could dedicate an eternity to it. But this in itself would not require it to itself be eternal. However, for an entity to be able to extend its force or power to create something infinite, it itself would have to be infinite. Therefore it would be eternal. Therefore, the universe would be eternal and thus, uncreated. It would also then become a place where God would have to exist.

The statement that the universe is not infinite is not a bombshell statement but it does lead to other important observations.

The Kenotic Problem

“Kenosis” or “kenotic theology,” at least in its modern form, can be said to be “the kenotic problem,” arising as it does as a solution to the difficulty that some have in accepting Jesus’ full humanity and divinity. Put another way, there has been much discussion, particularly since the time of Gottfried Thomasius (1802-1875), concerning the meaning of Jesus’ emptying Himself at the Incarnation, as Paul writes in Philippians 2:5-8:

⁵ Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: ⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, ⁷ but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!

The crux of kenotic theory is the struggle to accept that, somehow, Jesus was able to be fully man and fully God, particularly in the area of God the Son’s omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence. In other words, Jesus had to voluntarily lay aside these divine attributes in order to assume full humanity.

Thomasius— a German theologian and the originating source of modern kenotic theory—wrote in the wake of the enlightenment period—after Hume and Voltaire!¹⁴ It was part and parcel of the times, with the introduction of modern biblical criticism, to question what had always been believed about Jesus’ human and divine natures, in order to make it palatable to rational minds. Wayne Grudem explains that before 1800 there was no kenotic theory.

Beginning with this text [Philippians 2:5-7], several theologians in Germany (from about 1860-1880) and in England (from about 1890-1910) advocated a view of the incarnation that had not been advocated before in the history of the church. . . . We must first realize that no recognized teacher in the first 1,800 years of church history, including those who were native speakers of Greek, thought that “emptied himself” in Philippians 2:7 meant that the Son of God have up some of his divine attributes. . . . It is important to realize that the major force persuading people to accept kenotic theory was not that they had discovered a better understanding of Philippians 2:7 or any other passage of the New Testament, but rather the increasing discomfort people were feeling with the formulations of the doctrine of Christ in historic, classical orthodoxy. It just seemed too incredible for modern rational and “scientific” people to believe that Jesus Christ could be truly human and fully, absolutely God at the same time¹⁵. . . . If we limit our understanding to what modern psychology tells us is “possible” or “conceivable,” then we will have neither a sinless Christ nor a divine Christ. In this as in many other points of doctrine, our understanding of what is “possible” must be determined not by modern empirical study of a finite, fallen world, but by the teaching of Scripture itself.¹⁶

Not that God the Son’s self-emptying was not discussed by the early church fathers, but, prior to Thomasius, there was no belief that there had been any voluntary setting aside of Christ’s divine attributes.

The Philippians Passage

¹⁴ Elwell, W. A. (2001). *Evangelical dictionary of theology: Second Edition* (651–653). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

¹⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 549-551.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, footnote 30, page 551.

The plain reading of the Philippians passage does not indicate the laying aside of attributes. One must go out of context in order to postulate such a theory. In his book, *Pauline Christology*, Gordan Fee asserts that “the nature of the self-limitations that Christ imposed upon himself by becoming incarnate is simply not in Paul’s purview.”¹⁷

The question, then, is not *what* Christ emptied himself of, but *how else* Paul could possibly have expressed the divine mystery of God incarnate except by this kind of powerful imagery. Historically, far too much has been made of the verb, as though, in becoming incarnate, he literally “emptied himself” of *something*. However, just as harpagmon requires no object for Christ to “seize” but rather points to what is the opposite of God’s character, so also Christ did not empty himself of anything; he simply “emptied *himself*,” poured himself out, as it were. Thus, the issue for Paul is the selflessness of God, expressed by the preexistent divine Son, whereby in “becoming human” he took the morphe of a slave—one who expressed his humanity in lowly service to others.¹⁸

The context of the passage does not support the idea of God the Son being divested, either voluntarily or otherwise, of His divine attributes, nor does exegesis of the Greek support such an idea, according to Fee.¹⁹

It has been noted that Paul was not asking the Philippians to stop being human or to give up anything intrinsic to their human nature, but rather to take on a different attitude; a different mindset. This attitude or mindset was exemplified in Jesus Christ who did not allow His deity to keep Him from debasing Himself in order to look not simply to His own interests but to the interests of others. It must be agreed that this is the thrust of the passage and to superimpose a new theological idea, foreign to Paul, his readers, and, indeed, to the Church in its first 1800 years, is to violate the accepted rules of hermeneutics.

Persistent Problem

So, if the context and even the Greek grammar underpinning the Philippians passage do not support the idea of a voluntary setting aside of God the Son’s divine attributes, why does the kenotic problem persist? The problem arises, as it did for Thomasius, when Christians encounter difficulty in explaining the miraculous to rational minds. In other words, just as Grudem said above, it becomes “too incredible for modern rational and ‘scientific’ people to believe that Jesus Christ could be truly human and fully, absolutely God at the same time.”²⁰

Some Thoughts on Kenosis

The arguments

The prophecy “only the Father knows” scripture

The infancy dilemma

The “full assumption” argument

The “trickery” argument: Jesus was pretending to be ignorant in order to trick people.

(In response see John 1:9)

⁹ The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. ¹¹ He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.

¹⁷ Gordan Fee, *Pauline Christology*, (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrikson Publishers, 2007), 384.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Gordon Fee, *Pauline Christology*, (Hendrikson Press: 2007), 384-385.

²⁰ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 549-551.

Also consider the Messianic Secret.)

My questions:

In what way was the second person of the Godhead holding all things together by the power of His word (Heb. 1) while He was marooned on earth without His powers?

At what point does Jesus “learn” that He is God?

What of Jesus’ memory of His time with the Father prior to His incarnation (John 17:5)?

What about, “If you’ve seen me, you’ve seen the Father”?

What about, “I and the Father are one (John 10:30)” and the rest of John 10?

Note: This statement from Jesus was understood to be a claim to deity. His saying this, in their estimation, meant He was claiming to be God. They would never have understood that to be God in some lesser way.

If Jesus and the Father are one, and if Jesus is in the Father and the Father is in Jesus, and if the Son does all that the Father does and vice versa, would it not require that Jesus would know what the Father knows, even if by revelation? And if so such knowledge revealed would still equal that of omniscience. If not, aren’t we picturing a Jesus who is not completely one with the Father? If you or I were completely one with the Father would we not be exalted beyond measure?

What about the statement, ⁵⁷“You are not yet fifty years old,” the Jews said to him, “and you have seen Abraham!”

⁵⁸“I tell you the truth,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I am!” ⁵⁹At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds (John 8).

Does the Son *still* not know when the Father will return?

What roll does knowledge or lack of knowledge play in our susceptibility to temptation?

³²“But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”²¹

³⁶“No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”²²

Starting from an unbiased position: the total deity and the total humanity of Jesus Christ.

