
Chat room exchange: the meaning of life to an armadillo

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The following is an exchange that Geoffrey Chia was involved in, in the 'Meaning of Life and Everything Society' or 'MOLES' chat room, which raises issues of interest to our readers...

Here's a poem whose author I forget:

The ancient armadillo
is as simple as the rain,
He's an armour plated pillow
with a microscopic brain,
He's thoroughly disinterested
in what the world has wrought,
But spends his time in contemplative
Armadyllic thought.

What is the meaning of life to an armadillo?

If our hypothetical armadillo could speak, what contemplative armadyllic thoughts would he reveal to us? I bet he'd describe things from the point of view of an armadillo: how delicious and succulent fresh juicy ants can be, the feeling of wet blades of grass against his belly as he scurries through the undergrowth, the joy of bringing up baby armadillos. He may wonder if there is a Divine Armadillo that created the universe (and all armadillos in its likeness) for the sake of the Armadyllic Race. He would ponder the question of what happens after armadillos die. The thought of complete annihilation may be just so awful and unacceptable that surely, he would think, there must be such a thing as an armadillo soul and armadillo heaven, where all good armadillos go as a reward for living by the proper armadillo code (whatever that may be, eg thou shalt not stick thine proboscis into another armadillo's anthill).

He would also tell stories of horrid evil monsters, some of which prey on armadillos or destroy armadillo habitats. In particular, there is this one big ugly hairless ape that walks on two legs and cuts

down and clears away forests and poisons the air and water and sometimes captures armadillos for fiendish experiments on leprosy.

'Rubbish! Nonsense!' says the human beast. Armadillos are nothing more than a curious product of evolution occupying a particular ecological niche. Their individual lives mean nothing, ie the question of 'the meaning of life' from the point of view of an armadillo is in itself meaningless. They are thus because they have evolved thus; there is no intrinsic purpose to their existence. The reason they pursue their pointless existence is because they are selected by evolution to do so. Any armadillos that lost the drive to eat, drink and reproduce would have naturally died out in the past (and with them, these non-survival traits), so only those possessing these drives have survived. Do not mistake 'drive' for 'purposefulness' or 'meaning'. Whether or not the armadillos survive as a species will be a matter of random chance depending on their adaptation to the environment, which in itself may change.

Furthermore, everyone knows that the universe was created by God for man (who was fashioned in his likeness). This is based on the fact that human beings are at the top of the food chain, thus everything must surely have been created for our benefit, QED.

When we ask ourselves 'What is the meaning of life?' I would assert that what we really mean is, 'What is the meaning of life from the point of view of human beings?' This latter qualification is unconsciously and implicitly assumed, but nevertheless I feel should be stated overtly, because by doing so I think it puts the question into its proper context.

Is the human viewpoint more valid than the armadillo viewpoint? Does being at the top of the food chain make us the 'chosen species'?

The point is that, evolution being the way it is, one

species or another is bound to be at the top of the food chain. In the sea it may be those creatures that happen to have no natural predators, eg sharks or killer whales. If they could contemplate their navels (if they had navels) then surely they would consider themselves to be the chosen species because they seem to get their way all the time and do not live in fear of other species.

But wait (you may argue), what about our superior intelligence? What about our reasoning and tool-making abilities, which enable us to alter our surroundings and conquer other environments, even the sea? Surely these unique characteristics mean that we are divinely chosen.

Intelligence and tool-making are not any better an argument for us being divinely chosen than, say, having longer canines or a prehensile tail would be. They are merely random by-products of evolution which have enabled us to cope more successfully with our environment, just as the development of wings have enabled birds to fly. They are experiments of nature which could even prove to be deviant, aberrant evolutionary mistakes if the end result turned out to be self-extinction from nuclear annihilation.

