What does it mean to be human?

An enquiry from science, philosophy & Christian theology

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About the author

Paul was born and raised in Northern Ireland, where he lives with his Malaysian Chinese wife and their two young children. His background is in medicine, but he also holds degrees in theology and medical genetics. After leaving his medical career he spent six years in church based ministry including four with a Chinese Church in Belfast. Currently he sits as a lay magistrate in Belfast, lectures part time in a Bible College and is studying for a PhD in theology. He is passionate about the word of God, the local church and relating the Bible's message to contemporary culture. Nothing excites him more than seeing Christians growing in their faith and living lives of total surrender to Christ in the freedom of God's grace and truth. If you would like to contact Paul or find out more about his writing or his Bible teaching please visit his personal website:

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1. Who am I to tackle the question?

When I was first asked to speak (and by extension write) on the question of what it means to be human, I must confess to a considerable degree of apprehension for two reasons:

a) A concern over the limits of my knowledge
b) A concern over the impossibility of objectivity

A concern about my limitations

The first concern is because there are so many different angles from which the question could be considered, and I do not regard myself to be an expert in any of them. Furthermore, there is a strong likelihood that some readers of this article will be much more expert in some of these fields than I am. Consider, for example, the different angles from which the following people could approach the question:

- A lawyer may be concerned about legal definitions of rights and responsibility (culpability)
- A doctor will consider her duty to respect, preserve and enhance human life
- A theologian will wonder about mankind's relationship to God and religious theory
- A philosopher will wrestle with the purpose of human life
- A sociologist will consider human beings in relationship to one another in families and societies
- Anatomists, biochemists and physiologists will consider the structure and function of the human body
- An anthropologist may study culture, artefacts, language and biology to understand humanity
- A computer scientist may wonder at how artificial intelligence approximates to the human mind
- A historian will look for lessons from human history as to what motivates us and shapes our identity
- A political theorist will ask how human societies and nations can best be governed

I do not seek to hide the limitations of my knowledge, but rather to acknowledge them so as to avoid creating a false expectation for you, the reader. I have dabbled in the practical outworkings of several of these disciplines, but it is as an interested amateur that I approach most, and hence this article is heavily dependent on the expertise of others. I shall attempt to acknowledge my dependence as I write by referencing quotations and concepts.

A concern about objectivity

Any answer to this question is bound to be highly subjective and shaped by experience. Being human will mean many different things to different human beings. When asked, "What does it mean to be human?", I am tempted to respond, "Which human?", for it seems to me that each human life is a unique story lived out in a specific time, place, culture and context. Your understanding of what it means for you to be human may be radically different from mine because our experiences, personality and culture may be different. Even if you have the great misfortune to share my personality type (I would love to tell you what it is, but the longer I live the more confused I am about that), and assuming you have had experiences approximating to mine (two parents, three grandparents, one older sister, pet Labrador as a child, stable home, great opportunities, good education, cross-cultural marriage, encounters with certain illnesses, experience of evangelical Christianity etc. etc.) you may still be a very different person from me, and may understand and experience your life and the world in which it is played out quite differently than I do mine. Most obviously, slightly more than half of all humans in the world are female, and I can claim no experience whatsoever of what it means to be a human of the female variety! Although I express my limited ability to describe the subjective experience of being human in universal terms as a potential weakness in my writing, I am at no greater disadvantage than the writers I will quote in this respect. In fact, this issue does raise certain other questions that are pertinent to our enquiry. Exactly what is it that makes me different from you? Is it the differences between our genes, differences of environment, culture and upbringing, or a mixture of the two? The debate about nature and nurture is an important aspect of what it means to be human. In addition, what is it that makes connection between two individuals possible? Although we cannot ever claim to fully understand another person's situation or perspective, we

are capable of "putting ourselves in their shoes". We can imagine their feelings and listen to their verbalisations of their experience. Where do these faculties of consciousness and empathy arise from?

Suffice to say at this point that I am aware of the impossibility of objectivity in tackling this question and that I apologise in advance if what I say does not make sense because your perspective is different from mine. I proceed, however, in the belief that the interchange of ideas is possible and that there is an ultimate truth about reality to which we can aspire to move together in our understanding. My concern in this article is not to try to explain the subjective experience of individuals (there is, I feel, a danger that discussions of this kind focus either on the extremely gifted or those whose lives are most severely disabled) but to consider humanity as a whole. We stand or fall together, and we belong together – from the greatest to the least.

My "qualifications"

Having acknowledged my concerns, I suppose I must now provide some kind of justification for why I decided to accept the challenge of writing on this subject. Although my lack of expertise is in one sense a disadvantage, I hope in another sense that it might be an advantage as I attempt to distill key ideas from the writings of experts and make them accessible to my fellow non-experts. Trying to explain what you have learnt to another person is always a great way to clarify your own opinion and to test your own comprehension of the subject. In addition to this potentially selfish reason for writing, I genuinely hope that what I write might be of some benefit to you. In preparing for this article I was forced to read a number of books that had previously languished on my shelves and to purchase a few others I had known previously only by reputation. Having spent a considerable number of hours reading and researching I have found what I have read both helpful and provocative. It is my desire that in reading this article you too will be provoked and helped.

I have had involvement in a number of areas of life in which the question of human identity is important. I have worked as a medical doctor and as a lay magistrate. I have been engaged in pastoral ministry both within my own culture and cross-culturally and have lectured in a theological college. I have studied genetics and ethics. I have a keen personal interest in history. However, it is to none of these areas that I appeal for my basic qualification to speak about human nature. My only legitimate qualification, I feel, is that I am (at least as far as I can tell) human. I speak to "us" about "us" as one of "us". Not only am I human, but, strangely enough, my parents, and indeed my entire extended family were also human. I have lived in human society all my life and have often needed to draw upon my understanding of human nature to explain and interpret the actions of other humans I have encountered. When I sought a mate it seemed instinctual to me to seek a human as my partner. Lo and behold, the offspring of that union also turned out to be human. It seems that I am surrounded by human beings and that it is amongst them that I feel both most at home and most uneasy. At home because I can see my own feelings, thoughts, fears, and hopes lived out in their lives, and that makes connection possible. I crave their love and I find some pleasure in offering love to some of them. Uneasy because in them I see not only my own goodness but my own twistedness – my selfishness, weakness, greed and impurity. In interacting with them these aspects of my being are frequently exposed. They have a unique ability to anger me, and the possibility that they may reject me disturbs me in a way that little else can. Even the fear of death at times seems paltry when compared to the fear of loneliness. At times I have wished as I have read the writings of others that they would also own up to these most obvious facts. I have wondered how some could write so dispassionately and some could analyse the flaws in the thinking of others with such apparent confidence that their thinking (perhaps uniquely) is free from the same kind of flaws. In short, I found myself wishing for a little humility. I hope that I can reflect that quality in my own writing, and if I do not then I beg your forgiveness and patience.

2. Why ask the question?

Practically pointless

On one hand in my experience the question of what makes a human being is practically pointless. I have never had to ask in clinic, court, church or college whether the being in front of me was human or not. It seems that only humans walked into a hospital looking for treatment, came to the church seeking pastoral support or attended my lectures seeking enlightenment (!), and even the most cunning of lawyers has never tried in the courts I sit in to suggest that their client was outside the court's remit because they weren't human. In my everyday life, then, the question appears to be irrelevant and I suspect the same is true for many of you. Somehow we know instinctively what a human being is. At its most basic, being human is simply about being born into a line of human beings stretching back before living memory. Someone begat them, and that person in turn was begat by another (forgive my slippage into biblical language). Being human, then, means being born into the continuous community of human beings. This, of course, raises another question – when and how did that line of human heritage begin? When did the pattern of generations passing on accumulated knowledge and shaping the understanding of the next generation begin, and what was there before it all began? Was there a point where a creature that was not, at least by our modern conceptions, human gave birth to a creature that was, and, if so, what sparked the change and how did that first recognisable human find a mate who could be its equal? The question of human origins strictly lies beyond the remit of the discussion, although, it is scarcely possible to separate it entirely from the question of what it means to be human.

Ethically essential

On another level the question is increasingly important, as, our understanding of ethics depends on our understanding of human life. Who deserves to be respected as human and accorded the full rights we expect humans to have? We live in an age when human rights are considered to be very important, even sacrosanct, but is there any basis for such rights? What is my duty to my fellow human being (if any)? Ethical issues at the beginning and end of life are especially to the fore in this regard as it is often as life begins and ends that categories and definitions become stretched. Is a fetus human? What of a severely demented elderly person? Who has the right to end human life? Can a mother or doctor decide to end the life of a fetus in good conscience? Can a terminally ill patient or their relative end their life? Once again we raise questions that this article is not intended to answer, but our views on issues such as abortion and euthanasia will surely depend heavily on our answer to the question of what it means to be human.

Deeply personal

At a third level, this time deeply personal, the question becomes important in light of a constant contradiction I find inside myself. There is a tension at the core of my being which, I suspect is within every human being. I am a strange conglomeration of hopes and fears, goodness and evil, kindness and cruelty, potential and powerlessness, wisdom and folly, happiness and despair. I am capable of quite remarkable achievements and knowledge (I claim no special level of achievement for myself – I believe every human being is quite remarkable) and yet am so often marked by failure and ignorance. The tension invades my relationships too – others can be a source of companionship and community or competition and conflict. At a societal level the same tension seems to play out. Different forms of government, however good in principle, all seem to founder on human greed and selfishness. What a wretched human I am! Who can deliver me from this? Do I really need to be delivered or should I simply stop thinking? Is it even possible to be delivered? If so, how?

3. Is there anything unique about *Homo sapiens*?

Two initial observations

An initial observation of mankind will lead us to conclude that we stand apart from other species on earth for at least two reasons:

a) Our obsession with discovery and defining

We are the only species on earth that has named and classified other species. We have even invented a scientific label for ourselves – *Homo sapiens*, "wise man" (a beautiful irony). This tendency to naming and classification lies at the root of science. We have a thirst to understand what things are composed of and how they work. We also have a need to capture the beauty of our world and explore dimensions of its meaning through art. We create things simply for the pleasure, expending large amounts of time and effort in the process, even if they have no functional value at all. Furthermore, we are the only species on earth that appears to ask deeper questions about meaning and purpose. The tendency, universal across human cultures, towards religion and philosophy has no observed parallel in other species.

b) Our ubiquity and ability to shape nature

Mankind is hugely successful at inhabiting the earth. We have found ways to live in every climate and ecosystem on every continent on earth, and even, for short periods, outside the atmosphere of our home planet. Furthermore, we are the only species that appears to have successfully domesticated animal species, even practising selective breeding among some species (notably dogs) that has led to a bewildering array of varieties. We have multiplied to such astounding numbers that many people are now afraid that our success will lead to our downfall – that human activity may threaten the earth's environment and cause a widespread extinction of life. Others, such as James Lovelock, the originator of Gaia Theory,[1] argue that the earth functions as a self-regulating system that is capable of coping with the worst that mankind can throw at it. The earth was here before us, and will survive long after us, they claim. British philosopher John Gray (b.1948), who dubs humanity *Homo rapiens* because of our rape-like abuse of the earth's resources, predicts that human population will soon decline in the face of pressures from the environment. He quotes biologist Lynn Margulis**,** who writes: "No human culture, despite its inventiveness, can kill life on this planet, were it even to try".[2] It seems that mankind's success illustrates the tension within us – we are capable of such inventiveness in using the earth's resources and surviving its challenges but also such destruction. Man does seem to have a unique potential for ubiquity and dominion over nature.

