

## Beyond Reason?: The problem of solving the meaning of life

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If the answer to the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything is 42, then what is that question? John Moffatt SJ takes *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* as his starting point as he thinks about how human beings try to explain the world around them. Do we have to make a simple choice between faith and reason, or is there more to it than that?

When I was a teenager, I rolled around on the living room floor, helpless with laughter, listening to Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* on the radio. Perhaps the best known gag from the series is when a team of super-computers around the galaxy finally works out that the ultimate answer to the meaning of life is 42 – leaving the population of the universe asking: what is the ultimate question?



This actually captures quite nicely the puzzle for all of us who, in different ways, are concerned with integrating the gift of faith with a rich understanding of the world around us. We human beings use our reason to try to understand the way things are and why they are the way they are. We all want to reason rigorously and well – none of us would like to feel that our life is founded on a logical mistake – but sometimes, the more mathematical and rigorous our reasoning becomes, the clearer but the more disappointing the answers. If the question about the meaning of life is just an equation, its solution does not really seem to touch us as human beings.

This prompts interesting reflections about the nature of reason that take us back deep into the Christian and Jewish traditions, and the ancient philosophical ideas that they absorbed and transformed.

If you look at the beginning of John's Gospel, you read, 'In the beginning was the Word'. When I was growing up, I was slightly puzzled by that expression, but let it wash over me. Then when I got to university I read it for the first time in Greek, and began to see what lay behind it. You see, that verse could as easily be translated as, 'in the beginning was the Reason'. The Greek word 'logos', used by John to refer to the only-born Son of the

Father, gathers in one term a whole range of meanings: word, speech, explanation, account, ratio, definition and human understanding, amongst others.

Across a range of Greek philosophers we find *logos* associated both with rigorous analysis and with the mystical quest for truth. In the Christian tradition, this divine *logos* is the one who both enables us to interpret our reality and is also the personal object of our love. Here we catch our first glimpse of something that I want to call 'deep' reason.

I want to emphasise that 'deep' reason is a part of our Christian and Jewish heritage. It is a reason that is both more than logic and good science while still *including* logic and good science. I want to use this idea as a way of thinking about some of the recent debates on faith and reason, religion and science.

## Human explanations and the universe

We might agree that everything that happens in the universe happens in accord with the laws of physics and chemistry. These laws provide us with the most basic explanation of physical events. However, the most basic explanation of events is not always a *complete* explanation.

This is most obvious in the primary world of our experience, which is not the world of particles, atoms and molecules, but the world of human beings. In most of our human interactions, if we reduced our explanations to a description of physical events, we wouldn't be able to survive a day at work, let alone our life at home.

Why is your significant other cross? Well it might be something to do with disruption to their molecules – or it might be because you have left your breakfast things for them to clear up five days in a row. Yes, there certainly is disruption to their molecules, but unless you notice the problem with the washing up as well, you could find your own molecules disrupted in very unpleasant ways.

One of the tests of a good explanation is how it affects reality in predictable ways. In human affairs, explanations that take into consideration human desires, motivations and activities do indeed affect reality in predictable ways. You apologise, do the washing up – and you leave the kitchen in one piece.

There is, of course, a difference between the social behaviour of human beings and the physical behaviour of matter. There is generally more room for surprise and creativity in the case of the former (although quantum physicists may disagree). And this is why the human sciences *look* so much less scientific than the Newtonian behaviour of particles. It is also why Shakespeare is often a better guide for understanding human behaviour than a sociology text-book.

But all that depends on defining 'science' and 'reason' as being about *just* exploring the mechanical behaviours of matter – and we do not have to define science and reason so narrowly. That definition is a choice. The choice either excludes human behaviour from the realm of science, or includes it by reducing it to the mechanical behaviours of matter.

Those who choose the latter option would say that if we only knew enough about the physical states of human beings, we would be able to predict each person's next move perfectly. This often leads to a reductive take on human self-hood: human freedom and consciousness are an illusion; the *real* explanation is to do with the laws of physics. This is a perfectly legitimate way of looking at the world – and a very popular one.

But all the physics in the world will not solve the problem of that awkward kitchen conversation. Nor will it explain what we are doing when we do physics. Because that is not the sort of explanation physics can provide.

What we find then, is that what we count as ultimate explanations depends not just on logic and observation, but on a *choice* – a choice about how we already prefer to think of ourselves, our universe and our place in it – and about what explanations we are prepared to consider 'real'.

So by one account, human activities and explanations are a second order reality in a universe of physical elements. By another, our human experience of the world, and our capacity to talk about it and explain things in it, is a primary, irreducible reality; *logos* is an integral part of this universe.

But notice: we cannot 'prove' scientifically which world is better; rather, we make a choice based on reasons that are not strictly scientific. What shapes that choice?

## Religious experience and reasonable belief

It is interesting how much effort we devote to showing that it is not stupid to believe in God, when actually, few of those arguments really touch the main reasons why we believe.

It is something about our experience of the world and our inner life that gives us the deepest reason to believe in God. It is on that mysterious edge of things where 'reason' borders on 'awareness'. It is on the same edge where what we see is the same as before, but now there is a change in the quality of the light.