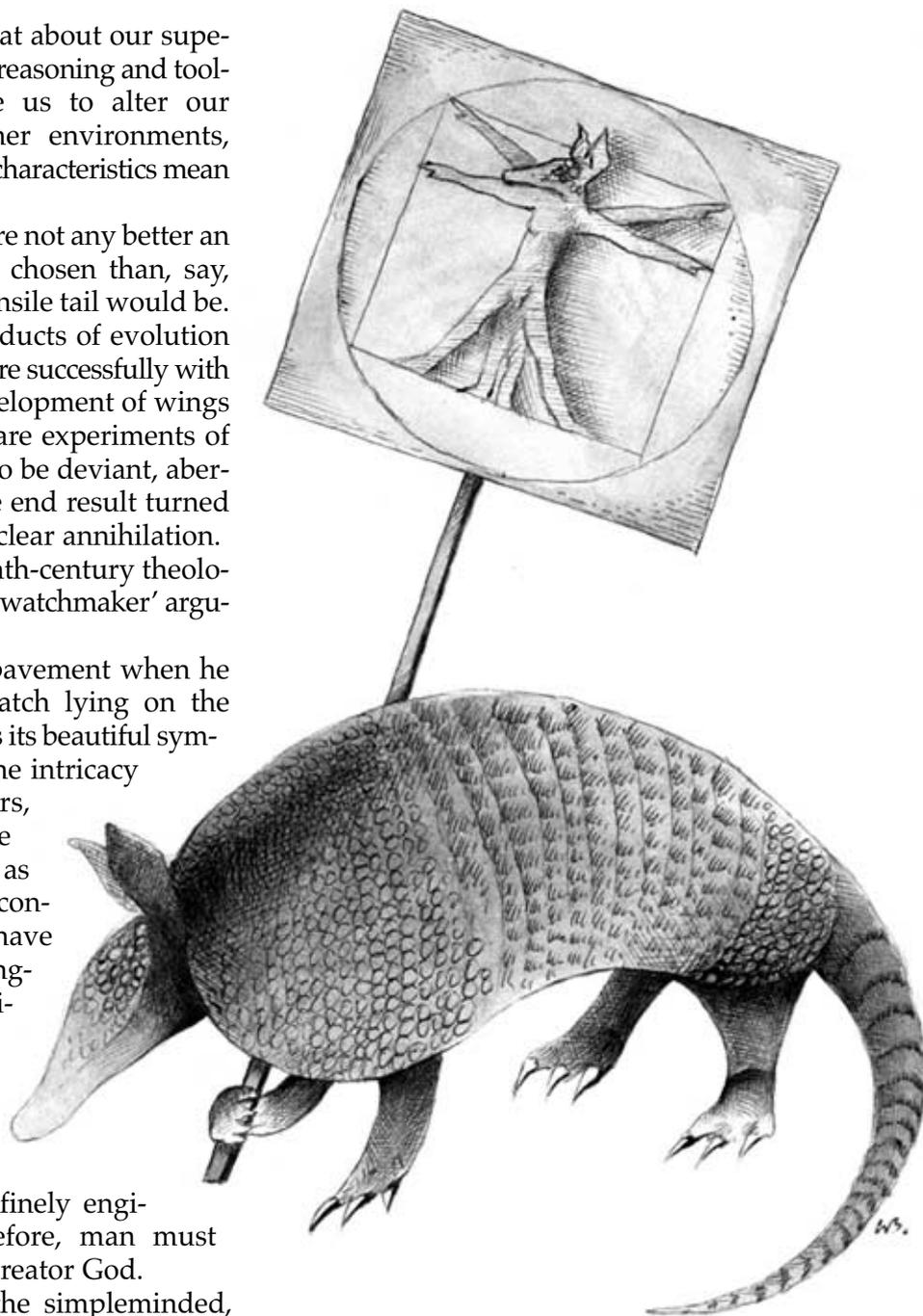
William Paley was an eighteenth-century theologian. Here is the gist of his 'divine watchmaker' argument for the existence of God:

A man is walking along the pavement when he comes across a gold pocket watch lying on the ground. He picks it up and notices its beautiful symmetrical form, its shiny finish, the intricacy of its escape mechanism, gears, springs and jewels. He sees the measured movement of its hands as it regularly marks out time. He concludes that such a device cannot have spontaneously arisen from nothingness, that there must be an intelligent force behind the creation of this artifact; a watchmaker. Similarly, man is a wondrous creation. We have a grand design with intricacy and complexity far exceeding that of the most finely engineered timepiece. Surely, therefore, man must have a creator, and we call that creator God.

A convincing argument for the simpleminded, which breaks down under the slightest scrutiny.