These observations are interesting, and we must ask what it is about our species that has made them possible. What is *Homo sapiens*, and is there anything unique about our species when compared to the other species that inhabit our planet? Different ideas have been suggested about what sets *Homo sapiens* apart from other animals. We will consider what three different branches of academic enquiry have to say on the matter – the physical sciences (chemistry and physics), the biological sciences (biology and genetics) and the social sciences (a broad category including disciplines such as law, anthropology and psychology).

The physical sciences

The physical sciences of physics and chemistry can compare our bodies to the stuff of the cosmos. At this level we discover that there is continuity. We are made up of the same elements and compounds that predominate in our universe. I belong in this cosmos and on this planet, and I am part of it. This may seem obvious to us today, but may not always have been obvious to the ancients.

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[1] Lovelock's seminal book, *Gaia: a new look at life on earth*, was first published by OUP in 1979

[2] Lynn Margulis, quoted in Gray, John 2002, *Straw Dogs: thoughts on humans and other animals*, Granta, p.8

The biological sciences

Biology can compare our bodies to those of other living creatures. We discover that there is significant continuity here too. Anatomy, physiology and biochemistry can all point to similarities. Notably the comparison is made with chimpanzees. Genetically, *Homo sapiens* is 96-99% similarity with *Pan troglodytes* (the common chimpanzee) depending on how the comparison is made.[3] Between any two individual human beings the difference can be up to around 0.5%. However, this statistic is misleading, as even a visual comparison of a chimp with a human should suggest. In the first place, the organisation of genetic material in the two species is quite different (for example, there is an extra pair of chromosomes in chimps). Secondly, when the two species are compared at the protein level only around 20-30% of proteins are identical in amino acid sequence![4] Admittedly many of the proteins differ only in one or two amino acids, but it is notable that the headline statistic that is quoted is the figure for DNA sequence and not protein sequence. The difference between the two statistics is explained by a number of factors. Firstly it is clear that the differences between the DNA sequences are in places that make a great different to phenotype (the physical appearance of an organism). Added to this is the fact that protein function depends on more than simply DNA sequence – the same DNA sequence can give rise to numerous proteins as it can be spliced in alternative ways and other chaperone proteins are necessary in the cells to shape the protein chain into a functioning protein.[5] Geneticist and popular science author Steve Jones (b.1944) has written:[6]

> *A chimp may share 98 per cent of its DNA with ourselves but it is not 98 per cent human: it is not human at all – it is a chimp. And does the fact that we have genes in common with a mouse, or a banana say anything about human nature? Some claim that genes will tell us exactly what we really are. The idea is absurd.*

Having highlighted the fact that man is not quite so closely akin to the chimpanzee as is sometimes implied, we must still acknowledge that there are great physical similarities. According to evolutionary psychologist Steven Pinker, the difference is primarily at the level of our brains:[7]

> *The outsize brain of Homo sapiens is by any standard an extraordinary adaptation. It has allowed us to inhabit every ecosystem on earth, re-shape the planet, walk on the moon, and discover the secrets of the physical universe. Chimpanzees, for all their vaunted intelligence, are a threatened species clinging to a few patches of forest, and living as they did millions of years ago.*

The advanced processing power of the human brain, according to Pinker, has elevated us above our closest relatives and explains our success. Still, chimps have brains that are not completely dissimilar from ours.

Social sciences

It is indisputable that human beings are remarkable in the complexity of their societies and the variety of their cultures and languages. Could these set us apart from other animal species? A BBC television documentary first broadcast in 2006 and hosted by Danny Wallace brought together research from a number of disciplines in addition to genetics to ask the question whether chimpanzees should have the same rights as human:[8]

- **Law** – US lawyer Steven Wise suggested that based on the ability to reason, chimps should have the same rights as a three year old child at least.
- **Sociology** – chimps stay with their mothers for 12 years, unlike monkeys, making them socially more similar to humans than most other animal species.

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[3] Wellcome Trust website: http://genome.wellcome.ac.uk/doc_wtd020730.html, accessed 23.10.10
[4] Glazko G *et al.* 2005, "Eighty percent of proteins are different between humans and chimpanzees", *Gene* 346:215-9 (14 Feb)
[5] Lennox, John 2007, *God's Undertaker: has science buried God?*, Lion, p.132ff., summarises these factors, drawing on the work of New York geneticist Barry Commoner
[6] Steve Jones, quoted in Lennox, John 2007, *God's Undertaker: has science buried God?*, Lion, p.131
[7] Pinker, Steven 1997, *How the Mind Works*, Penguin, p.40
[8] Elements from the October 2006 Horizon programme entitled "Chimps are People Too" are archived online at http://www.bbc.co.uk/sn/tvradio/programmes/horizon/broadband/tx/chimps, accessed 25.10.10

- **Culture** – groups of chimps can learn and spread knowledge (e.g. within a group they may share one way to solve a particular problem). This may be seen as a rudimentary level of culture.
- **Language** – chimps make many sounds that communicate to others. Yet parrots show much more advanced language skills than chimps, even being able to learn some human words.

In addition, chimps show signs of emotion and social interaction that we more commonly associate with ourselves. Dutch primatologist, Frans de Waal (b.1941), writes:[9]

> *I've argued that many of what philosophers call moral sentiments can be seen in other species. In chimpanzees and other animals, you see examples of sympathy, empathy, reciprocity, a willingness to follow social rules. Dogs are a good example of a species that have and obey social rules; that's why we like them so much, even though they're large carnivores.*

As the BBC documentary showed, even language is not unique to human beings, although the extent of our language ability is certainly much greater than other species and we do have the unique skill of writing. In the words of John Gray:[10]

> *The calls of birds and the traces left by wolves to mark off their territories are less forms of language than the songs of humans. What is distinctively human is not the capacity for language. It is the crystallization of language in writing.*

Gray continues to suggest that the development of writing, and especially languages using an alphabet (rather than pictographs or ideographs), allowed the separation of ideas from reality that led, in his view, to the error in Western philosophy of distinguishing humans from other animals. Human language is remarkable, but what makes our language so complex? Is it a result of our "outsize brain"? And who is the "me" who is writing these words and the "you" that is reading them? Am I more than just a large brain on top of a strangely hairless and peculiarly upright body? We must turn now to the question of the human mind and consciousness.

[9] Frans de Waal, quoted by Natalie Angier in a New York Times magazine article dated Jan 14th 2001, available: http://partners.nytimes.com/library/magazine/home/20010114mag-atheism.html, accessed 25.10.10

[10] Gray, John 2002, *Straw Dogs: thoughts on humans and other animals*, Granta, p.56

4. What is the human "mind"?

Differences of kind or degree?

So far what we have considered in our comparison of the bodies and skills of human beings with other animals suggests that differences are in terms of degree rather than of kind. *Homo sapiens* is not in a category of its own but at an extreme end of a spectrum of ability. Could it be, however, that the mind is the sphere in which mankind is truly distinct? Not according to Charles Darwin in his 1871 book, *The Descent of Man*:[11]

> *There can be no doubt that the difference between the mind of the lowest man and that of the highest animal is immense. An anthropomorphous ape, if he could take a dispassionate view of his own case, would admit that though he could form an artful plan to plunder a garden – though he could use stones for fighting or for breaking open nuts, yet that the thought of fashioning a stone into a tool was quite beyond his scope. Still less, as he would admit, could he follow out a train of metaphysical reasoning, or solve a mathematical problem, or reflect on God, or admire a grand natural scene……*
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> *Nevertheless the difference in mind between man and the higher animals, great as it is, is certainly one of degree and not of kind… If it could be proved that certain high mental powers, such as the formulation of general concepts, self-consciousness, &c., were absolutely peculiar to man, which seems extremely doubtful, it is not impossible that these qualities are merely the incidental results of other highly-advanced intellectual faculties; and these again are mainly the result of the continued use of a perfect language.*

According to Darwin, differences in the human mind when compared with apes are no different than differences in body and skills – they are only differences of degree and not of kind. Was Darwin correct? What does modern science say?

Self-awareness

It has been suggested that self-awareness or consciousness is a distinguishing feature of mankind, but we can hardly argue that animals are completely lacking in self-awareness. A number of animals pass the "mirror test" which assesses their ability to recognise themselves in a mirror, including great apes, dolphins, elephants and even some bird species.[12] Again the difference appears to be a matter of degree not kind. John Gray argues this point:[13]

> *cats, dogs and horses display awareness of their surroundings; they experience themselves as acting or failing to act; they have thoughts and sensations. As primatologists have shown, our nearest evolutionary kin among the apes have many of the mental capacities we are accustomed to think belong only to ourselves. Despite an ancient tradition that tells us otherwise, there is nothing uniquely human in conscious awareness.*

Gray does admit that there is a difference, in that humans are uniquely self-aware, although he argues that this has only served to complicate our lives:[14]

> *Where other animals differ from humans is in lacking the sensation of selfhood. In this they are not altogether unfortunate. Self-awareness is as much a disability as a power. The most accomplished pianist is not the one who is most aware of her movements when she plays. The best craftsman may not know how he works. Very often we are at our most skilful when we are least self-aware.*

Gray's illustration is interesting, as although it is generally true that a pianist plays best when she is least self-aware (my piano-playing wife, would undoubtedly agree), the ability to play well when unaware only arises through hours of conscious effort in practicing and learning music. Furthermore, being free from consciously focusing on the movements of fingers and keys releases the pianist to have conscious awareness at a higher level – to follow the score and consider how the music mixes with other instruments or voices she may be accompanying. If the music is known by heart it may also come instinctively, but this does not mean that the pianist is completely unaware – most likely her

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[11] Available online at: http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=SOiEo1tEnsoC&pg=PA150, accessed 01.12.10
[12] See, for example, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/8023295.stm, accessed 26.10.10
[13] Gray, John 2002, *Straw Dogs: thoughts on humans and other animals*, Granta, p.61
[14] *Ibid.*, p.61

mind will be transported to another place as she plays familiar pieces. The human imagination is immensely powerful! Likewise with a craftsman. His skills come naturally to him when he is using them, but they hardly came so naturally when we was an apprentice. And if the pianist or craftsman becomes too "unaware", he or she is likely to stray from the score or the plan and introduce either creativity (although if he or she is unaware how is this creativity to be repeated?) or error. The use of learnt skills is a fascinating mixture of instinct and coordination consciousness. Just think about riding a bike or driving a car! Gray is ultimately attacking the idea that we have a "self" that can be distinguished from the body, but the limitations of his illustrations show just how difficult it is for us to conceive of ourselves as nothing more than the result of instincts. We must consider the different ways in which people have conceived of the relationship between mind and body.