If you were to delay interpretation of the various kenosis-evidence scriptures and purely define what “100% God” means, you would not be inclined to leave out any of His attributes. In any other discussion about God, if someone said “I don’t believe that God is all-knowing” you would likely and properly assert that it would be impossible for God to be God without all knowledge. A sensible understanding of the source and substance of a divine attribute is required here, taking into account that a genuine attribute is something rises from one’s actual being, not a learned or forced behavior. Further, in any other situation we would agree that one could hide and attribute but not cease being a person with a particular attribute rising from their being.

²¹ *The New International Version*. 2011 (Mk 13:32). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

²² *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. 1984 (Mt 24:36). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

So, I am asking for at least a temporary effort towards objectivity, allowing ourselves to wrestle for a while with the conundrum of Jesus Christ truly being fully man and fully God without either nature having to yield something intrinsic in order to accommodate the other. This requires for a while at least to imagine that somehow Jesus was able to retain the limitations of humanity and yet, as God, retain full deity, without rushing into explanations or theories.

Following this, I would ask for a rational accounting of the logical, hermeneutical steps that lead to the kenotic theory.²³ For instance, the kenotic theory, while hanging its hat on the Philippians 2 passage, actually arises as the result of a difficulty in understanding how Jesus Christ could have been, while on the earth, fully man and fully God, the main arguments being located in the two verses that have Jesus declaring His “ignorance” of the day of the Son’s return, the fact of the Incarnation and Jesus Christ as an infant, passages that describe the growth of Jesus as a man, and even passages where Jesus wrestles with human situations such as the Garden of Gethsemane, the tomb of Lazarus, etc.

In response to the difficulty of reconciling these passages to our human understanding, scholars in the 1800’s, namely Gottfried Thomasius (1802-75), a German Lutheran theologian.^{24 25} At this point, Philippians 2:3-8 is marshaled into service of the new theory:

³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. ⁴ Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

⁵ Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

⁶ Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
⁷ but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
⁸ And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

Yet, the context of the passage does not support the idea of God the Son being divested, either voluntarily or otherwise, of His divine attributes, nor does exegesis of the Greek support such an idea, according to Gordon Fee.²⁶

It has been noted that Paul was not asking the Philippians to stop being human or to even give up anything intrinsic to their human nature, but rather to take on a different attitude; a different mindset. This attitude or mindset was exemplified in Jesus Christ who did not allow His deity to keep Him from debasing Himself in order to look not simply to His own interests but to the interests of others. It must be agreed that this is the thrust of the passage and to superimpose a new theological idea, foreign to Paul, his readers, and, indeed, to the Church in its first 1800 years, is to violate the accepted rules of hermeneutics.

The scriptures seemingly declaring the Son’s ignorance of the Son’s return are Son of man passages.

What role does knowledge play in one’s vulnerability to temptation or in escaping from it?

²³ There are many shades of kenotic theory. What is meant here is the typical view of God the Son being emptied of some of His attributes.

²⁴ Ellwell’s Theological Dictionary, “Kenotic theology can be said to have begun as a serious form of reflection on Christology in the works of Gottfried Thomasius (1802–75), a German Lutheran theologian.”

²⁵ It is important to consider that while Thomasius and others were rediscovering Jesus’ environment, they were products of their own environment: the Age of Reason, or the Enlightenment.

²⁶ Gordon Fee, *Pauline Christology*, (Hendrikson Press: 2007), 384.

God cannot be tempted.

The argument which mocks the idea of the omniscient infant Jesus is a brutal slap, seemingly effective argument when in reality it is based purely on human reasoning.

The Definition of Chalcedon

Following, then, the holy fathers, we unite in teaching all men to confess the one and only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. This selfsame one is perfect both in deity and in humanness; this selfsame one is also actually God and actually man, with a rational soul {meaning human soul} and a body. He is of the same reality as God as far as his deity is concerned and of the same reality as we ourselves as far as his humanness is concerned; thus like us in all respects, sin only excepted. Before time began he was begotten of the Father, in respect of his deity, and now in these "last days," for us and behalf of our salvation, this selfsame one was born of Mary the virgin, who is God-bearer in respect of his humanness.

We also teach that we apprehend this one and only Christ-Son, Lord, only-begotten -- in two natures; and we do this without confusing the two natures, without transmuting one nature into the other, without dividing them into two separate categories, without contrasting them according to area or function. The distinctiveness of each nature is not nullified by the union. Instead, the "properties" of each nature are conserved and both natures concur in one "person" and in one reality {hypostasis}. They are not divided or cut into two persons, but are together the one and only and only-begotten Word {Logos} of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus have the prophets of old testified; thus the Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us; thus the Symbol of Fathers {the Nicene Creed} has handed down to us.

What attributes would you say that Jesus had as God that were exactly as He was in heaven pre-incarnate? Can you truly say that He would have had any attribute of God in its fullness and still retain the fully humanity just like any other man? Really? Surely love is the nature of God. Surely Jesus held onto that attribute. But would it really be possible for Jesus to be a normal man with normal human perceptions and at the same time be love? Wouldn't the wreckless, raging fury of the love of God have swept away the humanity of Jesus? Any attribute of God in its fullness would overwhelm man in his flesh. Have we so accommodated God to ourselves that we imagine we could for one instant stand in His Presence as we are in our flesh? It is always only the mercy of God that allows us to perceive Him at all. For these reasons, don't we have to allow that either Jesus set aside all of His attributes or He somehow, miraculously found a way to retain them all while at the same time embracing humanity?

What about His holiness? This is one of the relational divine attributes Jesus is said to have retained. Really? What happened with John the Revelator, Isaiah, and the priests ministering at the inauguration of Solomon's Temple when the holiness of God was present (Revelation 1, Isaiah 6, 1 Kings 8)? Don't we have to say that Jesus set aside the fullness of His holiness in order to be able to dwell with man? Would not His holiness, unlimited by the incarnation, have been overwhelming to those around Him?

He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love Me?" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." Jesus said to him, "Tend My sheep" (John 21:17--NASB).

I understand that you are saying it does not make logical sense that Jesus could somehow be a man with the typical lack of knowledge a man would have and at the same time be God with the omniscience that God would have.

Also, you have trouble with an omniscient infant, but

Barnes' commentary states: "*This text has always presented serious difficulties. It has been asked, If Jesus had a divine nature, how could he say that he did not know the day and hour of a future event? Some have said that the verb rendered "knoweth" means sometimes to "make" known or to reveal, and that the passage means, "that day and hour none makes known, neither the angels, nor the Son, but the Father."* It is true that the word has sometimes that meaning, as in 1 Cor 2:2, but then it is natural to ask where has "the Father" made it known? (from Barnes' Notes)

Consider also Acts 1:6-7:

⁶ So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

⁷ He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority."²⁷

²⁷ *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. 1984 (Ac 1:6-7). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

The Euthyphro Problem

The question whether things are good because God wills them or God wills them because they are good. These two aspects of the question do not do justice to a Judeo/Christian Biblical worldview.