So, a watchmaker must have created the complex and intricately designed watch. Indeed, the watchmaker himself must be far more complex and intricately designed than the watch itself in order to create the watch, and he in turn must have been created by God. But surely, therefore, God must be far more complex and intricately designed than the watch-

maker and could not have arisen out of nothing. Surely God must have been created by a SuperGod, which in turn must be even more complex and intricately designed than God himself. And who created SuperGod? SuperSuperGod? And who created SuperSuperGod?



It is a never ending conundrum and explains nothing.

Some would argue that the laws of physics are delicately and precisely balanced: had the mass of a proton been a tiny shade more or less than it is, had the charge of an electron been a minuscule fraction more or less than what it is, had the spin of a neutrino

been a wee smidgen more or less than what it is, then atoms and molecules and the chemical reactions we know could not exist — the universe would be a swirling chaotic cauldron.

Surely it is more than blind coincidence that all these physical laws have come together to enable the formation of a stable universe and, with it, the formation of life.

This is the weak anthropic principle or WAP.

But wait! There's more! Surely the purpose of all these finely balanced physical and chemical laws of the universe came together not just to enable the formation of life, but also the formation of sentient, intelligent life.

This is the strong anthropic principle or SAP.

And, of course, the ultimate representation of sentient and intelligent life is humanity. Thus the entire purpose for the existence of the universe must have been the creation of mankind.

This is the completely ridiculous anthropic principle or CRAP.

It is the divine watchmaker argument in another guise.

This much is true — if the laws of physics and chemistry did not apply, then life and the universe could not have formed, nor continue to exist, and we would not be around to ask these silly questions. The existence of these inviolate and consistent laws are an indispensable prerequisite — a given — for us to be here, for me to write this essay and for you to read it.

Quantum theory postulates the existence of parallel universes. There may well be several trillion other parallel universes in existence, where no consistent laws of nature apply or where their own particular laws are not conducive to the formation of elaborate systems. In these universes it may not be possible for matter to form or remain stable, it may not be possible for chemical reactions to occur, it may not be possible for life to form or for sentient beings to evolve. Thus the question 'What is the meaning of life?' does not arise in those universes in the first place. Our universe may represent just one tiny drop in the vast ocean of possible universes. Among an infinite possibility of universes, it is inevitable that one will happen to have natural laws finely balanced enough to allow life to exist.

The one-in-a-trillion universe containing creatures able to ask these bothersome questions must, by definition, also contain beautiful, mathematically-consistent laws for such creatures to exist in the first place.

The existence of a beautiful mathematical consistency to the universe is no argument for the existence of a God. The appearance of a grand purposeful design is a vast illusion arising from the self-organising nature of Nature.

Are we the 'chosen species' for whom the universe was created?

We see the arbitrariness and complete indifference of nature all around us, from cataclysmic cosmic events such as supernovae and galactic collisions, to the ruthless struggle for survival among animals, such as the way the ichneumon wasp uses a living caterpillar as a food store for its larvae, which consume it from the inside out.

Modern humans have probably been around for about 150,000 years. For more than 145,000 of those years, human life and death were completely arbitrary and indiscriminate. Even during the past 5,000 years since the advent of agriculture, metallurgy and writing, death could still strike with complete indifference from famine, pestilence or natural disaster.

Only over the past 400 years or so, since the development of the

scientific method, have we been able to protect ourselves to any significant degree from lethal onslaughts such as infectious diseases or crop failures. Historically, human life has been, as Thomas Hobbes so aptly put it, 'nasty, brutish and short'. Even now it remains so for billions of people who have had the misfortune of being born into disadvantaged circumstances. Earthquakes and floods still kill thousands of people indiscriminately each year.

It is a sad fact that the practice of warfare and genocide seems to be an intrinsic trait of humanity. For many Jews in the Second World War, life or death, from day to day, were completely random events, as though determined by the toss of dice. Things were the same for the slaughter victims in Rwanda or Kosovo. True, these events were perpetrated by other humans and were not natural disasters. But these other humans, no matter how vile, were themselves products of nature. *It was up to still other human beings to oppose such atrocities, not up to divine intervention.* Similar genocidal behaviour has been observed by Jane Goodall in chimpanzees, the species closest to us, who share 98.4 per cent of our DNA.

Religion, far from being the saviour of mankind, has consistently been used as justification for mass murder, the farcical Crusades of the Middle Ages

*'Cocooning ourselves
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and predictability
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to us.'*

being one example. As Kurt Vonnegut, the German-American author, observed, Hitler's armies, tanks and planes bore the markings of the cross because the Nazis considered themselves to be a Christian army.