Theories of mind and body

Steven Pinker's earlier quoted comment about the complexity of the human brain raises the question of how the brain relates to the mind. What is the basis of human nature? Is the mind separate from the brain? Is there a self that can be defined or can exist separate from the body? Are all aspects of human consciousness explicable simply on the basis of physical processes? The debate around these questions is complex and continues to rage. In his 2002 book, *The Blank Slate*, Pinker argues against three traditional views of human nature:

- **Dualism** – This is the belief that the human being is made up of two distinct aspects – the material physical body and a non-physical, immaterial entity that inhabits the body or exists in parallel to it, relating to it intimately but distinguishable from it. In Western philosophy there have been two dominant forms of dualism:
    - *Platonic dualism* – classical Greek philosopher Plato (c.428-348 BC) proposed a dualism between physical matter and spirit that pervades the entire cosmos. At the human level this means that we are both physical and spiritual. It is a body / spirit dualism. Within Christian tradition the idea of body and soul has been dominant.
    - *Cartesian dualism* – French philosopher Rene Descartes (1596-1650) argued for a dualism of mind and body (or we may say mind and brain). He was concerned to establish an unshakeable proof of his own existence, and he eventually came to the conclusion that because he was reasoning, and someone had to be doing the reasoning, **he** must exist ("I think, therefore I am").

  Pinker criticises dualism, which he describes as the idea of a "ghost in the machine". He is opposed to it because the "ghost", whether mind or soul, cannot be seen or measured. Critics of dualism say that it seems to require a "homunculus" (or little man) who sits inside the brain observing the input from our physical senses and coordinating our physical responses. They mock the idea, asking whether this little man has an even tinier man inside his head, and so on ad infinitum. Like the "ghost", this little man cannot be detected, therefore he cannot exist. Advocates of dualism, of course, reject the ghost and homunculus images as unfair. Just because something cannot be seen, measured or detected using physical methods, they argue, it does not follow that it cannot exist. If non-physical entities do exist it seems unlikely that they could be measured using a physical means. Both Platonic and Cartesian dualism set mankind apart from other animals in a unique category, as John Gray writes:[15]

  > *Plato and Descartes tell us that consciousness is what marks off humans from other animals. Plato believed that ultimate reality is spiritual, and that humans are alone among animals in being at least dimly conscious of it. Descartes saw humans as thinking beings. He declared he knew he existed only because he found himself thinking – 'Cogito, ergo sum' (I think, therefore I am) – and that animals were mere machines.*

- **Empiricism** – Among European thinkers of the Enlightenment period who rejected the existence of the "soul", an empiricist explanation of human nature developed, in which it was claimed that the mind has no innate traits and that an individual's nature is simply the result of his or her environment. Although the idea of human nature being a result of the environment alone can be traced back to Aristotle (384-322 BC), it is especially associated with English philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) and Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–1776). Pinker calls

[15] Gray, John 2002, *Straw Dogs: thoughts on humans and other animals*, Granta, p.61

this theory "The blank slate" (a translation of the Latin term *tabula rasa* used by Locke) and argues that it is incompatible with the findings of modern science.

- **Romanticism** – Some European thinkers, especially in the creative fields of music, art and literature, rejected empiricism. They argued that the human being is fundamentally good and that human instinct can lead to great creativity. We are born good, and subsequently corrupted by our environment, in particular the constraints of society. They drew inspiration from an idyllic view of the societies of native tribes in newly discovered lands, who seemed to live simple, uncomplicated lives in touch with nature. Pinker describes this view as "The noble savage".

In contrast to these three views, Pinker argues that human nature arises from our genetic make-up. He equates the mind with the brain, writing that, "our minds are composed of intricate neural circuits for thinking, feeling, and learning rather than blank slates, amorphous blobs, or inscrutable ghosts".[16] According to Pinker and other evolutionary biologists such as Richard Dawkins, the "self" is only an illusion created by our genes to serve a coordinating function over the various parts of our brain. Although we feel like we have a mind that is somehow separate from the body, this is merely an illusion, and one that is not always helpful for us (as Gray suggested in the earlier passage about the pianist and craftsman). Modern science is revealing more and more evidence of how our nature arises from our genes and there is, they argue, no room left for the idea of a separate mind or soul.

Science versus Christianity?

In Pinker's view of the mind, which he claims arises from modern science, and his attack upon dualism, which has been a dominant way of understanding human nature among Christians, have we hit upon an area of fundamental conflict between Christianity and science? I will argue that the answer is no, for three reasons:

1) The limitations of science

It is premature to say that science has eliminated any possibility that human beings are dualistic creatures. The debate about human nature is far from concluded, and although there is a greater and growing awareness of the influence of our genes, it is far from certain that the genes can explain everything. If cloning of human beings resulting in genetically identical adult human beings was performed, would these two individuals be identical – would they conceive of themselves as one and the same person? In nature we already have cases that are similar to this in identical twins. Clearly although identical twins have a unique kind of relationship to one another they do have different personalities and traits, whether they are raised in the same family (very similar environment) or separated at birth. Although they may grow up to look identical and may have many similarities in personality type, there are also differences. Clearly our environment shapes the way in which our genes express themselves – that much is beyond dispute (the link between tobacco smoke and various diseases provides ample proof). It may still be claimed that the effect of the environment is simply modifying the way in which our genes manifest themselves, but is it not also possible that even with exactly the same environment two genetically identical people may make different choices and so become different people? If we arise simply from our genes then the answer should be "no". Of course it would be virtually impossible to test this question through scientific experiment as the mechanism of ensuring an absolutely identical environment would be so costly and complicated that it would almost certainly fail, not to mention the ethical questions surrounding this kind of manipulation of an individual's life. It seems that there will always be a limitation to what research can prove around the question of the respective impact of nature and nurture on the people we become. Yet, I will argue that the ability of people to make choices that rise above their circumstances suggests a role for ourselves in deciding who we become. Our genes may set certain limits on what is possible for us, but we are not powerless to overcome them. Recent scientific evidence suggests that obesity in most cases is associated with certain genotypes (certain genes that give the individual a tendency to be overweight). Environment has an impact as well – the availability and affordability

[16] Pinker, Steven 2002, *The Blank Slate: the modern denial of human nature*, Penguin, p.72

of high carbohydrate snacks and sedentary lifestyles make it more likely for those who have a genetic tendency to obesity to become obese. This much is certain, but surely there is also a third element in the equation – the choice of the individual. Does our experience not tell us that those who really decide to lose weight can do so and that until someone decides they are determined to make a change to their lifestyle no changes in environment will make them thin? Environmental changes (reduction of advertising of confectionery or free gym membership) can make it easier for them to make healthy lifestyle choices, but they must still reach a point of deciding to do something about their weight. Simple arguments from real life such as this tell us, almost instinctively, that we do have real choices that have real consequences.

At another level, there are ongoing debates about the ability of science to explain aspects of consciousness. For example, there is considerable debate about concepts like *qualia*, which are:[17]

> *the 'raw feels' of conscious experience: the painfulness of pain, the redness of red. Qualia give human conscious experience the particular character that it has. For instance, imagine a red square; that conscious experience has (at least) two qualia: a colour quale, responsible for your sensation of redness, and a shape quale, responsible for the square appearance of the imagined object.*

Some philosophers and neuroscientists deny the very existence of qualia, while others (like Ramachandran and Hirstein) argue that they are simply a result of neural processes, but many continue to see them as evidence that the mind cannot be reduced simply to physical processes of the brain. Probably the most influential thought experiment concerning qualia was proposed in 1982 by Australian philosopher Frank Jackson (b.1943).[18] He wrote about "Mary's Room". Mary is a brilliant scientist who has researched everything it is possible to know about the colour red and the physical processes by which the eye detects it and the brain interprets these signals. Now assume that Mary (for whatever reason) has lived her entire life in a black and white room, so that she has never personally experienced the colour red. One day she is allowed to leave her room and see red for the first time. When she does so, has she learned anything new? Instinctively we answer "Yes!" This suggests that knowledge about a phenomenon is of a different order than experience of it. We may extend this line of reasoning to ask how we could measure and describe the experience of love or grief or how we would ever know what another individual's experience of love or grief was like. We are capable of empathising – imagining ourselves in the other person's shoes – but we can never say conclusively that we understand fully what they are going through. Even if we had exactly the same experience as they did this is true. There is much more to the subjective experience of humanity that science has not yet been able to explain. Neuroscience tends to examine emotion and thought in terms of the activity of different areas of the brain, but how the correlation between brain activity and subjective experience is described is a matter of conjecture. Is the brain activity the cause or a result of the experience? This "chicken and egg" question is difficult to answer using scientific methodology, and it is difficult even to imagine what manner of scientific experiment could ever answer the question conclusively.

2) Variation of views among Christians

Questions of whether human beings are bipartite (body and soul) or tripartite (body, soul and spirit) creatures have long been the subject of discussion among Christians at both the popular and academic levels. Moreland and Rae summarise the debate within Christian theology in their book *Body and Soul*. Early Christian theologian Augustine of Hippo (354-430) and the most influential medieval theologian, Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), both argued for a dualistic understanding of human nature, and in fact dualism has almost certainly been the predominant view amongst most Christians throughout most of Christian history. However, in recent decades the consensus among biblical scholars has shifted towards a monist or holistic view of human life, in which the spiritual and physical aspects of human life are inseparable. Proponents of a monist view of human nature argue that it is more in keeping with the Scriptures (especially the Old Testament Hebraic perspective) and that the dualistic view entered Christian theology from Platonic philosophy. It should be emphasised in this context that Platonic dualism is ontological dualism, meaning that it claims a fundamental duality running throughout everything that exists, so that, for example, good and evil must always have existed. In contrast, Christian dualists believe that dualism only

[17] Ramachandran V. S. & Hirstein W. 1997, "Three Laws of Qualia: what neurology tells us about the biological functions of consciousness, qualia and the self", *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 4 [5-6]:429–58, p.430
[18] Jackson, F. 1982, "Epiphenomenal Qualia", *Philosophical Quarterly* 32:127–136

applies to those things that God has created, not to the ultimate reality, which is found in God who is undivided and separate from His creation. The monistic view is represented by German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg (b.1928): "the distinction between body and soul as two … different realms of reality can no longer be maintained… The separation between physical and spiritual is artificial".[19] Moreland and Rae continue to argue for a dualistic understanding of human nature, but it seems accurate to say that there is considerable diversity of opinion among Christians. Certainly in many places where the Bible uses words traditionally translated "soul" or "spirit" to speak of human beings the whole person seems to be in mind rather than simply one dimension of their being. Likewise, the word "body" is often used to describe the person in their entirety. There are other passages that seem more difficult to explain in monist terms, where reference is made to the spirits of people returning to God, but these are relatively rare and monists may argue that they are figurative.