Any concept we have of what is good must stem from God's self-revelation. If we follow Judeo/Christian concepts and teachings concerning God and creation we see that our first glimpse at what is good comes from God in His creative act. In Genesis 1:1-3 we learn that God called light into existence, observed what He had done, and made the assessment that it was good.

If we ignore the Bible and its concepts and look at the universe from strictly naturalistic or evolutionary perspectives, we would have to say that our concept of good begins with a process the outcome of which is a perpetual, predictable, measureable system (order from chaos). Once such a system is seen as one which is favorable to and sustaining of life we come closer still to being able to distinguish between that which is good (pro-life) and that which is either hostile to or anti-life.

Approaching the discussion from the Judeo/Christian concept and understanding of God and the universe (where it rightly belongs and can best be viewed and discussed), we realize that we cannot make a separate postulation about "the good" or that which is good or good as universal or nominal category outside of God's self-revelation and His revelatory acts in creation. The concept of goodness is only known to us because of God. Therefore, the question as to whether something is good because God wills it or God wills it because it is good is an inadequate framing of the larger question of goodness. God is good. We know this because in His self-revelation, we have observed Him to be inclined toward life. Our ability to determine what is good and what is not is traced back to the image of God in which we have been created. Further, we cannot rightfully imagine what things might have been like had God been evil instead of good. In a scenario where God was evil there would be no life since, as God, He would be pure in His nature and, consequently would not be life sustaining. It is not reasonable to postulate a universe created and sustained by an evil God.

Time

“Life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans.”¹

The Fleeting Nature of the “Present”

Gerhart B. Ladner, in his work *The Idea of Reform*, examines in some detail St. Augustine’s theory of *time*. He writes,

“How can we experience time if it is continuously passing? This is the problem of time in Augustine’s *Confessions*. The past of a thing no longer exists even in the immediately following instant and the future does not yet exist. The present, indivisible as it is—otherwise it would be part past and part future—is so closely ‘crowded in’ by past and future that Augustine exclaims almost in despair: *praesens autem non hebet spatium* [‘the present hath no space’]. If then we nevertheless experience and measure time, we can do so only by means of memory and expectation which are in our soul: memory of the past and expectation of the future.”²

Augustine lamented the fleeting nature of the present, regretting that there was no handle by which to hold it. As soon as we welcome the future into the present it slips into the past. Augustine was able to observe this even in a time when technology had not yet made it possible to measure the speed of light or to break things down digitally so as to be able to “see” the passing of time in terms of microseconds (a microsecond is one millionth of a second; it takes 300 to 400 microseconds for an eye to blink!).³ Technology has allowed us to see that what can properly be referred to as “the present” is actually so short-lived as to be practically non-existent. Apparently, the smallest scientifically meaningful measurement of time is the amount of time it takes light to travel a *Planck length*. A Planck length is

$1.61619926 \times 10^{-35}$ meters

I don’t know what that means other than that it is some fractional measurement of time, and that it is shorter than something called a *yoctosecond* which is one septillionth of a second.⁴ Augustine said,

“If any portion of time be conceived which cannot now be divided into even the minutest particles of moments, this only is that which may be called present.”⁵

So, in our times, technology has reduced what can be considered “the present” into *Planck lengths* (notated l_p) and *yoctoseconds*.

The Speed of Time

According to Einstein, “light, traveling in a vacuum, is the universal speed limit.”⁶ One might conjecture that the only thing faster than light is time itself (which seems like a nonsense statement until you *Google* it and read the discussion threads). Augustine lived in Hippo Regius (modern Annaba in Algeria), considered to be a major Roman city. Though life in the city would have been more hectic than life in the country, Augustine’s life would have been much less hectic and hurried than our lives today for one simple reason at least: the pace and flow of information and travel. Our ability today to send and receive information, along with our travel capabilities, allows us to live at a pace that would dumbfound Augustine. It also creates an almost insurmountable obstacle for the person who wants to live a contemplative, reflective, thoughtful life because our busy-ness and ability to be productive masks the reality that time is passing by at an alarming rate. This, in turn, has the tendency to prohibit us from being emotionally and spiritually available. If asked whether we consider time to be important, our resounding answer would be, “Yes!” but

that's because we see time as something we need more of so that we can get more things done. However, there are some things that force us to slow down and consider time in a different way—the death of a friend or loved one, our children growing up and moving away, an event giving us a glimpse of our own mortality. In those moments we realize that while we were busy making other plans, time was relentlessly flowing past at a pace faster than the speed of light, robbing us of our most precious opportunities in this life to connect with people and with God.

So, while technology has allowed us to measure the passing of time in astonishingly fractional increments, it has also so increased our capacity for production and busyness so that it detracts from our using time as an ally in an effort to be emotionally and spiritually available. Instead of looking at the rapid passing of time and allowing it to motivate us to greater relational and spiritual depths, we instead look at the passing of time and say, “I need to get more done.”

Impressions

At one point in his *Confessions* Augustine said that he measured the present by taking note of the impressions left upon him by people, things, and events that have already slipped into the past.

In you, my mind, do I measure the times. . . . I measure as present the very impression (*affectionem*) which the things which pass away have had on you and which remains after they have passed away; when I measure the times, I measure that impression and not the things which have passed away . . .⁷

This is a profound observation, for not only have things, events, and people left their impressions upon us, even though they have long since passed away (or are in the process of passing), but we must also realize that we too are making impressions as we pass.

God's Time

Ironically, though it would seem that the present is all but non-existent, *in God*, the One Who lives outside of time, the present is all there is. (Reread that sentence and let it sink in. I'll wait...) At this juncture, I actually have two choices. I can follow my own instincts, and the instincts of my American culture and try to squeeze all of the productive juice out of every yoctosecond, or I can connect with God and align myself with His time. What does this say about how we should live? How we should live our lives *in God*?

Time is passing by. Technology has allowed me to fill my time with efforts at productivity and to travel. Because technology has increased production and travel efficiency, I do not experience “the present” like I might if I were not trying to pack so much productivity into my life.

If the present is so short that it immediately becomes the past, and if in fact we are rushing headlong into the future, what does this say about how we should live?

Augustine's perspective that time is best measured by measuring the impressions that things, events, and people have left on us, all of which have now slipped into the past, what does this say to us about how we should live? What kind of impression will we leave?

NOTES

¹ Usually attributed to John Lennon in his song, "Beautiful Boy (Darling Boy)"; "Similar expressions were used by others prior to Lennon's use of this line, and have been attributed to Betty Talmadge, Thomas La Mance, Margaret Millar, William Gaddis, and Lily Tomlin, but the earliest known published occurrence was the 1957 attribution of "Life is what happens to us while we are making other plans" to Allen Saunders in *Reader's Digest*, according to *The Quote Verifier: Who Said What, Where, and When* (2006) by Ralph Keyes http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/John_Lennon

² Garhart B. Ladner, *The Idea of Reform: Its Impact on Christian Thought and Action in the Age of the Fathers*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959), 203. The Latin phrase trans. is J. G. Pilkington's as found in the *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, edited by Philip Schaff (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), 169.