We are fortunate in our present ability to insulate ourselves from a sometimes hostile environment, but cocooning ourselves in deceptive security and predictability does not alter the fact that nature is completely indifferent to us. The offshore yachtsman or Himalayan mountaineer will be able to attest to this, but very few of us seek or savour their experiences. Think of the most distinguished, talented, capable, accomplished, respected person you know. If he/she went swimming in the Coral Sea tomorrow, they

Their individual lives mean nothing, ie the question of 'the meaning of life' from the point of view of a human is in itself meaningless. They are thus because they have evolved thus; there is no intrinsic purpose to their existence. The reason they pursue their pointless existence is that they are selected by evolution to do so. Any humans who lost the drive to eat, drink and reproduce would have naturally died out in the past (and with them, these non-survival traits), so only those possessing these drives have survived. Do not mistake 'drive' for 'purposefulness' or 'meaning'. Whether or not they survive as a species will be a matter of random chance depending on their adaptation to the environment, which in itself may change.

A nihilistic philosophy? Perhaps. Uncomfortable and close to the bone? Certainly. But, to my mind, honest and true. Certainly far more likely to be true than any supernatural wishful thinking fabricated by our forbears, or the three bears (with or without Goldilocks), or L Ron Hubbard.

Here's my philosophy: it's up to us to create meaning in our own lives. It's up to us to make things better (or not). This life is the only one we've got and will ever have. We should be good not because we fear God or because we fear hell. We should be good because it promotes our wellbeing and the wellbeing of others and reduces general suffering.

Religious views as to the true nature of the universe have been thoroughly discredited, but nevertheless have been vindictively defended historically. The church's insistence on a

geocentric universe (and persecution of Galileo) was one example.

We can, however, derive useful lessons from some religious philosophies of human interaction. The concept and practice of empathy seem to be universally valued between cultures throughout history. One common feature of many ancient religions is the golden rule, originally stated as 'do not do unto others as you would not have others do unto you' (analects of Confucius) and, centuries later, as 'do unto others as you would have others do unto you' (some guy from Nazareth).

Funnily enough, verification of this wisdom of the ages has been demonstrated as the best interactive strategy from computer simulations of the 'prisoner's dilemma' scenario.

One difference between us and other animals is that



would be just so much shark bait, no different from slabs of beef.

There is plenty of evidence to demonstrate that humans are not the *raison d'être* for the universe. (What an arrogant thought!) Everything we now know indicates that we are just insignificant little specks of self-preoccupied matter on the wafer-thin film of organic scum which coats this minuscule world, which revolves around one average star among a hundred billion in this galaxy, which itself is but one galaxy among perhaps another hundred billion.

Now let me repeat a previous paragraph, substituting 'humans' for 'armadillos'. It will make no greater or lesser sense than the original paragraph:

Humans are nothing more than a curious product of evolution occupying a particular ecological niche.

we have more choices. That doesn't apply to all humans — for instance, the starving infant in Somalia probably doesn't have any more choices than the average armadillo.

But the rest of us ought to make use of what good fortune we have.

Discussions

At 03:56 PM 19/05/97 +1000, ML wrote:

This is not such a convincing argument against the existence of God as it may appear. It may be well argued that intrinsic in the notion of God is the notion that God exists through Him/Her self. Therefore God needs no cause, just being God is the cause of God. This elements [sic]the infinite regress. Further you are looking on the world in a linier [sic] way which is very much a product of Western thought and in [sic] not a given at all. I don't think that it is this easy to eliminate God from the big picture.

Thank you ML. I was not trying to disprove the existence of God, but merely indicate that the notion of God is not necessary to explain the existence of the universe.

I am arguing absence of proof rather than proof of absence.

You must know, of course, that it is impossible to prove a negative. We can never 'prove' the absence of God, particularly if you insist that God is essentially undetectable — a convenient situation for religious advocates.

How easy it is for me to fabricate some hypothetical substance or entity, the existence of which you cannot disprove. Let me call this substance 'Bollokks'. I claim that Bollokks permeates our entire universe, has neither mass nor energy and cannot be detected by any known measuring instrument. I also claim that Bollokks is the necessary glue which holds the universe together, without which nothing could exist. Can you prove to me that Bollokks does not exist? Certainly not. The fact that we exist *must* mean that Bollokks must exist! Of course, you would probably say I am just talking Bollokks, and you would be right.