Concerns among Christians about the "soul" often arise from two related questions. The first is about the origin of souls. If the dualistic view is correct and we have immaterial "souls", are they pre-created (i.e. God created all human souls during the Creation of the Universe and they await the conception of a body to inhabit), specially created by God when an individual is conceived, or created through the normal processes of reproduction in the same way that human bodies are? I am unaware of an answer to this question in Scripture. Certainly the Bible speaks about the plans God had for individuals before they were conceived, but this may imply nothing more than fore-knowledge of them. Psalm 139 speaks about God knitting the body of the psalmist together in his mother's womb (v13), which may imply an act of special creation by God in the case of every individual, but there is no mention in this psalm of the "soul" as distinct from the body. The second question is about the "intermediate state" – what happens to the human person (or their "soul") after death and before they receive a new body at the resurrection of the dead? Some New Testament passages appear to imply that the individual is unconscious during this period (the word "asleep" is used figuratively of death in 1 Corinthians 15 and 1 Thessalonians 4 and 5), whereas others (notably the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16, which is variously interpreted as a parable or as a literal story) imply consciousness, while others simply promise that the person will be with Christ (e.g. Jesus' words to the dying thief on the cross or Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 5:8). The resurrection of the dead is, therefore, variously understood as a uniting of the conscious souls of the dead with a new body, the waking of sleeping souls to receive a new body or the "re-creation" of the individual from God's perfect record of their identity. It seems to me that this may be an area where Christians must agree to disagree as Scripture is not sufficiently clear for us to be dogmatic. It is my contention that the Bible is perfectly clear on essential matters that God has chosen to reveal to us, but that it does not answer every question we may want to bring to it. There are some things that God has chosen not to reveal, either because this knowledge is unnecessary, or even harmful, for us or because we are incapable of comprehending it. This is not to belittle the authority of the Bible or its foundational role in our lives but to say that it does not answer every question we can ask. We need to learn to ask the right questions. In highlighting these differences of view there is always a danger that the large degree of unity among Christians is missed. Christians can be united in believing that God will raise the dead, and that He will make no errors in doing so, even if we have different ideas about how He will do it. We can also be united in our belief that every individual is created by and known by God even if we have different ideas about when and how directly or indirectly He creates us. In our present context the key point is that opinion among Christians, even those who have a high view of the authority of the Bible, is far from united on the question of whether humans are dualistic or monistic beings.

3) Questions of "why?", not "what?"

We have already indicated that the debate over dualism and monism is not simply a disagreement between Christians and scientists, but is, rather, a debate that cuts a line through opinion amongst both groups (not forgetting as well that there are many people who belong in both camps – committed Christians who are scientists). Our third reason for rejecting the idea that this is a conflict between science and Christianity is broader than simply the issue of dualism. Some scientists do seem determined to set science up in conflict with

[19] Wolfhart Pannenberg, quoted in Moreland, J.P. & Rae, Scott B. 2000, *Body and Soul: human nature and the crisis in ethics*, IVP, p.23

Christianity and some Christians seem equally determined to set their faith in conflict with science. Such a conflict, however, arises from a misconception about science or the Bible or both. John Lennox, Professor of Mathematics in the University of Oxford, has written about the relationship between science and religion in his book, *God's Undertaker*. He argues that the real conflict is not between science and religion at all:[20]

> *There is a conflict, a very real one, but it is not really a conflict between science and religion at all… No, the real conflict is between two diametrically opposed worldviews: naturalism and theism.*

Lennox's observation is vital. Science is designed to answer certain types of questions, and it is very good at doing so. It observes what is the case or events that happen and formulates a theory (hypothesis) as to how they came to be that way or what caused a measurable change. This hypothesis is then tested either by continued observations or through experimentation, and is either rejected or adjusted depending on new findings. A theory is given increasing degrees of respect as its explanatory power increases – the more it is shown to explain what is observed the more likely it is to be true. Strictly speaking, science can never "prove" anything, since there is always the theoretical possibility that some entity or phenomenon that has not yet been observed falls outside a theory's explanatory power. In practice, however, some theories are so powerful that questioning them further is widely believed to be unnecessary. In these cases people often speak of science having "proven" the theory, and if the weight of evidence is great enough and the idea can be reduced to a simple principle that has been repeatedly observed to be true then this may be called a scientific "law". Many theories in science can be tested by experimentation, but not all. Where an event is not repeatable then a different approach to formulating and testing a theory must be followed. This is obviously the case with events in the past such as the origins of the cosmos, of life, and of species. In these cases the evidence is observed and the theory that best explains the evidence is inferred from it. This is the process of inference to the best explanation. It is a legitimate approach to science, but one whose conclusions should be held to be less certain than theories that are tested by repeated experimentation.

The important point in either case is that the evidence only leads so far. It is interpreted as pointing in a certain direction, and the scientist then extrapolates towards a conclusion. There is what we might call a "leap" from the evidence to the conclusion, and there is significant room for error in this "leap". It is at this point that we must realise that the scientist is not a dispassionate and entirely objective observer – he or she is a human individual who understands the world in certain terms. Every scientist has a "worldview", as Lennox calls it, a set of presuppositions about what the world is like and how it functions. The worldview is undoubtedly influenced by his or her knowledge of science but it is also shaped by other factors such as personality, culture, upbringing and experience. The scientist's worldview will determine the range of possible destinations for his or her "leap" from the evidence and will also influence the direction of the leap (which of these possible destinations is chosen). Lennox highlights two worldviews as being at the centre of a current conflict: naturalism and theism. Naturalism is the belief that everything that exists is the result of natural processes and can be explained by them – there are no supernatural beings or causes. Since science by definition follows a naturalistic methodology, that is it is only capable of measuring and observing things within the realm of nature, naturalism may also be thought of as scientism, the idea that science is the only basis for authority about the nature of reality and that science will eventually be able to understood and describe everything that can be understood and described. This worldview is closely related to materialism and physicalism, which claim that all of reality consists solely of matter or physical properties respectively. Clearly dualism, whether spirit/body or mind/brain, is inconsistent with a materialist or physicalist worldview. The alternative worldview, according to Lennox, is theism, the belief in a personal God who exists outside of and independently from the cosmos. Christianity is a theistic belief system. A theist is open to the possibility that "supernatural" powers are a cause of "natural occurrences". This is not to say that he or she will always tend to look for a supernatural explanation, but that he or she will not reject that conclusion without seriously considering it. For a committed naturalist, God is not within the range of possible destinations for the "leap" from the evidence. For a committed theist, God **is** within the range of possible explanations.

[20] Lennox, John 2007, *God's Undertaker: has science buried God?*, Lion, p.27

It is important to distinguish at this point the implications of worldview for the range of possible explanations of observed phenomena and the reasons for which a worldview is held. I have spoken of "committed" naturalists and theists, but there are other people who describe themselves as agnostic – they have not rejected the existence of God but are not yet convinced that He does exist. I would argue that no agnostic has become a theist or a naturalist based solely on the evidence of science. There are many respected scientists who are naturalists and many who are theists, even in the discipline of evolutionary biology.[21] A theist may interpret the evidence as support for her belief in God, while a naturalist may interpret it as supportive of his atheistic view. The theist is unlikely to say that she is a theist solely because of science, in fact I have never met anyone who says they became a Christian because of scientific evidence alone, although I have met many Christians who know a great deal about science and do not see any contradiction with their faith and some who were initially led towards Christian faith because of the order and beauty they saw in nature. Strangely, however, there are some naturalists who claim that their naturalism is purely because of the scientific evidence, and that naturalism is the **only** worldview compatible with science. They make this claim despite the fact that it cannot possibly be substantiated by science itself. How could science ever "disprove" the existence of God? What experiment would we devise? There will always be a "gap" in our knowledge for God to hide in (to use the image of the "God of the gaps" that naturalists often use disparagingly against theists). For further support of their belief in God, Christians will point to evidence from history (what people have believed about God in the past and how this has changed them), from personal experience, and most importantly of all to the concept of revelation, to which we will return later. These are all forms of evidence that are outside the normal realms of science. Scientists may describe the physical manifestations of people's experience and how they speak about it, but they cannot discount that experience. We may investigate history using "scientific" methods and come to a better understanding of what happened, but the interpretation of the significance of those events will depend on other factors. It is to these other lines of evidence that Christians will point agnostics who are genuinely concerned to ask whether God may exist and it is with these other kinds of evidence that a naturalist must engage if he is to genuinely engage with the question of God's existence. Otherwise he is presenting little more than an "atheism of the gaps". If he tries to deny that any "gaps" exist he is pre-empting the conclusions of future science (assuming that it will fill in any currently discernible "gaps") and excluding large swathes of human experience and life that fall outside the scientific method. More importantly still, even if all the "gaps" in our knowledge of what exists in the physical world and how it works were filled in the issue of purpose would still not have been dealt with. Science is simply not suited to answering questions of "why?" It can answer many (perhaps all) "what?" questions about the physical universe – describing what exists and how things work – but when it comes to the question of why the universe exists it is struck dumb. For this reason neither a naturalistic worldview (there is nothing but the natural processes we can observe) nor a theistic worldview (a Creator exists) can ever be based solely on science.

Lennox provides a simple but brilliant illustration of this limitation of science using the image of a cake made by his Aunt Matilda.[22] Scientists could analyse the cake and say exactly what it is made of. That is a "what?" question. They may even be able to infer a purpose for the cake from the fact that it is suitable for human consumption, that it will stimulate certain taste buds and that it has been carefully sculpted. I might add that they could guess at the purpose of the cake based on their own personal experience and cultural awareness, although this is a step into other kinds of evidence that are not strictly part of science. Ultimately, however, the only way to be certain of purpose of the cake is to ask Aunt Matilda herself. The "why?" question can only be answered by revelation from the creator. If Aunt Matilda had written "Happy Birthday John" on the cake we could have figured out what her purpose was, but in the absence of written revelation we must seek verbal revelation. Christians believe that the Creator of the cosmos has revealed Himself to mankind. We will return to this idea of revelation at a later point, but for now we must emphasise that the clash of ideas regarding the nature of humanity is not a conflict between Christianity and science but between Christianity and naturalism.

[21] John Lennox lists a number of examples in *God's Undertaker*, p.90
[22] Lennox, John 2007, *God's Undertaker: has science buried God?*, Lion, p.40ff.

5. Volition and Morality

So far we have considered John Gray's argument that self and consciousness are illusions. This is only the first of three steps in a chain of argument in *Straw Dogs* that we must now follow. Effectively Gray argues that:

1. Self and consciousness are illusions, therefore:
2. Free will is an illusion, therefore:
3. Morality is an illusion.

We have already questioned whether Gray is correct to think that self is an illusion, but we must now turn to the question of free will. Gray argues, uncontroversially in my estimation, that we are only aware of a fraction of the knowledge our senses acquire, but he goes further than this, attacking the very idea that we have any decision making capacity. Gray's logic is that if consciousness is only illusionary then there can be no such thing as a choice based on the human will – in fact our bodies are acting in keeping with their basic instincts, which arise ultimately from our selfish genes. The end result is that people cannot be held morally accountable for their actions. Now it seems to me that there is an assumption being made by Gray here. Even if dualism is wrong and the self does not exist separately from the brain, why must that mean that choice is an illusion? Could it not be true, even if Gray cannot conceive of it, that the brain could support a voluntary self that can make real choices that determine, to however limited a degree when all other factors are taken into account, the individual's destiny? Does modern science support Gray's claim that free will and morality are illusionary?