³ <http://entertainment.howstuffworks.com/olympic-timing.htm>;
<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/01/technology/impatient-web-users-flee-slow-loading-sites.html?pagewanted=all&r=1&>; <http://olympics.time.com/2012/07/27/technologys-touch-how-a-photo-finish-in-the-olympic-pool-gets-resolved/>.

⁴ http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What_is_the_smallest_unit_of_measurement_in_time
http://wiki.answers.com/Q/Which_is_smaller_Planck_time_or_yoctosecond

⁵ *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, edited by Philip Schaff, *Confessions*, trans. Pilkington, (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), 169.

⁶ Jamie Conliffe, "Did Scientists Really Just Break the Speed of Light?" (Gizmodo, May 7, 2012) <http://gizmodo.com/5908206/did-scientists-really-just-break-the-speed-of-light>

⁷ Compare Ladner's quote of M. Skutella's translation of Book 11, Ch. 26:36 (Ibid., 204) with that of J. G. Pilkington's as found in the *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, edited by Philip Schaff (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), 173.

Philosophical Theology: Why it Matters

What it is . . .

Let me first give a simple working definition of *philosophical theology*. If *philosophy* is an attempt at a rational interpretation of reality, and if *theology* is the study of God, then *philosophical theology* is an attempt to arrive at rational conclusions concerning the question of God. It is the study of how philosophical theologians have come to conclusions about the existence of God and how they have answered all of the impending questions attached to various responses to that ontological question.

Why it matters . . .

So, what is the inherent value in a study of philosophical theology? A significant outlay of time and dedication is required in order to properly address its various issues and subjects. Is it worth it? I have determined that it is for the following reasons:

- 1) A great shift away from God happened as a result of what some have referred to as “the modern ‘turn to the subject’.”

It was, however, the modern “turn to the subject” that proved decisive. Kant’s call for “autonomy,” for the individual’s “release from a self-incurred tutelage” to such heteronomous [external] authorities as the Bible and the Church, embodied the spirit of the Enlightenment. Increasingly, individual reason and conscience became the arbiters of religious truth. Although the Romantics rejected the appeal to autonomous “reason alone,” they nevertheless shifted the source of spiritual authority to the “religious self-consciousness,” that is, to religious experience. The entire nineteenth century can be viewed as an effort to resolve the increasingly problematic issue of authority (emphasis mine).²⁸

This “shift away from God” did not begin with Kant; he merely codified and canonized it. The shift began in the decades prior to the Reformation. Even the Reformation itself can be seen in the light of self-focus and rebellion against authority. As the discoveries and assertions of Kepler, Copernicus, and Galileo brought about a mechanistic view of the universe, God began to drift into the background, being replaced by self in the foreground.

- 2) Western culture is still in the throes of Enlightenment, mechanistic thinking and is particularly focused on the self. Understanding the roots of our present frame of mind gives insight into the issues of Christ and culture thus making this type of study potentially relevant to the Church.

Rene Descartes in his *Rule for the Direction of the Mind*, Rule III, wrote:

In the subjects we propose to investigate, our inquiries should be directed, not to what others have thought, nor to what we ourselves conjecture, but to what we can clearly and perspicuously behold and with certainty deduce; for knowledge is not won in any other way.

He goes on to endorse the study of what “the ancients” have taught while warning us not to “become infected with their errors.” He advocates for intuition and induction as the only two ways to “arrive at the knowledge of things.” And yet, he allows (Paschal would say grudgingly)²⁹ for the belief of matters “divinely revealed” though he expects those truth to be discernible through the two ways he prescribes.

²⁸ Livingston, Fiorenza, Coakley, and Evans, Jr., *Modern Christian Thought: Twentieth Century*, Second Edition, Vol. 2, (Fortress Press, 2006), 2.

²⁹ See Paschal, *Pensees*, Section II, no. 77.

Between the Real and the Ideal³⁰

The concept of the study of man as proposed by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing: Is it also a study of idealism?

The following from Lessing:

Either one considers man in particular or in general. Of the first approach one can hardly say it is the noblest pursuit of man. What is it to know man in particular? It is to know fools and scoundrels . . . The case is quite different with the study of man in general. Here he exhibits greatness and his divine origin. Consider what enterprises man accomplishes, how he daily extends the limits of his understanding, what wisdom prevails in his laws, what ambition inspires his monuments.³¹

Recently, this quote launched me on a revisit of the concept of idealism.

I have written in the past on the *real* and the *ideal*.³² I wrote, “The existence of the ideal is evidence of its possibility.” This is too simplistic for the subject I wish to tackle in this book. We will instead need to dialogue with the Enlightenment era *philosophes* and the thinking they generated on this subject.

It seems strange to me every time I encounter the idea from Kant that we cannot know the “thing in itself;” that the object must conform to our cognition. I have to remind myself that the Enlightenment agenda results in no place being found for God or revealed religion and thus any purpose for the universe.

The existence of the ideal is evidence of its possibility.

Ever been inspired by a movie because of the values it portrayed? The story was challenging and beautiful, moving and uplifting. Then you come back to “reality” and realize that the players are just actors, the movie is based on a novel, and you realize that it is just a story. This self-inflicted “balance” between idealism and reality is aided by our own exposure to shattered dreams, burst bubbles, and unmet expectations. It’s what Rod Tidwell (from the movie *Jerry Maguire*) meant when, referring to single moms considering a new relationship, he said:

“They’ve been to the circus, you know what I’m saying? They’ve been to the puppet show and they’ve seen the strings.”

We face this type of exposure to reality all the time. In fact, it begins to seem that everything and everyone has a seamy underside;³³ a corrupt core predisposed to dishonesty and fraud. We learn to protect ourselves from getting hurt again. We adjust our expectations of people when we hear that a pastor or a politician has committed adultery, a friend has been busted in an internet scam, or we observe every-day, garden variety hypocrisy in people we know. By the time we “grow up,” we have been conditioned to temper idealism—if any still exists—with “reality.” We assume that anything that appears genuinely good or honorable must have “strings” attached somewhere. We begin to consider as true Dr. Greg House’s axiom: “Everybody lies!”³⁴

³⁰ Fowler, “between the Real and the Ideal,” <https://scottythinks.com/2012/05/29/between-real-and-ideal-3/>, May 29, 2012.

³¹ Lessing, *Schriften*, ed. Lachmann-Muncker, Vol. V, p. 143, quoted and referenced in Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1951), 216.

³² See Appendix 1.

³³ The word *seamy* is literally referring to the exposure of the rough seams of a garment turned inside out. So, in the context of idealism, it is a picture of being presented with something that appears perfect but upon inspection is proven to be imperfect.

³⁴ Greg House is a fictional character on the television series *House, M.D.* which aired on Fox for eight seasons.

