

Review of: "Why Existence? An Explanation with No Remainder"

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This is an eminently readable account of an answer to the question "Why is there something rather than nothing?", in which what usually goes for muddled thinking, such as that of the Kabbalists, is put to good use.

There are several problems with the presentation, in the sense that "value", which is at the heart of the answer, is left unspecified. It appears as if "values" are defined by the author in an absolute sense, much like Erich Fromm in "The Heart of Man": "mental health is achieved if man develops into full maturity according to the characteristics and laws of human nature."

The few places in which the author refers to this matter indicate as much:

"Values, unlike the laws of physics, are in many instances "trans-world.""

"While I cannot in this brief space claim to resolve all issues related to value objectivity, the conclusion that at least certain values are objective and universal is critical (and in my view justified) if we, like Plato, are to appeal to values or "the Good" as the foundation of all."

The author is very likely aware that this point of view is very unpopular these days, that ever since Nietzsche claimed that one does not stumble upon objective truths, given that truth claims are best understood as social constructs with their inescapable dependence on the historical context in which they arise, and ever since Kierkegaard wrote that, on matters related to existence, one's own subjective truth is "the highest truth attainable", a large swath of really existing humanity has decided to self-define values or use convenient values of a certain culture, given that it is much more convenient to find one's own lifestyle in agreement with those "values" than be perennially sinful according to absolute values envisioned by a perennial philosophy.

So, the absolute view regarding values, should be stressed from the beginning of the article, as well as all other assumptions, so that the reader knows what the answer depends on.

For example, the author's claim that

"While mind certainly appears to be a necessary condition for the actualization of all, or at least most, values, I believe a strong case can be made in the opposite direction as well, for the proposition that values are intrinsic to the mind's very operation and existence." taken together with that of value objectivity, can be found in the following "reflection" of Goethe,

which appeared posthumously in 1833 (Goethe1953, *Maximen und Reflexionen* 1060, p. 514):

"In case I know my relation to myself and to the outside world, I call it truth. And in that way everyone can have their own truth, and it is nevertheless always the same. (Transl. V. P.)

[Kenne ich mein Verhältnis zu mir selbst und zur Außenwelt, so heiß ich's Wahrheit. Und so kann jeder seine eigene Wahrheit haben, und es ist doch immer dieselbige.]"

When the author writes that "we cannot conceive of a universe where the values of truth, compassion, beauty, freedom, and wisdom are vitiated." he steps again on highly unpopular territory, and is very likely aware of it, so he should mention somewhere that these statements are by no means commonplaces, but rather highly unpopular, as can be read from the following thought experiment proposed by Simone Weil in *L'Enracinement* (1949, p. 328):

"If one were to propose to all those whose profession is to think, priests, pastors, philosophers, writers, scholars, professors of all kinds, the choice, from the present moment on, between two destinies: either to sink immediately and definitively into idiocy, literally, with all the humiliations that such a collapse entails, and keeping only enough lucidity to feel all its bitterness; or a sudden and prodigious development of intellectual faculties, which ensures them an immediate global celebrity and glory after death for millennia, but with the inconvenience that their thought would always stay a little outside of the truth; can one believe that a lot of them would experience for such a choice even a slight hesitation?

[Transl. V. P.]

[Si l'on proposait à tous ceux qui ont pour profession de penser, prêtres, pasteurs, philosophes, écrivains, savants, professeurs de toute espèce, le choix, à partir de l'instant présent, entre deux destinées: ou sombrer immédiatement et définitivement dans l'idiotie, ausens littéral, avec toutes les humiliations qu'un tel effondrement entraîne, et gardant seulement assez de lucidité pour en éprouver toute l'amertume; ou un développement soudain et prodigieux des facultés intellectuelles, qui leur assure une célébrité mondiale immédiate et la gloire après la mort pendant des millénaires, mais avec cet inconvénient que leur pensée séjournerait toujours un peu en dehors de la vérité; peut-on croire que beaucoup d'entre eux éprouveraient pour un tel choix même une légère hésitation?]

There is also a touch of mentalism or epistemological subjective idealism in the author's contention that:

"From an epistemological perspective, the very objects, categories, ideas, actions, persons, etc. that comprise our world are conditioned by value. There is a serious question of whether there could be facts, information, and even "things" in the absence of value. What are facts, information, and things except that which is cognized by a conscious mind for a particular goal or purpose?"

similar to David Bohm's views on mind, matter, and meaning (Bohm and Weber, *Meaning as being in the implicate order* philosophy of David Bohm: a conversation. In: Hiley BJ, Peat FD (eds) *Quantum implications. Essays in honour of David Bohm*. Routledge, London and New York, p. 443):

"Mind and matter are inseparable, in the sense that everything is permeated with meaning. The whole idea of the soma significant or signasomatic is that at no stage are mind and matter ever separated. There are different levels of

mind. Even the electron is informed with a certain level of mind."

In the same vein is:

"The upshot of McGilchrist's observations is that if attention is of ontological significance values are of an even deeper, more fundamental ontological level, and are constitutive of both consciousness and the world. [...] values direct consciousness, and are hence foundational for both mind and world."

and in "Whitehead proposed a form of "panpsychism" in which sentience is present everywhere and in everything".

It's not only Whitehead. Teilhard de Chardin's and Bohm's proposals are similar. The former, with his "Omega point", could also be mentioned in the "open teleology" context.

This aspect of the author's analysis, namely the mind-dependent nature of everything, together with the objective nature of the values that same mind discovers, should be mentioned from the beginning.

In "In both history and biography, we find that it is invariably only after the occurrence of certain events that earlier events take on their significance." there is an echo of "Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards." (The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard, 1844).

When writing "Anyone who gives it serious thought will realize that the truly important things are the values that ought to guide human life. This has been recognized by virtually all philosophical and spiritual traditions."

one should be aware that there are serious philosophical and spiritual for which not values are guiding human life, but rather an awareness of what is, an absence of the activity of thought and of following rules, as emphasized by the Buddha and by Jiddu Krishnamurti. That "values" can be said to follow from such detached awareness is a different matter. The subject is not "guided by values", which are considered "dead words", but rather by an insight not mediated by words.

Some commas and a quotation mark should be added in

"I have argued that the answer to the question "Why is there something rather than nothing inevitably follows"

"I believe that there is only one reasonable answer. Our question "Why is there anything at all?" understood as an inquiry into the reason for existence points to values and meanings as the only possible candidates. "