Libet's half-second gap

Gray appeals for scientific support for his denial of free will to the work of physiologist Benjamin Libet (1916-2007).[23] Libet's research, published in 1983 [24] demonstrated a delay between the appearance of a "Readiness Potential" (RP) on their electro-enchapalogram [25] when subjects decided to move their hand and the moment at which they were conscious of making the decision. The RP appeared around 0.5 seconds before the person knew they had made a decision. Libet suggested that the brain has already made the decision to act before the "mind" is conscious of it – the decision is not a conscious one; consciousness merely registers the brain's decision. Libet himself did not interpret his findings as a complete denial of free will. He retained the possibility of "free won't", believing that during the delay the conscious mind might be able to veto the brain's decision and cancel the action. There are, however, several disputed aspects to the interpretation of Libet's work:

- Firstly, it is highly questionable whether Libet's laboratory conditions can be translated into the world of everyday decision making. In his experiment the subjects were told what to do and were waiting to do it. They didn't have to decide from a range of possible actions; the only decision they had to make was the timing of the action. This situation is highly artificial and does not equate to the kind of complex decisions we make repeatedly throughout every day.

- Secondly, there are a number of alternative explanations for the "gap" Libet observed. It may be argued that the brain activity seen in the RP reflects not the making of a decision but a state of readiness before the decision is made as the subject prepared to make a decision. Although Libet went to considerable pains to eliminate any delay in subjects determining when they were aware of making a decision, the possibility remains that the delay he recorded was actually in their ability to process the information from their visual pathways. It is also possible that consciousness is involved in the decision but that the registering of that consciousness is delayed. We might ask whether consciousness in decision making and awareness of consciousness are the same thing.

- Thirdly, subsequent research has not conclusively supported Libet's findings. Research published in 2008 using functional MRI scanning (a much more advanced indicator of brain activity than the EEG used by Libet) showed

[23] Gray, John 2002, *Straw Dogs: thoughts on humans and other animals*, Granta, p.67
[24] An extensive discussion of Libet's research is found online at: http://www.consciousentities.com/libet.htm, accessed 23.10.10.
[25] EEG, a reading of electrical activity in the brain

activity in areas of the brain that are believed to be involved in decision-making up to ten seconds before awareness of making a decision.[26] This suggests a much longer gap than Libet found, but it creates a problem, as we may wonder how we can possibly square a ten second delay with our experience of life. Are we really to believe that we are living ten seconds behind what actually happens? More recent research published in March 2010 disputes Libet's findings. New Zealand scientists Judy Trevena and Jeff Miller compared brain activity before a decision to move and before a decision not to move and found no difference. They "conclude that Libet's results do not provide evidence that voluntary movements are initiated unconsciously."[27]

It seems that Gray's conclusions are at best premature and that they arise more from what he wants to be true rather than what has been demonstrated to be true. We will return to the issue of "free will" at a later point in terms of what Christians believe about it, but at this point it is important to say that science is very far indeed from describing what happens when a person makes a decision and that it has certainly not disproved the idea that we are capable of making real decisions with real consequences.

Morality an illusion?

If the self and free will are illusions, it follows that morality as it is commonly understood does not exist. Our choices would simply be results of our physical make-up and a universal standard of "morality", if it exists at all, would be simply a description of the normal way in which our brain conditions us to act. Michael Ruse and Edward O. Wilson summarise this view succinctly:[28]

> *Morality, or more strictly, our belief in morality, is merely an adaptation put in place to further our reproductive ends. Hence the basis of ethics does not lie in God's will… In any important sense, ethics as we understand it is an illusion fobbed off on us by our genes to get us to co-operate.*

Within this statement is an attack on a Christian view of ethics, which is dependent on God. Ruse and Wilson are not, however, completely accurate in suggesting that a Christian view of ethics is based on "God's will". In the Bible, God's will is an expression of His character – He **wills** good because He **is** good. Christians do not believe in obedience to blind rules that emerge from the will of an unpredictable and capricious God, but in relationship with a God who can be known. We will return to the Christian idea of ethics in due time, but for now we must ask whether there is any evidence that morality is more than simply an evolutionary illusion. Before considering some additional evidence it is worth noting, however, that Ruse and Wilson cannot avoid using language that describes genes as conscious agents (how can genes fob anything off on anyone?) This is a consistent feature of the writings of many evolutionary biologists. It may help people to accept the arguments of these writers by making them sound more plausible, but could it also reflect a fundamental inability to believe in seemingly purposeful action without an intelligent cause?

A recent edition of the magazine *New Scientist* [29] included a number of brief articles about current scientific thinking about morality. Contributions included:

- **Peter Singer** (ethicist) – ***Beyond intuition***

  Singer draws on work by moral psychologist Joshua Greene that suggests that we have an instinctive negative response to hands-on violence, but not to actions that cause the same outcome in a less direct way. Singer sees this as support for the idea that our "moral" decisions are simply based on intuitive emotional responses. In this he appears to support a naturalistic worldview, yet he still argues that we can rise above these intuitive emotional responses to find more carefully reasoned responses to moral dilemmas. He writes:

  > *It certainly doesn't follow that we ought to do what our instincts prompt us to do… Rather, by undermining the authority that some philosophers have given to our intuitive moral responses, the new scientific lines of*

[26] Soon, C.S. *et al.* 2008, "Unconscious determinants of free decisions in the human brain", *Nature Neuroscience* 11:543-545
[27] Trevena, J. & Miller, J. 2010, "Brain preparation before a voluntary action: evidence against unconscious movement initiation", *Consciousness and Cognition* 19[1]:447-456
[28] Ruse, M. & Wilson, E.O. 1985, "Evolution and Ethics", *New Scientist* 108:50-52 (17 October)
[29] *New Scientist* issue 2782, 16 October 2010

evidence about the nature of morality open the way for us to think more deeply, and more freely, about what we ought to do.

Where does this word "ought to" arise from? Who decides what we ought or ought not to do? Singer seems to depart from a purely naturalistic view here. Morality is no longer simply a natural response; we can rise above our inbuilt instincts and do better. But surely we can legitimately ask why we should bother! Does evolution need a helping hand from our intelligence? If we believe that evolution got us this far, why would we now question its ability to lead us on? Even if we could rise above our instincts, why should we bother if there is no God and no purpose greater than our own survival and pleasure? Surely we should simply eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die!

- **Paul Bloom** (developmental psychologist) – ***Infant origins of human kindness***

Bloom suggests that the foundations of morality are built into babies since in his research they were drawn to puppets that helped another puppet up a hill and reject puppets that pushed the struggling puppet down. This pattern was observed at age six months and even three months. These findings provide a strong challenge to the "blank slate" theory of human nature, but do they indicate that morality is purely a result of our genes? Bloom writes about the inspiration for his research:

Many scientists who study morality are interested in why people behave badly, but I am more curious to understand why we are so nice. We give extraordinary amounts to charity, donate our blood, give directions to lost tourists and perform acts of random kindness every day. It is no surprise that modern humans can often be selfish and cruel, but this kindness poses a deep puzzle.

Bloom has identified a key question for evolutionary biologists. Selfish genes are a good explanation of selfish actions and they may even explain actions that are for the overall good of the whole community (my relatives' genes are my genes, hence any action that protects and preserves my relatives could benefit my "selfish genes"), but how can they explain true altruism? Why would they cause me to care beyond my own "clan"? Science is far from explaining a plausible evolutionary basis for these aspects of morality.

- **Sam Harris** (neuroscientist and "new atheist") – ***We can send religion to the scrap heap***

This article is really a trailer for Harris's new book *The Moral Landscape*. He has realised that morality is a weak point in the arguments of the new atheists and is concerned to see more scientific research into morality so that religion can finally be dismissed. He attacks the Catholic Church and proposes a variant form of utilitarian ethics [30] in which issues like truth, justice and fairness can be included with pleasure and happiness in an all-encompassing concept of "well-being". He expects that scientific enquiry as to the "the way the universe is" will guide us to what is best for the experience of conscious creatures – that we can discover an absolute system of ethics based on nature. Harris appears to have confused two key issues – the issue of describing what is and what works in life (a legitimate area of enquiry for science) and the issue of why it is that way and what is of ultimate value (which is beyond the remit of science). Even if science could unravel exactly what everything in the world is currently like, the questions of whether it could be better (and how we would decide what was "better"), how it came to be this way, and whether it has any purpose, would still be wide open. Furthermore, there would undoubtedly still be differing ideas of what "well-being" is and in the absence of anyone who can adjudicate the inevitable result would be conflict. It may be argued that most of mankind's failings are not the result of knowing what action would be best but result from either a lack of will to do what is best or a lack of power to do it. Human greed and selfishness have ruined every dream of utopia to date, and it seems inevitable based on the lessons of history that Harris's utopian dream will be confounded too.

- **Patricia Churchland** (philosopher of neuroscience) – ***Brain roots of right and wrong***

Churchland is confident that a better understanding of our brains will explain the origins of morality. She writes that:

[30] Utilitarianism is an ethical system within which decisions are deemed to be morally acceptable or unacceptable depending on their consequences for all feeling beings.

Morality seems to be shaped by four interlocking brain processes: caring, rooted in attachment to and nurture of offspring; recognition of others' psychological states, bringing the benefit of predicting their behaviour; problem-solving in a social context, such as how to distribute scarce goods or defend the clan; and social learning, by positive and negative reinforcement, imitation, conditioning and analogy. These factors result in the emergence of a conscience: a set of socially sanctioned responses to prototypical circumstances.

These ideas are very interesting and seem quite plausible, but they hardly solve the entire mystery surrounding morality. In the first instance, Churchland has not suggested a solution to Bloom's problem. She speaks about the benefit of defending the clan, but what of altruistic goodness across clan divides? We care for our offspring, but why do we also care for strangers? Secondly, she is still talking about descriptions of what we are and what comprises what we are. She makes no suggestion as to why we are that way. The question of purpose is left unanswered. Thirdly, we might ask whether Churchland is correct in claiming that the conscience is "socially sanctioned" or is there, in fact, an aspect of morality that is more intimately programmed into our psyche? What of Bloom's discovery of elementary morality in children as young as three months?

- **Martha J. Farah** (neuroscientist) – ***My brain made me do it***

Farah writes about the implications for ideas of justice of the theory that morality arises from unconscious brain function rather than from volition. Can people be found guilty of crime if their brain made them act that way? She refers to evidence from functional MRI scans that murderers have abnormal activity in some areas of the brain. This is, however, something of a "chicken and egg" situation. Are their choices the result of this activity, or do these changes in the brain result from their choices and repeated patterns of behaviour (if that part of the brain that is involved in violent thoughts is repeatedly used may it not expand and so be over-active in people who have become violent to the degree of committing murder)? Furthermore, even if an individual has a greater propensity to murder because of an abnormality in their brain, does that mean they are no longer responsible for their actions when they commit murder? What about the possibility of reform? Is it possible for a murderer to reform his ways – experience in my own country of Northern Ireland would suggest that it is. What happens to the brain activity of these reformed murderers? What of the idea of resisting temptation? Every person seems to have areas in which they are particularly prone to actions which society or their own conscience says are wrong, but recognising this does not necessarily mean that their actions are not wrong. Could it be that the subjective feeling of guilt or of shame (which we predominantly experience will depend largely on the culture in which we are raised) is a pointer to an objective moral standard – that there might be a cosmic Judge before whom we are guilty or a loving Creator before whom we ought to feel ashamed? Whatever the basis for an action in a particular case (whatever factors worked together in leading to the action), we can still ask whether the action is morally wrong. It is one thing to say that a particular individual should not be held culpable for murder in a particular case, but would we really be happy to say that murder is perfectly acceptable and that we should not attempt to catch murderers and put them on trial? It is important that individual cases are tried on an individual basis, but there must be a standard against which to try them.