Leave it to Beaver

The premise of the book, *The Way We Never Were*,³⁵ is that nostalgic reminiscences of, say, the 1950s are unrealistic. There were no *Leave it to Beaver* households. It was all Hollywood hype. I wasn't alive in the 50s so I don't know what it was really like, but I want to argue the following point: If I can imagine a story with values in which all the characters operate with integrity and depth and idealism, isn't that proof to some degree that such a thing is possible? The fact that you can be moved by the dramatization of such values is the evidence that you can be inspired to imitate such idealism. And isn't it true that nestled within our protests against the atrocities of character seen in everyday life is actually the call to live the ideal?

God's Ideal

Now, cut to Scripture as our example of idealistic living. The Bible is full of high ideals that God clearly expects us to pursue. I have met people who feel that even the call to live according to Scripture is unreasonable! To think this way is to completely miss the power of God's grace and God's Word. It *is* possible to do right. It *is* possible to think clean thoughts. It *is* possible to envision people who interact with integrity and honor. It *is* possible to *be* a person who interacts with others with integrity and honor.

Such living demands that we focus not on the evil inclinations that bombard us but on the example of Jesus "*who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:2b).*" That is, instead of focusing on the seamy underside of things and giving place to our own propensity to imagine evil, we instead pursue the right path. But how? This is the point of grace. We have been given the power to live differently; on a higher plane!

³⁵ Stephanie Coontz, (Basic Books: 1992). A prequel to this book is *The Way We Really Are* upon which the front cover depicts a single parent families, a mixed race parented family, and a same-sex parented family.

The Modern “Turn to the Subject”: An Ongoing Study³⁶

The primary thesis of this paper is that Western culture continues to reflect significantly the influence of Enlightenment era thinking and philosophy, that underlying Western cultural thought from the pre-Reformation period to present day is what some scholars have referred to as “the modern turn to the subject.”³⁷

Enlightenment Still?1

Western culture is still in the Enlightenment period (though many subsequent and intervening eras have been spawned in response). While, indeed, Western culture may have been in a postmodern trance for a time in response to the Enlightenment era and the subsequent eras it spawned, postmodernism failed to convincingly “occupy a standpoint (‘the view from nowhere’) from which it [might] survey all possible standpoints and find them all ‘relative,’ while at the same time [claiming] that there is no such standpoint.”^[1] That is to say that, in spite of all the reactions it spawned, modern Western culture continues to wrestle with the same questions of authority and revelation, and continues its “buy-in” to Kant’s call for a “release from . . . self-incurred tutelage”^[2]—only the rejection has been extended to any authority outside of one’s own self. Seen in its proper light then, postmodernism can be considered to be modernism inched ever closer to its nihilistic extremes.

James K. A. Smith declared the Enlightenment project to be “alive and well” and continuing on in the West in the form of secularism.^[3] In fact, Smith refers to postmodernism as “an intensification of modernity.”^[4] He refers to Christian Smith who documents what he considers to be “a secular revolution” spawned by, among other forces, the Enlightenment.^[5] All of this is to say that, while we are postmodern when it is convenient, at heart of Western culture, the Enlightenment project continues.

The “Turn to the Subject”

The modern “turn to the subject” has shaped and continues to shape Western culture more than any other philosophical concept. It lurks in the decades just prior to the Reformation and behind the Reformation itself. It breathes in Descartes *cogito ergo sum* and is codified and canonized in Kant’s Copernican Revolution. Its offspring includes the so-called “social” gospel, liberation theology, and today’s American political and social correctness. It is the culprit in Charles Taylor’s (via Weber’s) disenchantment and in Taylor’s “great dis-embedding.”^[6] It lies at the heart of postmodernism and beyond to what Alan Kirby refers to as pseudo-modernism. Indeed, using postmodern literature as an example, Kirby wrote,

“Postmodernism . . . fetishized . . . the author . . . but the culture we have now fetishizes the recipient of the text to the degree that they become a partial or whole author of it.”^[7]

It is the self that has emerged as the one constant since the Reformation. Any discussion of postmodernism or pseudo-modernism proceeds only in reference to the continuing questions of authority, revelation, and metaphysics that propelled the Enlightenment.

Livingston and Fiorenza define the concept best, writing:

³⁶ The “turn to the subject” as the foundation of knowledge represented a significant challenge to religious self-understanding. It also challenged the way theology is done. The starting point is no longer God but the human person. This represents the most significant transformation of theology in what is termed the “modern era.” Although we can date this turn to the eighteenth century Enlightenment (Kant and Descartes), its influence on the way theology is done took another two centuries. For Catholic theology, the landmark is the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s. Protestant theology and some Catholic theologians had already embarked on this approach in the earlier decades of the twentieth century.

<http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/staffhome/gehall/systematic1.htm>

³⁷ Livingston, Fiorenza, Coakley, and Evans, Jr., *Modern Christian Thought: Twentieth Century*, Second Edition, Vol. 2, (Fortress Press, 2006), 2.

It was, however, the modern “turn to the subject” that proved decisive. Kant’s call for “autonomy,” for the individual’s “release from a self-incurred tutelage” to such heteronomous [external] authorities as the Bible and the Church, embodied the spirit of the Enlightenment. Increasingly, individual reason and conscience became the arbiters of religious truth. Although the Romantics rejected the appeal to autonomous “reason alone,” they nevertheless shifted the source of spiritual authority to the “religious self-consciousness,” that is, to religious experience. The entire nineteenth century can be viewed as an effort to resolve the increasingly problematic issue of authority (emphasis mine).[8]

However, as claimed above, the turn to the subject had its beginning long before Kant and it did not stop with the Romantics.

Definition

Practically speaking, the turn to the subject is a re-evaluating of truth from the perspective of the self rather than the authoritative structures of the state and the church. Kant describes it in terms of the subject and the object where the meaning of the object is provided by the subject. However, and back to Fiorenza’s reference to Kant, if throwing off the shackles of the Bible and the Church (the list according to Kant can be expanded to the officer and the tax-collector, whom Kant refers to as “guardians”[9]) is the first step on the road to autonomy and a liberated self, then mustn’t we say that those steps began to be taken just prior to the Reformation? Thus the turn to the subject begins long before Kant comes on the scene.

Any discussion of the turn to the subject can seem to evaporate when one recognizes that selfishness, subjectivism, and humanism have all been constants in human nature since the fall. However, the modern turn to the subject is unique in its import since it constitutes a canonization, if you will, of subjectivism as a rule and as the proper approach to the foundational philosophical questions of human flourishing.