The notion of God is a personal thing and no more or less valid than the notion of Siva or Vishnu or Zeus or the Great Plains Spirit. If a Hindu asks me to disprove the existence of Siva I will be the first to admit that I cannot. This is not the same as proving that Siva exists.

Is there a way to apply non-linear thought to these

concepts? Will it make any difference?

At 12:42 AM 20/05/97 +1100, JP wrote:

G's message was a pleasant read, but I have to confess at times I did not know what he was trying to argue. I'm glad he clarified it later with the 'absence of proof rather than proof of absence' comment. I would agree that we are not intrinsically better than armadillos, but rather than replace humans in his argument, I would say that it is entirely possible armadillos behave in this way. I didn't fully agree with conclusions about his other examples, but suspect this will come down to a matter of opinion so I won't debate the issue, except for his multiple universes account.

Science has produced many theories of this type, some quite respectable, like the Big Crunch theory. In essence, these other universes, whatever or wherever they be, are completely separate from our universe by definition, and thus there is no way we can ascertain what happens there or even if they exist. This is remarkably similar to that belief despite lack of evidence most people complain about in Christians.

Also (and despite my earlier comment about not debating the issue, it seems I am about to...) God didn't need to be created by something else, as ML said, because if God created the uni-

verse, as is generally believed by most people who accept his existence, then he is of necessity outside it. If he is not part of the physical universe, he is not subject to time, and therefore not subject to cause and effect as we are.

Personally, I agree that the notion of God is not necessary to explain the universe, I just think it's more likely.

Thank you JP. I hope I haven't misled you into thinking that the 'multiple universes' idea was my preferred theory. It is based on quantum mechanics. The basis is mathematical rather than proven (although the same could have been said for the general theory of relativity before experimentation demonstrated its validity). I used the idea as an illustration to get a point across, which even now I struggle to express clearly.

Here's the idea again. Let's use the 'Oscillating Universe' (Big Bang and Big Crunch) theory, which you consider to be more respectable, as an example instead:

Some would argue that the existence of mathematically inviolate constant physical laws working

'I was not trying to disprove the existence of God, but merely indicate that the notion of God is not necessary to explain the existence of the universe.'

beautifully together just so, to enable the formation of solar systems, planets, organic matter and complex life forms, must indicate the presence of a grand design and a creator. Let us conceive of a universe or universes where such laws do not apply. Perhaps 'prior' to our own Big Bang there were a trillion universes with no such laws, and after our own Big Crunch there will be a trillion others. In none of these universes would it be possible for matter and/or energy to form and/or interact in a consistent fashion to produce life capable of pondering on the nature of the universe. In our own universe these laws have happened to come together, but this may purely be due to the one in a trillion odd circumstance and not through any design.

It may well be impossible to prove or disprove the parallel universe or the oscillating universe theories. No matter. I have no emotional investment in such theories and only use them to illustrate a point.

Even if our universe were the only one in existence, what of it? Just because puny humans with grandiose delusions imbibe meaning into the clockwork mechanism of the universe does not in itself mean anything. The idea is as laughable as armadillos which consider themselves to be the focal point of creation.

If we feel the need to explain the design, then surely we should feel the need to explain the designer, whether or not he is inside or outside our own time

and space. To say that the creation of God needs no explanation because he is outside our space and time is a copout, pure and simple. It is a contrived ploy to evade the issue.

If you say the designer does not need explanation, then why not simplify and say that the design does not need explanation?

Here's a thought: many of the Judeo-Christian or

Islamic persuasion would argue that monotheism represents a superior world view as compared to polytheism — far better and simpler to dispense with a whole bunch of unnecessary gods in favour of one God.

If so, what would be a superior world view as compared to monotheism?

Ockham's razor states that the most straightforward, least complicated explanation is the most likely to be true. That is why we accept as truth that the earth and planets revolve around

the sun, and not the idea that everything revolves around the earth in complex loopy inexplicable paths, even though the latter appears to be the case from our frame of reference. The geocentric universe is a powerful illusion, just as the appearance of design among living creatures is a powerful illusion. They have no factual basis.

Simply wishing that there exists a supernatural being who gives a toss about our lives and deaths does not make it true.