Another challenge to the naturalistic idea of morality comes from the ability to be influenced. If our actions result simply from our genes, then how can we explain the ability of other people to influence our ideas and morality? Farah includes in her article a quotation from Francis Crick, co-discoverer of the structure of DNA:

'You', your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules.

She then refers to a 2008 study in which some subjects were asked to read this statement before taking a computerised test. Those who had read the passage were more likely to cheat in the test than other subjects who had not read it. Farah claims that this finding supports the idea that "awareness of the neural causes of behavior influences our behavior", but surely it is more accurate to say that **belief** in this basis for behaviour is what actually makes the difference. It is because subjects believed that their choices were programmed by their brain that they felt that they were no longer responsible for their actions and that cheating could be justified. If reading a passage of a book can influence how we think about morality, does that not imply that we are capable of changing through the conscious absorption, weighing and acceptance of ideas? If so, then our choices are not simply determined by our genes and brain structure. We choose to read the passage, we make a decision

whether or not to believe it, and we reference it when we are faced with a moral dilemma. That, at least, is how it appears to us, and the research Farah references seems to me to agree.

Natural Law?

Taking all of these articles together we can conclude that there is a growing body of scientific evidence for the idea that human nature, including a sense of morality, is at least in part a result of our inherited nature. It seems that we can indeed reject the "blank slate" theory of human nature. Several of the contributors clearly lean towards a belief that human nature and morality are entirely the result of our genes, but the evidence does not exclude the role of our environment (nurture) in shaping us and our morality. Furthermore, it does not refute the idea that we can make genuine choices, even if these are heavily influenced by both environment and our genes, which have real consequences. More importantly still the scientific evidence does not even begin to answer questions about **why** we are moral at all or why we should care so much about morality. Questions of purpose, once again, are outside the reach of the scientific method. It appears that there is a form of morality ingrained in our very nature. It may not be a complex morality, perhaps determined primarily by a recognition of good and bad actions as in Paul Bloom's research or a few basic principles as suggested by Patricia Churchland, but it is there nonetheless. We may add to this from observation of various cultures on earth that there are certain principles that seem to be universal among different groups of human beings. These are perhaps best determined by asking people how they think others should treat them rather than observing what they do themselves. Our sense of morality is much more acute when we are the injured party than when we are justifying our own actions. This principle of wanting to be treated well by others is enshrined in many different religious and philosophical systems in what is known as the "Golden Rule".[31] Also called the ethic of reciprocity, this rule says that it is morally wrong to do to another person something we would not want them to do to us.

Observations from human culture and modern science, then, converge in suggesting that morality, at least at some basic level, is ingrained in our being. We might call this a "natural law" that is common to all mankind. It seems to me that it would be intellectually obtuse and morally perilous to observe a kind of "law" at work in our hearts without considering that there may have been a "law-giver". Even if we prefer to speak of principles rather than law, then it still seems logical to at least consider the possibility that these principles had their origin in an intelligent mind. Christians claim that God created us and that "natural law" originated with Him. The most significant New Testament passage that is often quoted in this context is Romans 2:14-15:

> *Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.*

These verses are found in the context of a discussion by Paul of God's righteous judgment of mankind. Paul has spoken about the Jewish people who have the law of God (the Old Testament Law given to Moses), but here he speaks about Gentiles who do not have that written law. He acknowledges that human beings are capable of doing things that God expects or requires even without knowing who God is or having heard His words. The reason for this is that the law's requirements are "written on their hearts". Paul is in agreement with cultures and modern science in saying that morality is ingrained in our beings. Where Paul differs from some naturalists, however, is that he does not believe that all of our actions come directly from our instincts. If that were true then no action would be wrong and this natural law from God would justify every action of human beings. Naturalists will argue that if something comes naturally to a person it cannot be morally wrong. Paul, however, believed that we can either follow the principles of this law written on our hearts or we can reject them. It is at this point that the conscience comes into play. This inner voice either accuses or defends us depending on how we have acted. It speaks on the basis of the law written on our hearts, but it is not an entirely reliable guide. In another passage Paul can speak about people "whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron" (1 Timothy 4:2). It is possible for us to make repeated choices that go against

[31] For a list of versions of the "Golden Rule" in different belief systems see the Wikipedia article at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Golden_Rule, accessed 2.11.10

natural law with the result that eventually the conscience ceases to function. We are expert at justifying our own actions to ourselves. The natural law written on our hearts can guide us to what is wrong and also what we ought to do, but it is, according to the New Testament, clouded by our own self-deception and the influence of evil spiritual powers. As Christian philosopher J. Budziszewski has written:[32]

> *On the tablets of the heart a law is written indeed, the same for all men … not only as to rectitude but as to knowledge. But it is a far cry from knowing something to acknowledging it, and the human race has been in the condition psychologists call 'denial' ever since the Fall. Acknowledging what we really know is now an act of faith.*

Natural law may guide people to right actions, but it also awakens them to their need of further and clearer guidance and to a sense of shame or guilt when they fail to live up to the standard. There is no suggestion in Paul, or anywhere else in the New Testament, that mankind is able to construct from an examination of our own hearts a universal and error-free ethical system. Some philosophers have tried to do just that – the intricate system of Confucian ethics, based on relationships of proper respect and deference, and Kantian ethics, based on the principle of treating others as ends in themselves rather than "means to an end", are prime examples. The problem with this approach, according to a Christian view, is threefold. Firstly, the information is incomplete. The evidence written on our hearts is not a complete picture of God's will, and it is obscured and distorted because of our sin. It may awaken us to the existence of a Creator, but it cannot tell us who that Creator is or how we can know Him. Secondly, although the resulting system may include many good principles (I am struck, for example, by how many Confucian ideas are similar to Christian principles), if it does not include the relationship with God for which we were created it will always fail to solve our root problem. Ethical systems that begin with our hearts always focus only on our relationships with one another and with the world we inhabit – they neglect the third dimension of human life. Thirdly, these ethical systems are guides to what we ought to do but they contain no source of power to enable us to achieve the standard and no basis for restoration when we fail. Without the power of God Christians believe we are incapable of achieving the will of God and without reconciliation to God we remain alienated and lost in our own helplessness.

Some concept of "natural law" is evident from human culture and modern science, and it is entirely predictable based on the Bible. The evidence leads us this far. We are forced to make a leap from this evidence and the "leap" in this case is to whether this "law" arises simply from natural processes that are part of our genetic make-up (for the naturalist this conclusion is inevitable) or from a law-giver who created us for a purpose (the theistic position). The question of the existence of a Creator is one we cannot afford to ignore. Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), the brilliant French mathematician and philosopher who was a convinced Christian, described the reasoning of a person who refuses to consider the possibility of the existence of God and an afterlife in which account must be given to Him in the following terms:[33]

> *As I know not whence I come, so I know not whither I do. I only know that on leaving this world I fall for ever into nothingness or into the hands of a wrathful God, without knowing to which of these two states I shall be everlastingly consigned. Such is my condition, full of weakness and uncertainty. From all this I conclude that I ought to spend every day of my life without seeking to know my fate. I might perhaps be able to find a solution to my doubts, but I cannot be bothered to do so, I will not take one step toward its discovery.*

Pascal's language may seem outdated, but surely his logic is faultless. Our decision about the "why?" questions of human morality and existence will depend upon our belief or disbelief in a Creator. To settle the question of God's existence we must venture outside the limitations of science into the realm of philosophy and religion. We would need to ask if there is further evidence of a Creator having revealed him-, her- or it- self to us.

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[32] Budziszewski, p.183

[33] Blaise Pascal, quoted in Craig, William Lane 2008, *Reasonable Faith: Christian truth and apologetics* (3rd edition), Crossway, p.67

6. Consistent Naturalism?

Let us return for a moment to the quotation from Francis Crick included in the *New Scientist* article by Martha Farah:

> *'You', your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules.*

Crick is a renowned scientist, but this is not a purely scientific statement; it is, in fact, a statement of the philosophical worldview we have called naturalism. What makes it a philosophical rather than a scientific statement are the words "no more than". Had Crick omitted those words we could accept it as a scientific statement and it would be largely uncontroversial. At least it would be a claim open to further scientific testing. The addition of those words, however, takes us outside the possibility of scientific confirmation. Science has not proven that there is nothing more to us than nerve cells and chemicals, and I cannot conceive of any scientific method that could ever do so. Science cannot argue from what it cannot measure and describe, and it is not capable of answering questions of purpose (the "why?" questions). Crick may not acknowledge that he has made a philosophical statement but he has. He is a naturalist and that worldview has determined his conclusion. According to naturalism, "higher" levels of existence such as consciousness can be (or eventually will be) explained by the complex interaction of lower level processes. According to naturalism there can be no intent or purpose behind the cosmos. To introduce the idea of purpose is to introduce a concept that cannot be explained by scientific processes – it opens the door to the supernatural.

Naturalists are, by definition, atheists, but it is important to realise that not all atheists embrace the full implications of naturalism. Many atheists are humanists and see dignity and great potential in mankind. They believe that human beings can create a destiny for themselves, that we are capable of determining our own future. John Gray contends that humanism is logically inconsistent. His book *Straw Dogs* is largely dedicated to exposing the errors (as he perceives them) of the humanistic belief in progress and morality. Gray's basic contention is that:[34]

> *Humanism is not science, but religion – the post-Christian faith that humans can make a world better than any in which they have so far lived… Humanism is the transformation of this Christian doctrine of salvation into a project of universal human emancipation. The idea of progress is a secular version of the Christian belief in providence*.

Gray advocates a view of life that is devoid of purpose and does not hope for progress. He identifies support for this view in several places:

- The "primordial" animistic religions of mankind.[35] Gray argues that animistic religions view mankind as equal to other animals and in harmony with nature. He does not attempt to substantiate his claim that animism is the "primordial" religion of mankind, and he neglects to mention other ancient religious concepts that have a more exalted idea of mankind's place in the cosmos, for example the religious systems of ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt.
- James Lovelock's *Gaia* theory, which "re-establishes the link between humans and the rest of nature which was affirmed in mankind's primordial religion, animism".[36]
- Taoist philosophy in ancient China.[37] In fact the title of his book is taken from a Taoist text. Gray holds the Taoist philosophy of life, with its emphasis on living simply without desire and with no expectation of progress, in high regard. It is interesting, however, that he never acknowledges the degree of influence that other worldviews had in the Chinese mindset – Buddhism, traditional Chinese religions (which are far from animistic) and, above all, Confucianism. More significantly still, he does not mention the fact that the predominant religious system in imperial China before the advent of Buddhism, Taoism or Confucianism was centred on ideas of Heaven (*Tian*) and a deity called *Shangdi* and had traits suggestive of monotheism. This religious system conceived of a personal but non-corporeal god and involved prayers and sacrifices (led by the emperor who served as a kind of priest) as well as strong ideas of purpose and morality originating from the will of Shangdi.