Pre-Reformation Roots

I suggest that the maturation of the turn to the subject as a proper area of focus happened gradually, and in fact, may yet have gone unnoticed for what it was and for its continuing impact on Western culture at large. Nevertheless, its development gets under way in earnest in the pre-Reformation tensions between church and state and the rise of an articulated quest for human rights. In keeping with this flow of thought, or conjecture as it may turn out to be, is it also possible that a re-examination of the Reformation is warranted at the very least for the purposes of inspecting it for elements that arose in sympathy with the struggle for human rights? Is not the Reformation a reflection, at least to some degree, of the rejection of institutional authority in favor of individual human spiritual and religious freedom and fulfillment? If this is found to be the case then we must take more seriously James K. A. Smith’s posture as a “catholic Christian”:

I write unapologetically as a catholic Christian—situated in the historic faith of Augustine and Aquinas, Erasmus and Luther, Jonathan Edwards and Pope Benedict XVI but with a distinct Reformed accent.[10]

This should not be seen as a call to return to the abuses of the Catholic Church (indulgences), the gross misinterpretations of Scripture (the actual blood and actual body of Jesus in the Eucharist and infant baptism), or the horrific additions to Scripture (the cult of Mary, praying to the saints, purgatory). Nor do I personally choose to accept what I consider to be the spurious claims of Calvinism and some of Reformed theology. But it is perhaps a call to reopen the wound as it were, return to the moments in time where the Catholic Church and the Protestant church veered from truth and wisdom, and revision one holy Catholic

Church. Certainly a radical idea! This would bring the church to a place of existence in the world that it has perhaps not seen since the first century.

A Vocabulary of Individualism

Steve Ozment, describing the milieu that existed on the eve of the Reformation, enlists several phrases and words that demonstrate a focus that was turning away from papal authority toward a national, regional, local, and, finally, an individual autonomy. He frequently employs the words autonomy, independent, self-interest, themselves, rights, individual, experience, self-esteem, humanism, personal, subjective, subjective feelings, subjective needs, and vernacular. He further invokes such concepts as centralization and decentralization, control, championing rights, checking papal power, egalitarianism, protest, and reform. He describes the felt need for the church to provide “a theology and spirituality that could satisfy and discipline religious hearts and minds.”^[11] He discusses the scramble for power between rising nations and the Catholic Church with its power centered in the Pope and between the nations, nation-states, and strong cities themselves. It was a time of backlash against the abuses of the church to be sure, but it was also a time of growing education among the common person and a growing desire to be treated fairly and to claim one’s own right to autonomy and one’s rights in general. Taylor in turn speaks of the “rage for order” which was “a drive [in Latin Christendom] to make over the whole society to higher standards.”^[12]

It is obvious from the above list of words and concepts that what has in our times evolved into a completed focus on the rights of the subjective, autonomous individual, began in earnest in the thirteenth through the fifteenth centuries, erupting in the Reformation before maturing into “providential deism” and aging into what Taylor calls “exclusive humanism.”^[13] The complexities of a growing global population, a young urban population, increased connection and communication due to the printing press, the abuses of the Catholic Church, brought about a focus on abuses in terms of human rights. There began to be a desire for deeper personal devotion...a pondering of human potential. The Reformation solidified these inclinations.

The Move Towards an Exclusive Humanism

Taylor speaks of the reversal of the “field of fear.”^[14] The Catholic Church levied fear on the laity through indulgences and the threat of judgment and damnation. Taylor writes, “This cranking up of fear may have helped to prepare people to respond to Luther’s reversal of the field.”^[15] But then, Taylor suggests an even further way in which the process may have led to exclusive humanism: “Some Protestant preaching repeats the pattern” of cranking up the fear. Taylor asks, “Did this prepare the desertion of a goodly part of their flock to humanism?” Taylor thinks so.^[16]

So, Taylor sites three “axes” on which there were “strong urges for renewal”: 1) a desire and turn toward deeper personal devotion (echoing Ozment above), 2) uneasiness with what Taylor calls “church-controlled magic” and “sacramental,” and 3) the rescuing of the laity from a cranked-up fear through the new idea of salvation by faith.^[17]

The Renaissance and early Enlightenment bring about development in the area of scientific inquiry and revolutionary new ways of seeing the universe. On the philosophical level, Descartes gives expression to the turn to the subject when, after doubting everything, he arrives at the one thing he can be sure of: cogito ergo sum, “I think, therefore, I am.” The philosophes of Descartes age did not reject God but the seeds of unbelief were nascent in an increasingly mechanistic view of the universe and humanistic view of people. As they continued to struggle with the concept of Divine Self-revelation, no place was found for God. Blaise Pascal could not forgive Descartes for the small place he was able to find for God in his philosophy. He wrote,

“In all his philosophy he would have been quite willing to dispense with God. But he had to make Him give a fillip [18] to set the world in motion; beyond this, he has no further need of God.”[19]

An increasingly deistic view of God prevailed until with Kant any impulse to believe in God disappears as he codifies and canonizes the turn to the subject, positing that we cannot know the “thing in itself”, or, the object. Whatever is perceived to be true concerning an object is provided by the subject. This opens the way for the postmodern relativism and the fragile self we are familiar with in Western culture today.

In his book, *Christianity’s Dangerous Idea*, Alister McGrath brings to light what I consider to be tantamount to the beginnings of a turn to the subject. In the process of explicating what his book jacket refers to as “the Protestant Revolution,” McGrath paints a picture of a growing milieu of unrest and dissatisfaction with the Church and “growing pressure for reform.”[20] He makes it clear that it was not the Protestant revolution that was responsible for this new “longing for social progress and reform,” for it was already in progress at the time of the Reformation. In describing the transitioning ethos of the late middle ages into the Renaissance, McGrath points to two developments without which the Reformation would not have occurred. The first was the printing press. The second was the rise of humanism.[21] One mustn’t equate this humanism with what we refer to today as “secular humanism” or with Taylor’s “exclusive humanism.” The humanism McGrath refers to did not exclude religion or God. In fact, it took as its impetus for social progress and change the idea that, in the same way that those outside the church could reference to Rome and Greece of the past in a primitivist effort to restore the glory of human society, so could intelligent men recapture its primitivist source: the Bible.[22]

A second impetus came from the concept that God had created humanity with the capacity for progress and perfection without limits.[23] Nowhere was this more prominently articulated than in Giovanni Pico della Mirandola’s “Oration on the Dignity of Humanity,” or as it is also known, “The Manifesto of the Renaissance.”[24] For Mirandola, God had decreed for humanity at its inception, “Thou, constrained by no limits, in accordance with thine own free will, in whose hand We have placed thee, shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature.”[25]

Disenchanted Providential Deism

Charles Taylor does a masterful job of tracing for his readers the evolution, if you will, of Western culture as it moved from a world where it was the norm to believe in God and to see the universe in terms of the geocentric model where man is at the center of a universe deigned by God to a secular age in which believing in God is optional and problematic. It is important to note that the shift from this enchanted society to what Taylor calls “exclusive humanism” was not a rejection of God at the start.[26] Gradually, man left behind his enchantment as he rose to the challenge to fulfill all that God had created him to be. He observed nature as God’s handiwork as he began to make his way to a view of the autonomy of nature and a “mechanistic” picture of the world. According to Taylor, this development was not “a step outside of a religious outlook” though it did “serve as grist to the mill of exclusive humanism.”[27] God was not immediately left behind but, as in Mirandola’s oration, man is designed to live up to his potential. To do this, man would have to strive to bring about the inherent goodness or purpose in the things God has created. Enchantment gave way to instrumental reason where humanity had to “abandon the attempt to read the cosmos as the locus of signs, [and] reject [such] as illusion, in order to adopt the instrumental stance effectively.”[28] Humanity was moving from an enchanted world to and through an increasingly detached Deism on its way to exclusive humanism—“a notion of human flourishing [that] makes no reference to something higher which humans should reverence or love or acknowledge.”[29]

