

CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS LIFE?



Man asks questions. A person can have all the creature comforts met, and yet find himself disturbed by the larger questions of life: Who am I? What am I here for? Where did I come from, and what is my ultimate destiny?

These are not just academic issues. A lot hinges on your answers to these questions—how you choose to live, what you value, and what purposes drive you.

NATURE OF MAN

At the core of the question of life is the issue of the nature of man. Am I a complex biological machine and no more, or am I a spiritual being with a soul? Richard Dawkins, an atheist writer, has said, “We are survival machines—robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes.”¹

“We are survival machines.”

– Richard Dawkins

That is one possible answer, and maybe the only possible answer if we are not permitted to look beyond nature for our answers.

Atheist Bertrand Russell bluntly enumerates the ramifications:

That Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in

the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins [...] Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair can the soul's habitation be safely built.²

– Bertrand Russell, *The Free Man's Worship*

What is Russell's conclusion about the meaning of life? If we are indeed just "accidental collocations of atoms," do you agree with his conclusion? Why and why not?

The view espoused by Dawkins and Russell (and generally embraced in our world), also known as "**naturalism**," says that all of reality is composed of the physical. This view is also called "**scientism**" because it tends to claim truths for science that are not themselves verifiable by science. If all of reality is physical, then it follows that we are no more than animated flesh. Any sense of self we may have that transcends our bodies is illusory. Quite literally, "we" are just our bodies, according to naturalism. Is this right?

Here's a story from the Bible in which a man finds himself suddenly very wealthy. His approach to life turns out to be very "modern."



Luke 12:15-20

¹⁵ And he said to them, "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." ¹⁶ And he told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man produced plentifully, ¹⁷ and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' ¹⁸ And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'" ²⁰ But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?'

What is this man's "anthropology," i.e., his view of the nature of man?

What would be this man’s life philosophy?

What did this man fail to consider?

If we are not *just* our bodies, if we are *more* than our bodies, then what is this “more”?

Given that the rich man in the story thought his “soul” fed on “grain” (v.19), maybe the highest good we can find for man is to feed the appetites, to minimize pain and maximize pleasure. So, is the notion that life is supposed to be about more, that we are more than our bodies, that there are real, transcendent values beyond satisfying our appetites—is this notion just unreal fluff? It must be, if who we are is just bodies. But Jesus, the one who told this story, says that “one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” If not possessions, then what is life about? Academic degrees? Pleasures?

Like Shakespeare’s Macbeth, some throw their hands up and say life makes no sense, that

“ “life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

Or, as Danish philosopher Kierkegaard put it, is it the case that man is like a smooth stone thrown across the surface of a river—“it bounces along, until, like life itself, it loses momentum and sinks into nothingness.” In other words, since we all die anyway, no matter what we try to construct out of our short lives, what meaning can we find? “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die,” as the saying goes.^a

a. 1 Cor 15:32 “What do I gain if, humanly speaking, I fought with beasts at Ephesus? If the dead are not raised, ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.’” This is the life philosophy the Bible sees as appropriate if we are no more than bodies destined to perish.



Obviously, this is an absurd view of man. Yet, better answers seem hard to find under an atheistic, naturalistic worldview. This difficulty, however, is entirely arbitrary, imposed on modernity by the irrational claim that there is no truth other than scientific truth, and there is therefore nothing real other than what science can detect (i.e., atoms).^b

In addition to being a bleak view that strips life of all its color, this view makes a huge claim that is simply asserted without evidence. Naturalism stifles deeper thinking in that it artificially reduces what we are allowed to consider in answering the most fundamental of questions.

For a grander perspective that gives place to human nature, worth, and meaning find their place—we need to start with the question of origin. In other words, where did we come from? Again the naturalist here is forced to paint with only one color: we did not come from anywhere. Matter is all there is. However, even the most ardent naturalist is forced to admit that this itself is an unverifiable claim that is simply asserted as a matter of dogma. For more on this, and on the larger issue of the existence of a creator and the origin of the universe, please read the article at the end of this week’s material: **Appendix A: The Reason for God.**

If we have been created by God, it would follow that our attempt to locate ourselves apart from the larger story of creation is bound to be unfruitful. Further, if God, himself a spiritual being, made us to be more than our bodies, then it follows that we would have such a thing as “spiritual longings” which no amount of food or pleasures can satisfy.

The Bible goes on to identify the reason for this longing: God has “put eternity into man’s heart” (Ecclesiastes 3:11). In other words, the Bible claims that we can never be fully at peace with only the physical because we have been created by God with eternal souls, which long for something much more than a mere biological existence. C.S. Lewis describes an “inconsolable longing” which has characterized the human condition across cultures:

b. It has been pointed out by philosophers, atheistic and religious alike, that this widely-held view is itself not a scientific statement, and therefore self-defeating. Like the sentence, “There are no sentences in English longer than 5 words,” the statement that there are no truths apart from scientific truths, being a nonscientific statement, cannot be true on its own terms. It collapses logically, and is, essentially, meaningless nonsense.

I find in me a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation of which is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing.³

– C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

THE CREATION ACCOUNT IN GENESIS

So let's dive into the question of origin.

Many seekers looking into Christianity often get stuck in the first few pages of the Bible because of a crucial misreading of the Genesis creation account.

Imagine a person, upon reading a chemistry lab manual, exclaiming in exasperation, "This book has no plot!" Such a person is misunderstanding the genre of what he is reading. A lab manual is not interested in character or plot development. It is only meant to describe how to run experiments. Therefore, it would be absurd to demand from a lab manual answers it is simply not interested in providing.