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[34] Gray, John 2002, *Straw Dogs: thoughts on humans and other animals*, Granta, p.xiii
[35] *Ibid.*, p.17, 33
[36] *Ibid.*, p.33
[37] *Ibid.*, p.34, 112, 114

- The philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), according to which our behavior is the result simply of our desires.[38] According to Gray, Schopenhauer is alone amongst European philosophers in recognising the truth about human nature that is consistent with Gray's own understanding:[39]

  Schopenhauer was the first major European thinker to know anything about Indian philosophy, and he remains the only one to have absorbed and accepted its central doctrine – that the free, conscious individual who is the core of Christianity and humanism is an error that conceals from us what we really are.

  Schopenhauer believed that, "our actual experience is not of freely choosing the way we live but of being driven along by our bodily needs – by fear, hunger and, above all, sex".[40]

By contrast, Gray criticises other European philosophers such as:

- German **Immanuel Kant** (1724-1804). Kant was not an atheist, but he was typical of Enlightenment philosophy in seeing human reason as the supreme means of discovery about reality and therefore rejecting the need for divine revelation. Gray criticises Kant for retaining the idea of mankind as uniquely exalted rational beings:[41]

  Kant tried to protect our most cherished notions – above all our ideas of personal identity, free will and moral autonomy – from the solvent of skeptical doubt. Putting them to the acid test of experience, Schopenhauer showed that they melt way. In doing so he destroyed Kant's philosophy, and with it the idea of the human subject that underpins both Christianity and humanism.

- German **Friedrich Nietzsche** (1844-1900), who declared that God was dead and predicted nihilism (the absence of purpose and meaning in life) as the inevitable consequence. Nietzsche's conclusion may appear to support Gray's own views, but Gray takes issue with him over his constant tendency to react to Christian thinking: "Nietzsche was an inveterately religious thinker, whose incessant attacks on Christian beliefs and values attest to the fact that he could never shake them off".[42]

- German **Martin Heidegger** (1889-1976):[43]

  Heidegger tells us that by comparison with man, animals are 'world-poor'. Animals merely exist, reacting to the things they encounter around them; whereas humans are makers of the world they inhabit. Why does Heidegger believe this? Because he cannot rid himself of the prejudice that humans are necessary in the scheme of things, whereas other animals are not.

- Austrian **Ludwig Wittgenstein** (1889-1951):[44]

  Like Heidegger, Wittgenstein was a humanist in a venerable European tradition. Philosophers from Plato to Hegel have interpreted the world as if it was a mirror of human thinking. Later philosophers such as Heidegger and Wittgenstein went further; and claimed that the world is a construction of human thought. In all these philosophies, the world acquires a significance from the fact that humans have appeared in it. In fact, until humans arrive, there is hardly a world at all.

Gray also critiques the modern trend towards postmodernism, with its rejection of the idea of absolute truth as "just the latest fad in anthropocentrism".[45] Any view of the world that is anthropocentric, that elevates mankind into a class distinct from other animals or that hopes for progress is, according to Gray, in conflict with what we now know about the world based on evolutionary theory. Effectively, Gray is saying that many people who profess to believe in a naturalistic world are inconsistent with it when they speak about mankind, progress and morality. In this critique Gray finds an unexpected ally in evangelical Christian philosopher and apologist William Lane Craig, who lists a number of other thinkers who he claims have been inconsistent in his book *Reasonable Faith*:[46]

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[38] *Ibid.*, p.38-44
[39] *Ibid.*, p.41
[40] *Ibid.*, p.43
[41] *Ibid.*, p.44
[42] *Ibid.*, p.45
[43] *Ibid.*, p.48
[44] *Ibid.*, p.53
[45] *Ibid.*, p.55
[46] Craig, William Lane 2008, *Reasonable Faith: Christian truth and apologetics* (3rd edition), Crossway, p.78 ff.

- French philosopher **Albert Camus** (1913-1960): "Camus said that we should honestly recognize life's absurdity and then live in love for one another".
- French existentialist **Jean-Paul Sartre** (1905-1980) argued that the cosmos had no ultimate meaning but that one can create meaning for oneself by freely choosing to follow a certain course of action (for him it was Marxism).
- English philosopher **Bertrand Russell** (1872-1970) was an atheist but he criticised war and restrictions on sexual freedom. He admitted that he could not live as if ethics were simply a matter of personal taste. He found his own views incredible and said, "I don't know the solution".

Craig's point is that such a concern with morality and ethics is inconsistent with a naturalistic view of the world. According to him, if God does not exist then:[47]

> *Mankind is a doomed race in a dying universe. Because the human race will eventually cease to exist, it makes no ultimate difference whether it ever did exist. Mankind is thus no more significant than a swarm of mosquitoes or a barnyard of pigs, for their end is all the same. The same blind cosmic process that coughed them up in the first place will eventually swallow them all again.*
>
> *And the same is true of each individual person. The contributions of the scientist to the advance of human knowledge, the researches of the doctor to alleviate pain and suffering, the efforts of the diplomat to secure peace in the world, the sacrifices of good people everywhere to better the lot of the human race – all these come to nothing. In the end they don't make one bit of difference, not one bit. Each person's life is therefore without ultimate significance. And because our lives are ultimately meaningless, the activities we fill our lives with are also meaningless. The long hours spent in study at the university, our jobs, our interests, our friendships – all these are, in the final analysis, utterly meaningless.*

To Gray and Craig's lists we might add one additional name, that of evolutionary biologist and University of Oxford emeritus professor **Richard Dawkins** (b.1941). Dawkins has said that, "There is at bottom no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pointless indifference… We are machines for propagating DNA"[48], yet in his 2006 book *The God Delusion* he calls compassion and generosity "noble emotions",[49] condemns child sacrifice by the Incans, abuse of homosexuals, religious indoctrination of children and even proposes his own version of the 10 Commandments.[50] In an earlier book, *The Selfish Gene* (1976), Dawkins argued that we should not give up on morality. He wrote that we should:[51]

> *try to teach generosity and altruism, because we are born selfish. Let us understand what our own selfish genes are up to, because we may then at least have the chance to upset their designs, something that no other species has aspired to do*.

Notice again here language that personalises genes, which is a constant feature in Dawkins' writings, as even the title *The Selfish Gene* reveals. How can genes be "up to" anything? Atheistic British psychologist Susan Blackmore (b.1951), author of *The Meme Machine*, has developed another of Dawkins' ideas, the theory that ideas evolve and spread like selfish genes. Dawkins coined the term "meme" to describe these distinct units of ideas, and theories about memes have come to be known as "memetics", paralleling the term genetics for the study of genes. Blackmore argues that the ultimate implication of memetics, as of genetics, is that self is an illusion (although this conclusion can be disputed and it must be said that in the theory of ideas the conclusions reached are just as dependent on worldview as in theories of human nature). She writes that:[52]

> *Dawkins ends The Selfish Gene with his famous claim that ' We, alone on earth, can rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators.' Yet, if we take his idea of memes seriously, and push it to its logical conclusion, we find there is no one left to rebel.*

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[47] *Ibid.*, p.73
[48] Richard Dawkins, quoted in Craig, William Lane 2008, *Reasonable Faith: Christian truth and apologetics* (3rd edition), Crossway, p.80
[49] Dawkins, 2006, p.221
[50] *Ibid.*, p.264
[51] Dawkins, Richard 1976, *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford University Press, p.3
[52] Susan Blackmore, quoted in Johnson, Phillip E. 2000, *The Wedge of Truth: splitting the foundations of naturalism*, IVP, p.110

Christian author Phillip Johnson also highlights the illogicality of Dawkins' idea of rebelling against our genes. He objects not simply because he rejects the idea that genes alone determine all aspects of our existence, but also because he sees Dawkins' argument as:[53]

> *... both scientifically absurd and morally naïve. How could natural selection favor the development of a capacity to thwart the interests of the ruling genes? Any tendency to pursue goals other than gene copying would be self-extinguishing because by definition it would be less effective at spreading genetic copies.*

Gray and Blackmore on one hand and Craig and Johnson on the other disagree fundamentally in their understanding of the world – as to whether there is a Creator and therefore whether or not self, choice and morality are illusions – but they all agree that the logical consequence of a world without a Creator is a world without morality, without purpose, without meaning. Although Gray appears to be ignorant of the fact, this strand of thinking is also found within the literature of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Listen to these words from the Bible (Ecclesiastes 3:19-20):

> *Man's fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; man has no advantage over the animal. Everything is meaningless. All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return.*

In fact, the author of Ecclesiastes, writing from personal experience and observation of society, repeatedly proclaims the verdict "meaningless" over all of human existence. We must be completely clear, then, what we are choosing between when we choose between a world created by God and a world without God. Although *Straw Dogs* only briefly touches on the implications of Gray's view for ethics, a fuller development of ethical ideas at least partly consistent with naturalism is found in the writing of Australian ethicist Peter Singer (b.1946). His ethical system is popular with animal rights movements because he regards animals that are genetically closely akin to mankind as having some rights in common with some human beings: [54]

> *Our better understanding of our own nature has bridged the gulf that was once thought to lie between ourselves and other species, so why should we believe that the mere fact that a being is a member of the species Homo Sapiens endows its life with some unique, almost infinite value?*

Singer sees the abuse of species such as chimpanzees as "speciesism", a term coined in 1973 by British psychologist Richard Ryder which suggests a link with discrimination against other human beings on the basis of skin colour (racism). He argues for the legitimacy of infanticide (killing of young infants) in some cases and the acceptability of zoophilia (sexual activity with animals) so long as the animal is not hurt. I say that Singer's ethics are "at least partly" consistent with naturalism because his article in *New Scientist* referred to earlier speaks about what we "ought to do", language that Gray would undoubtedly dispute as being inconsistent with naturalism. We may see Singer's ideas as an indication of what society might be like if naturalism became the sole determining factor in morality and law, but even his ideas do not describe the full extent of the changes that would occur if naturalism was followed to its logical conclusions.