Cogito Ergo Sum

Fast forwarding more than a hundred years beyond the Reformation, we find Descartes with the philosophical approach of “doubt”:

One was to proceed in the search for a metaphysical absolute by challenging every belief, however widely accepted and plausible it might be, in order to see whether it in fact met the test of certainty...Descartes' doubt was methodological: He undertook simply to suspend his beliefs until he could prove them conclusively. . . Indeed, the fact that in his quest for absolute certainty Descartes was led to the self, the fact that the existence of the self became the premise of his whole philosophy, was at once a symptom of the enormous change that had already occurred and a foreshadowing of the subsequent course of philosophic thought.[30]

It is quite telling that the bedrock foundational truth that he “discovers” and for which he is famous is *cogito ergo sum*, “I think therefore I am”—sublime for its brevity and its ability to capture and express the linchpin of Western individualism to the present time—should arise from such pure human subjectivity. Can this mantra be seen in a positive light? Is it possible to see this as a healthy approach to understanding truth and revelation, perhaps suggesting that the proper place for the reception of divine revelation is the human heart?[31] Possibly, although Paschal would enjoin that such a view of Descartes was too generous. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this project, it merely further documents the subjective saturation of the times and the ominous impact of the turn to the subject.

Objects Conforming to Our Cognition

By the time we reach Immanuel Kant over a hundred years later, he has arrived at a perspective that will solidify the turn to the subject into philosophical dogma that has yet to be overturned. In fact, according to Emile Brehier, the French historian of philosophy, “From the end of the eighteenth century up to the present [1947], there has been hardly any philosophical thought which did not start – directly or indirectly – from a meditation on Kant’s doctrine.”[32]

In his preface to the second edition of his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant wrote,

It has hitherto been assumed that our cognition must conform to the objects; but all attempts to ascertain anything about these objects a priori, by means of conceptions, and thus to extend the range of our knowledge, have been rendered abortive by this assumption. Let us then make the experiment whether we may not be more successful in metaphysics, if we assume that the objects must conform to our cognition.[33]

Ultimately, it would seem that Kant’s point is that humans cannot know anything more than what they can perceive from their own faculties in themselves and can never know an object as a “thing in itself.” If this is a fair description of any part of Kant’s message, then we see right away that the concept of divine self-revelation is, of course, not taken into account and we immediately experience a breach between biblical Christianity and enlightenment thinking. The danger in this thinking is that it allows for us to know nothing except what we can prove through empirical investigation (positivism), and opens the way for post-modern relativism.

It would seem that Kant is trying to say that we cannot know God in Himself, but rather that our understanding of God must conform to our subjective cognition of Him.

If the intuition must conform to the nature of the objects, I do not see how we can know anything of them a priori. If, on the other hand, the object conforms to the nature of our faculty of intuition, I can then easily conceive the possibility of such an a priori knowledge.[34]

The ramifications of the turn to the subject for metaphysics are, of course, far-reaching. If we cannot know a thing in itself but only “as it appears to us in sense perception,” [35] we are left far short of being able to make any certain statements about the “thing.” If that “thing” is God and I cannot speak authoritatively

about Him, then I am discouraged from knowing Him at all or left with a construct in which the definition of God can be as varied and numerous as the number of sentient beings.

Ramifications

From these few thoughts, it can be clearly seen and hardly denied that a distinct turn to the subject began to emerge in the late medieval period. This new view of things from the standpoint of the individual human had certain merits. With its desire for a deeper, more meaningful personal devotion to God, its push for and achievement of greater individual literacy, and its drive to live up to the God-given potential inherent in God's creations, [36] the turn to the subject had positive goals and outcomes. But as it evolves, into Descartes but particularly into Kant, it begins to shut out the need for revelation, indeed even the possibility of it, and has bequeathed to present, particularly American culture, a dangerous focus on self and the "selves" of others to the degree that not only has God's divine Self-revelation continued to be discounted, but any intrusion into the personal psyche from forces outside itself that bring discomfort or disapproval is becoming criminal.

Three Concepts

There are two concepts that keep Western culture anchored to the Enlightenment project. The first is its *preoccupation with self*, begun in the pre-reformation, given authority in Descartes' cogito ergo sum, and codified in Kant's "Copernican" turn to the subject.

The second is a continued and warranted *preoccupation with the possibility of God* and the reality of His divine Self-revelation. The tenets of atheism, however widely spread (or not) they may be, and the claims of evolution of necessity are anchored to empirical or pseudo-empirical inquiries. For this reason, I contend that our society is largely not post-modern in the sense of the relativity of truth, but in fact depends on some version of it.

A third concept keeps our post-modern (pseudo-modern) hyper-modern society from returning to a pre-Kantian consideration of the question of God—*Darwin's theory of evolution*. The first two are, and at least in their pre-critical forms, have always been, constant. The information age, which begins in earnest with Gutenberg and the printing press, has only sharpened our abilities to examine ourselves further and sharpen our articulation through ever-increasing interpersonal communication.

Charles Taylor in *Sources of the Self*, paints an interesting picture that may help to explain the evolution of self-consciousness that so pervades Western culture. Referring to the importance that modernism places on avoiding suffering, Taylor writes:

"We don't see the point in ritually undoing [a] terrible crime in an equally terrible punishment. The whole notion of a cosmic moral order, which gave this restoral its sense, has faded for us. The stress on relieving suffering has grown with the decline of this kind of belief. It is what is left over . . . after we no longer see human beings as playing a role in a larger cosmic order or divine history." [37]

Perhaps what can be said is that this evolution away from the sense of a cosmic moral order and toward ever greater reliance on one's own inner light paves the way for the crippling political/social correctness seen, for example, in America today. Taylor observes that all of this is part of the larger discussion of the central importance of personal, individual autonomy, and this as part of our pursuit of respect which is

nascent in the “Lockean trinity of natural rights” (life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness). Autonomy and thus respect is part of the inalienable human right to liberty and the “demand that we give people the freedom to develop their personality in their own way.”[38]

If we equate the horrible punishments Taylor refers to with today’s modern American culture war of tolerance and intolerance and what seems to be an increasing distaste for any expression of disagreement with another’s moral or immoral beliefs and behaviors, and if we locate those ancient punishments in a conviction of a cosmic moral order, then in the absence of such an order today, any attempt to claim a moral high ground would be seen as an affront to the individual human freedom to “develop one’s personality” however one sees fit. Put another way, if there is no cosmic moral authority then on what grounds do we proffer any sort of moral vision or demand? Put yet another way, if there is no God, then the only sensibility that need be catered to is, ultimately, one’s own which will lead, by way of Judeo-Christian reasoning, to a nihilistic moral emptiness. If the Apostle Paul’s assessment that the throats of humans are open graves and that their tongues practice deceit (Romans 3:13), then whether they know it or not, non-believing (or wrong believing) humans who rely on the self, will be utterly disappointed and discover that there is nothing to live for. Even the pursuit of human flourishing and the presumed utopia of John Lennon’s Imagine will ultimately prove to be illusory.