Many read the creation account in Genesis as one would read a lab manual and demand from it answers that the book of Genesis is not interested in providing. Genesis is not concerned with the question of "how" but with the theological narrative of God's creation with a focus on the questions "why" and "who"—i.e., why is there something rather than nothing? Who created this universe? Who is man, and what is his relationship to the Creator?

IN THE BEGINNING

Let's read Genesis 1.



Genesis 1

¹ In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. ² The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

³ And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. ⁴ And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

⁶ And God said, "Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." ⁷ And God made the expanse and separated the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse. And it was so. ⁸ And God called the expanse Heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

⁹ And God said, "Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. ¹⁰ God called the dry land

Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good.

¹¹ And God said, “Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, on the earth.” And it was so. ¹² The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their own kinds, and trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. ¹³ And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

¹⁴ And God said, “Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years, ¹⁵ and let them be lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light upon the earth.” And it was so.

¹⁶ And God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. ¹⁷ And God set them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, ¹⁸ to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. ¹⁹ And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

²⁰ And God said, “Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens.” ²¹ So God created the great sea creatures and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. ²² And God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on

the earth.” ²³ And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

²⁴ And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds—livestock and creeping things and beasts of the earth according to their kinds.” And it was so. ²⁵ And God made the beasts of the earth according to their kinds and the livestock according to their kinds, and everything that creeps on the ground according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.

²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

²⁸ And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” ²⁹ And God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. ³⁰ And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. ³¹ And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Note that the Bible does not attempt to persuade the reader of the existence of God. Rather, from its very first pages, the Bible declares the activity of God. All of the arguments regarding the origin of the universe aside (covered in Appendix A), the Bible simply states that everything has its being in the sovereign creation of God.

What repeated statement describes God's assessment after each phase of creation? What is God's final assessment of the created order after he places mankind within the rest of his creation? (Genesis 1:31)

List the ways in which the creation of man differed from the creation of the rest of the universe? (Genesis 1:26-31)

What do you think it means for man to be made "in God's image"?

Genesis 2:7-8 provides a bit more detail: "then LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature. And the LORD God had planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed."

A special Hebrew verb is used in the creation account when God creates man. We see God taking a pause, almost taking a deep breath, deliberating, and "forming" man. We read that the other animals were created "according to their kinds" but the Bible declares that "God created man in his own image" and that God "breathed...the breath of life" into us, highlighting the special relationship between mankind and God. According to the Bible, part of the reason for this special relationship is that we are spiritual, and not merely physical, creatures.

Christianity asserts that every individual human being is going to live forever, and this must be either true or false. Now there are a good many things which would not be worth bothering about if I were going to live only seventy years, but which I had better bother about very seriously if I am going to live forever...If individuals live only seventy years, then a state, or a nation, or a civilization, which may last for a thousand years, is more important than an individual. But if Christianity is true, then the individual is not only more important but incomparably more important, for he is everlasting and the life of a state or a civilization, compared with his, is only a moment.⁴

– C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

What can you conclude about God's intention and heart for mankind through the Genesis account?

ANTICIPATING PARENT

Genesis reports that God repeatedly declares creation as good, and finally, with man in place, "very good." What is the basis of this "goodness"?

Parents expecting the arrival of a newborn don't get caught off guard. Before the arrival of the baby, they set up the room. They decorate it with pastel baby colors and line the walls with pictures of trains and clouds. They assemble a crib and pad it with cushion. At each stage, you can imagine the parents stepping back, looking at what they prepared and saying, "This is good."



There are many different perceptions about God: an aloof figure sitting at a distance, a powerful and vindictive force that should be avoided, perhaps an irrelevant and senile grandfather.

Contrary to such views, the portrait of God as revealed in the very first pages of the Bible is that of a loving Father, who places man into an environment prepared for him. God "blesses" and "gives" and pronounces that creation is "very good."

The majestic mountains, the pristine beauty of the meadows, the rivers, the trees, were all prepared for mankind, who uniquely among creatures is endowed with the strange propensity to find nature transcendently beautiful.

Man was the crown of all of God's creation, sharing His nature, and meant to rule over it with love and wisdom. This is the message of Genesis.

A FORK IN THE ROAD

Let's consider once again the question we started with: "What is life?" The answer to that question is integrally linked with the question about God. As William Lane Craig puts it:

Without God the universe is the result of a cosmic accident, a chance explosion. There is no reason for which it exists. As for man, he is a freak of nature – a blind product of matter plus time plus chance. Man is just a lump of slime that evolved into rationality. There is no more purpose in life for the human race than for a species of insect; for both are the result of the blind interaction of chance and necessity.⁵

– William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith*

Such notions are disheartening. However, if it really is the case that there is no God, then we ought to be clear about the consequences and accept them, which would mean we reject notions of value and meaning and align our lives in accordance with the belief that life is ultimately meaningless.

On the other hand, if the Bible is true in its claim that the God who created us is a loving heavenly Father, that means we are more than mere molecules. We are more than our bodies. It means that our longing for something higher is not a futile desire, but that it arises out of the very core of who we are as transcendent beings.

The weight of the evidence is on the latter. While some people think there must be some kind of “leap in the dark” involved, the actual state of the evidence to help you assess the truth value of the Christian claim is actually quite good. This course aims to lay out the foundations of Christianity. Whether you’re a believer or just seeking answers, let’s consider together the claims of the Christian gospel through the next few weeks.



ENDNOTES

- 1 Dawkins, Richard. *The Selfish Gene*, 3rd ed. s.l. : Oxford University Press, 2006.
- 2 Russell, Bertrand. “The Free Man’s Worship.” s.n. : 1903w.
- 3 Lewis, C.S. *Mere Christianity*. New York: Harper Press, 2001.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Craig, William Lane. *Reasonable Faith*. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994.