There are, of course, many ways of ‘deconstructing’ such experience. One of these comes from the Scottish philosopher, David Hume and his famous argument about miracles – which I think can be naturally extended to interior religious experience as well.

Hume starts from the definition that a miracle is a violation of the laws of nature by a supernatural agency. The core of his argument is that our understanding of the laws of nature is based on our consistent experience.

Now, clearly, it will always be reasonable to suppose that events follow the laws of nature, because that is what the weight of our experience tells us happens. And it is always reasonable to rely on the weight of our experience because that is, in the end, all we have to go on.

The question is: can it ever be reasonable to suppose that a law of nature has been violated and that a miracle has occurred? Hume’s answer is that it can *never* be reasonable to suppose this. It will always be more probable either that there was some mistake in the evidence or that we had not fully understood or discovered nature’s laws. The weight of probability, based on past experience, will always be against the miracle. The miraculous is excluded from reasonable explanations by the definitions of ‘miraculous’ and ‘reasonable’.

It is interesting that this argument clearly shifts the weight from the question of *truth* to the question of *reasonable belief*. This is important, because all of us (including David Hume) can have reasonable beliefs, based on the probabilities of experience, which are false.

But let us take a side-step and ask: do we need to accept Hume’s account of a miracle as a violation of a law of nature? I suggest that we do not. What is important is not *how* a remarkable event happened – the mechanics – but what it *means* to us.

For Christians, a miracle is above all a sign, a ‘meaning event’ that speaks to us as we are. There is nothing supernatural about the processes of speaking and hearing words. But when those words are ‘I love you’, they are life-changing. Catching a large number of fish on Lake Galilee is hardly unnatural; for Simon

Peter, though, that was a moment which spoke to him, the fisherman, directly, clearly and deeply.

This line of thought invites us again to deepen our understanding of things, to move beyond the world of the purely mechanical to the world of the human, from abstract causal understanding to personal, communicative understanding.

When we do so we can begin to recognise the final and central puzzle in all that we have looked at so far. The things that mean most to us and that transform our lives cannot be directly communicated to anyone else. Others can have experiences that echo our own, but they cannot have *our* experiences.

The meaning-events in our lives that lead us to a sense of God are central to our self-understanding, but can never be a sufficient reason for David Hume or anyone else to believe that God has touched our lives. He can always find a ‘better’, ‘more probable’ explanation for our claims than that our lives have been touched by God, because God is already excluded from his repertoire of reasonable explanations.

Our own ‘deep reasons’ for believing are inescapably personal and communicative, just as God is personal and communicative. This is about deep *logos*: a word, a reason, a logic, which includes but goes beyond physical explanations.

This leads me to a way of thinking about this puzzle, and the relationship between a ‘narrow’, analytic reasoning and a ‘deep’, human reasoning, that I have found helpful.

The psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist has devoted the last twenty years or so to exploring two different modes of attention, located in the right and left lobes of the brain. The two halves of the brain can communicate, but each more often ‘shuts off’ the other, so most times we are either in left-brain, focused mode, or in right-brain, open mode.

Apparently the left, analytic lobe is where most of our words are – it is the chatty lobe – and so for a long time people assumed that it was the cleverer, more advanced part of the brain. The poor old right lobe was a lobe of few words and was assumed to be primitive, less intelligent and less important.

What McGilchrist wanted to do was show that this assumption was incorrect. The right lobe actually has the more profound, insightful and value-laden appreciation of the world.

Through his research he tries to show how the left lobe is unaware of the right lobe and therefore thinks it has the only worthwhile take on reality. He suggests that, perhaps because of this, our culture is over-impressed by 'left-lobe' takes on reality, and that as a result we are losing something important from our view of the world.

According to McGilchrist, in the ideal relationship, the left lobe is the 'emissary' of the right lobe, which is the 'master'. The left lobe's analysis, rightly taken up, leads to a richer appreciation of the world. The problem is that the left lobe *can* go it alone, and believe that its flat, analysed version of the world is the only true candidate for reality.

I found this a helpful way of thinking about our puzzle about reason and reasonableness. The narrow version of reason that only accepts mechanistic explanations as authentic seems very close to what McGilchrist is talking about when he describes the left-brain going it alone. His picture of the right relationship between the two lobes seems close to the idea of deep reason. Deep reason includes analysis and investigates mechanisms, but is open to a reality beyond them.

It includes silent contemplation. It is open to the unexpected, to the human and to value. It is in this space, open to 'more', that it becomes reasonable to believe in God, though it is a space we share with many who do not believe in God.

Richard Dawkins begins his book, *The God Delusion* with a moving quote from his friend Douglas Adams, who died of cancer at the age of 49: 'Isn't it enough to see that a garden is beautiful without having to believe that there are fairies at the bottom of it too?'

Theists and non-theists alike can share a sense of awe and wonder at the beauty of the world. In so doing, though, we move closer together as human beings, away from any sense that the problem of the meaning of life can be 'solved' like an equation. 42 can never be the answer to the human vision of the world.

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