The Collapse of Confidence

Another perspective on the symptoms of the turn to the subject can be found in what W. T. Jones refers to as the “collapse of confidence.”[39] Science and technology having failed to bring “unlimited improvement of material conditions” brought about a collapse of confidence in rationality and sense of human helplessness in the face of a mechanistic universe.

Far from being rational creatures [in this sense I think rational more refers to man’s inherent ability to think and respond appropriately rather than the purity of reason vis a vis empiricism] able to control their destinies, men seemed driven by their hates and fears—moved less by enlightened self-interest or by cool benevolence than by irrational and destructive aggressions against one another and even against themselves. . . The man of the nineteenth century was uneasy, anxious, alienated, and introspective. He was increasingly unsure of himself—doubtful of the validity of his values, of his ability to communicate in a meaningful way with others, and of his ability even to know himself.[40]

Taking this perspective into account, not only do we begin to see the failure of the enlightenment that arose from the turn to the subject but also that the turn to the subject had a negative side. The focus on the self does not merely manifest in the pursuit of pleasure or in a prideful confidence, but also in the recognition of human weakness and hopelessness. Unfortunately, by the time confidence collapses, even deism has dropped out of fashion and men like Kant are finding a “science of metaphysics, of a realm of being that transcends the spatiotemporal, is clearly impossible.”[41]

Frameworks

Perhaps it all comes down to what Charles Taylor refers to as “frameworks.” “Frameworks provide the background, explicit or implicit, for our moral judgements, intuitions, or reactions in any of the three dimensions [respect for others, deciding what is the good life, and dignity]. To articulate a framework is to explicate what makes sense of our moral responses.” [42] Taylor refutes the idea proffered by naturalists and utilitarians alike that frameworks are non-existent or, where they do exist, they are part of the previously enchanted, embedded world which modernism wants to leave behind. Frameworks are articulated by one’s moral ontology. At issue is the naturalist’s dismissal of all moral ontologies as “irrelevant stories.” Taylor looks to retrieve the value of moral ontologies and defend the validity of frameworks.[43]

Taylor has a way of making the chasm that exists between modernists who dismiss God and those with a traditional moral ontology (who hearken back at least to some degree to a time when people still believed in God) seem smaller or at least less permanent; less threatening. Perhaps. The danger, at least as seen by the typical evangelical Pentecostal, is that while philosophies and frameworks come and go, they leave in their wake those who bought into them and made them part of their own personal frameworks. So, while generations come and go, living through various eras in which the Western world evolves from enchantment to disenchantment, from a belief in God to a deistic belief in God and then to a Kantian rejection of God (or at least any dependable metaphysical theory to undergird God), to a generation or two (or several) who pass through a time when God is said to be dead (or simply irrelevant), to a time when all gods or no gods are acceptable—souls are lost; shipwrecked; misled.

There is a danger inherent in the academy and that is a loss of connection with all things locally relevant to the church and the culture. The academy can take comfort that times change and ideas evolve and are either vindicated or corrected. But if, as the typical evangelical Pentecostal believes, there is a heaven and a hell, and if it is true that one soul lost is more valuable than a whole world gained (Matthew 16:26), then we discover that there is something more important than marking the philosophical times and cataloguing culture trends.

The modern turn to the subject, in my estimation, has had tragic results. A quick look at Western narcissism proves that. Against Taylor, I am not optimistic that the trend can be overturned, at least not short of fresh divine revelation. Unfortunately, modernism ruled out that possibility.

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Endnotes (for Modern Turn)

- [1] James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Witness*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 300.
- [2] Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals and What is Enlightenment?*, (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1959), 85.
- [3] James K. A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 31.
- [4] James K. A. Smith, 32. See footnote 5 of Smith's work where he compares "modern skepticism, coupled with the Enlightenment emphasis on the autonomy of the self" with postmodern relativism.
- [5] Christian Smith, ed., *The Secular Revolution: Power, Interests, and Conflict in the Secularization of American Public Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), viii-1.
- [6] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Cambridge, MASS: Harvard University Press, 2007).
- [7] Alan Kirby, "The Death of Postmodernism And Beyond," *Philosophy Now*, November/December 2006, page 35.
- [8] Livingston, Fiorenza, Coakley, and Evans, Jr., *Modern Christian Thought: Twentieth Century*, Second Edition, Vol. 2, (Fortress Press, 2006), 2.
- [9] Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals and What is Enlightenment?*, (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1959), 86-87.
- [10] James K. A. Smith, *Discipleship in the Present Tense*, (Grand Rapids, MI: The Calvin College Press, 2013), 2.
- [11] This and the preceding list of words and concepts is drawn from Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform 1250-1550*, Chapter Five "On The Eve of the Reformation," (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1980), 182-222.
- [12] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Cambridge, MASS: Harvard University Press, 2007), 63.
- [13] *Ibid*, 63, 221, ff.
- [14] *Ibid.*, 73.
- [15] *Ibid.*, 75.
- [16] *Ibid.*
- [17] *Ibid.*, 75-76.
- [18] A "fillip" is essentially the action of the thumb and pointer finger in the flipping of a coin.
- [19] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, no. 77, taken from the *Everyman's Library* edition trans. by W. F. Trotter and republished in *Great Books of the Western World*, ed. Mortimer J. Adler, (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), 186.
- [20] Alister McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 21-22.
- [21] *Ibid.*, 25, 33.
- [22] *Ibid.*, 30-31.
- [23] *Ibid.*, 28-34.
- [24] *Ibid.*, 34.
- [25] Forrest E. Baird and Walter Kaufmann, *Medieval Philosophy*, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 200), 525.
- [26] Taylor, 63, 90-99.
- [27] 93-95.
- [28] *Ibid.*, 98.
- [29] *Ibid.*, 245.
- [30] W. T. Jones, *A History of Western Philosophy: Hobbes to Hume*, (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1969), 162, 164.
- [31] This is not my thought. Dr. Tim Lim, professor at Regent university, shared his positive view of Descartes statement in a lecture. However, I am completely hesitant to attribute my poor thoughts to him.
- [32] Quoted in Alfred Stern, "Kant and our Time," in the *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (Jun., 1956), pp. 531.
- [33] Kant, *Preface to the Second Edition*, translated by J. M. D. Meiklejohn.
- [34] *Ibid.*

- [35] T. D. Weldon, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, Second Edition, (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 80.
- [36] McGrath, 24-25; Taylor 247; Osment 201.
- [37] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989), 13.
- [38] *Ibid.*, 11-12.
- [39] W. T. Jones, *Kant and the Nineteenth Century*, (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1975), 9-13.
- [40] *Ibid.*, 9-10.
- [41] *Ibid.*, 58.
- [42] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989), 26.
- [43] *Ibid.*, 7-12.