We must be honest about the consequences of a naturalistic worldview. We cannot have our ethical cake and eat it. If we reject God, we reject the basis for universal objective ethical standards. Too many philosophers and scientists have muddied the waters by pretending it is not so. Christian apologist Francis Schaeffer (1912-1984) wrote a brilliant critique of Western philosophical thought entitled *Escape from Reason* (1968). He suggested that philosophers tend to live in a "two storey" world. The lower storey is the level of normal existence, consistent with what they profess to believe to be true. It is a world without ultimate purpose or meaning. Mankind, Schaeffer claims, cannot live happily on this level, and so these philosophers repeatedly leap to the upper storey in which there is meaning, value and purpose. The atheist has no right to make this leap, but he cannot help himself because we have an innate need to find meaning and purpose. Schaeffer suggests that this need is a powerful indicator that our lives have ultimate meaning and that this is because we were created for a purpose by God. Steven Weinberg (b.1933), Nobel Prize winning physicist, also recognises that we have a constant tendency to look for purpose in our existence: [55]

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[53] Johnson, Phillip E. 2000, *The Wedge of Truth: splitting the foundations of naturalism*, IVP, p.107-8
[54] Singer, Peter 1983, "Sanctity of Life or Quality of Life," *Pediatrics,* 72[1]:128-129
[55] Steven Weinberg, quoted in Craig, William Lane 2008, *Reasonable Faith: Christian truth and apologetics* (3rd edition), Crossway, p.83

> *It is almost irresistible for humans to believe that we have some special relation to the universe, that human life is not just a more-or-less farcical outcome of a chain of accidents… The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless.*

Schaeffer and Weinberg observe the same tendency in human beings to expect purpose in the cosmos and in their lives, but they reach different conclusions as to what it means. For Schaeffer it is evidence of a divine purpose giver; for Weinberg it is only a farce (an illusion). We must emphasise again, however, that these conclusions are not the results of the scientific evidence, but extrapolations from it. Now, it seems to me that the "evidence" fits with only two explanations – consistent naturalism as described by Gray and theism. Any position in between is logically inconsistent with itself. Which explanation is reached will depend upon our worldview, and again we must consider other types of evidence (lessons from history, revelation and personal experience) before reaching a conclusion about which is true.

7. Genesis 1 and 2 on mankind

Correcting two misrepresentations

Before attempting to describe a Christian view of mankind, I must first address two fundamental misconceptions of the Christian view that arise in the writings of critics of Christianity. The first is the idea, implied by John Gray, that Christianity is anthropocentric (mankind-centred) in its view of the world. Although some Christians may have been guilty of speaking as if this was true, it is not a fair representation of the biblical material which is actually theocentric (God-centred). Christians do believe that man has a special place in the world but that it is only because we have been given a special purpose by God. He is the true hero of the Christian message, the one because of whom and for whom all things exist.

The second misrepresentation is found in the writing of Steven Pinker, who describes the Christian view of mankind thus: "Humans are made in the image of God and are unrelated to animals."[56] Pinker is absolutely correct to recognise that the Christian understanding of humanity begins with the idea of creation in God's image, but absolutely wrong to suggest that this means that Christianity (or the Bible) teaches that we are "unrelated to animals". In saying this he is setting up a false gulf between science and Christianity. Science, as we have seen, has shown many similarities between human beings and other animals, such as the chimp, and many of the differences that do exist are being shown to be differences of degree rather than of kind. According to Pinker, Christianity claims there is no relationship, therefore Christianity flies in the face of science and must be nonsense. Again we must admit that the way in which some Christians have spoken and written about the nature of mankind has contributed to this confusion. Perhaps they have been so vigorous in their rejection of evolutionary theory and their defence of special creation of mankind that they have suggested that there are no similarities at all between human beings and animals. This is, however a serious distortion of what the Bible says, as we shall see. Again, Pinker writes that: "We know that the human mind has nothing in common with the minds of animals because the Bible says that humans were created separately".[57] Once again he is setting up a false dichotomy between science and the Bible. He claims that modern science has rendered the Bible unbelievable:[58]

> *the modern sciences of cosmology, geology, biology, and archaeology have made it impossible for a scientifically literate person to believe that the biblical story of creation actually took place.*

Is this a fair accusation? What does the "biblical story of creation" actually say, and is it really incompatible with science? How do Christians understand Genesis 1 and 2?

Interpreting Genesis 1 and 2

We must first acknowledge that there is considerable difference of opinion among Christians over how these chapters should be read. I am speaking of Christians who take a high view of Biblical inspiration and authority. Some want to take them entirely literally and so argue for creation over six twenty-four hour days and a real Garden of Eden somewhere in the Middle East. Others acknowledge that Genesis 1 is written as a carefully constructed poem and see it as a hymn or parable of Creation, celebrating the order and beauty of creation but not the actual order in which it occurred. Whilst Genesis 2 and 3 are written in prose, many see them as figurative or allegorical (in fact they are likely to argue that Genesis remains figurative until chapter 9, or perhaps chapter 11, whilst the call of Abraham in Chapter 12 is the beginning of a true historical account). Those who read these chapters figuratively are not tied to a particular timescale or order of creation, but they still see important truths in these chapters. So we have at least three possible positions – those who take Genesis 1 to 3 in its entirety as figurative, those who see Chapter 1 as figurative and the rest as literal, and those who read the whole section literally. We could spend another article simply considering the relative merits of these positions in light of the evidence of science and the biblical text, but for

[56] Pinker, Steven 2002, *The Blank Slate: the modern denial of human nature*, Penguin, p.1
[57] *Ibid.*, p.2
[58] *Ibid.*, p.2

now I simply want to say that these positions are each held by genuine Christian believers who take the authority of the Bible, including Genesis 1 and 2, seriously. The important thing to realise at this point is that whichever way we understand these chapters the theology of Genesis 1 and 2 is unchanged. The theological principles found in these chapters are not dependent on either a strictly literal or an allegorical reading. We can read these chapters and allow them to inform our understanding of mankind, of God and of God's purposes for mankind. Pinker's objection seems to be towards a literal reading of Genesis 1 and 2. Leaving aside the legitimacy of his criticism of this way of reading these chapters, we can still examine the theological message of the "biblical story of creation" and ask whether it is possible to "believe" it as a "scientifically literate" person. I will argue that "to believe" the "biblical story of creation" must mean to accept the truths that it teaches about God and man. It does not necessarily imply reading every detail literally. To accept the legitimacy of the message of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* I do not have to believe in talking pigs. In what follows I will not argue for a particular way of interpreting these chapters, but I will draw out five vital theological truths about mankind that emerge from them:

- Our unity with the physical universe
- Our continuity with the animal world
- Our God given task
- Our identity in God's image
- Our moral nature

Mankind – made of the stuff of the cosmos

Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. (Genesis 2:7)

The biblical account of creation makes it entirely clear that physically mankind is derived from the same material as the earth. This may not come as any surprise to us, but it means that the findings of modern physics and chemistry that our bodies consist of the same stuff as the cosmos is entirely consistent with the Bible. We may notice, however, that life is a gift from God and we may wonder what it means to say that God breathed the "breath of life" into the first human being. We will consider this under the next heading.

Mankind – sharing life with the animals

And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food." And it was so. (Genesis 1:30)

Here, just a few verses earlier than the last quotation, we have the same phrase "the breath of life" that was used of mankind in Genesis 2:7 being used of all animals. Although there have been attempts to see "ensoulment" (the giving of a soul) in Genesis 2:7, we cannot argue that the "breath of life" represents the "soul" unless we also accept that all animals have "souls". Importantly, Genesis is placing human life in continuity with animal life. Even the fact that the poem of chapter 1 places the creation of mankind on the same day as the creation of animals (day 6) shows that there is continuity. Steven Pinker is simply wrong to argue that Christians see no relationship between mankind and animals. It is true that the wording of chapter 1 emphasises that God was doing something special in creating human beings, but this is very different from suggesting that there are no similarities. In fact we could argue that, based on Genesis, Christians should have expected that science would reveal very significant continuity – that many of the physical and social differences would be of degree rather than kind. Christian theologian Charles Sherlock writes:[59]

> *It is not easy to be precise about where a boundary is to be drawn between humankind and otherkind. The Scriptures closely associate them as fellow creatures, distinguishing them only in their differing capacities for relationship with God. Human beings are first described in the Scriptures as 'earthlings' taken from 'earth',* hā'ādām *from* hā'ādāmâ *(Gn. 2:7-9). With all creatures, we exist in the first place as material beings. God gives us the gifts of work, hearing and speech (Gn. 2:15-20), shared to some degree with other creatures, but received by humans with an awareness of*

[59] Sherlock, Charles 1996, *The Doctrine of Humanity* in the 'Contours of Christian Theology' series, IVP, p.115

our ability and accountability in their use. Associated with these is the gift of partnership as male and female (Gn. 2:23-24), a sexual nature shared with other creatures, but exercised distinctively by human beings as those creatures made to live as persons in communion with God and one another.

Mankind – created to fill the earth, subdue it and order it

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground." (Genesis 1:28)

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. (Genesis 2:15)

So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals. (Genesis 2:20)

The first of these three verses is sometimes referred to by theologians as the "creation mandate". It describes God's purpose for mankind – to be fruitful, increase in number and subdue the earth. The success of mankind in spreading across the planet and inhabiting every ecosystem is entirely predictable from the biblical story of creation. The third verse, Genesis 2:20, also provides an explanation for our constant tendency to categorise, name and define things, or at least describes it. This trait began with a God-given task of naming the animals. Mankind was called to define what God had made. The scientific enterprise (questions of "what?") finds support in the "biblical story of creation". It is a matter of historical record that the majority of early scientists were inspired in their quest by a belief that the world had been created by God and that they should therefore expect to find order within it. Far from being at enmity with the Bible, "science" is expected and sanctioned by it.

We have already said that mankind has been highly successful at fulfilling the first command of Genesis 1:28 – we have multiplied, increased in number and filled the earth – but there is a second part to the verse. We are to "subdue" the earth and "rule over" the other living creatures. How have we done on this score? We might argue that in this command we have an explanation for man's success in shaping his environment and creating order from the physical world as well as in domesticating various animal species. We would, however, have to admit that the way in which we have done this has often been harmful to the world and to these other species. The traditional English translation of this verse included the word "dominion", leading to a criticism that the Bible licenses mankind to use the world and its resources as we see fit, with little regard to the consequences. At this point we cannot defend the abuses that humanity has perpetrated and the careless attitudes to the environment prevalent among Western countries for so long, including among professing Christians. In fact, the context of Genesis 1 and 2 also has something to say about these abuses. It is true that God calls humanity in Genesis 1:28 to "subdue" and to "rule", but to understand what this was intended to mean we must look into Genesis 2, where we have a picture of mankind in harmony with nature. In fact, Genesis 2:15 (quoted above) defines man's role in terms of working and taking care of a Garden. Theologians have suggested that the idea is of mankind extending the Garden across the surface of the earth – the Garden will fill the earth as the gardeners increase in number and spread. Good gardeners do not abuse their gardens. They bring greater order to them, enhance their beauty and increase their productivity by carefully tending the plants and the soil. This is an apt metaphor for the kind of rule God intended mankind to exercise. It was supposed to be a rule after the pattern of God, the King. Just as He delights in and cares for His Creation, so we were intended to enjoy it and care for it.

There is no support in Genesis 1 and 2 for the abusive approach to nature that man has too often followed, rather there is a strong argument for a healthy environmental awareness and concern for the well-being of other animals. After all, in Genesis 9 we have God making a covenant (a relationship based on binding promises) with every living creature! How dare man neglect or abuse species that matter so much to God? *Homo rapiens* is not explained by Genesis 1 and 2 but by the problems that enter in Genesis 3. It is when mankind seeks only its own pleasure without recognising this duty of care that the world becomes to us nothing more than a resource to be consumed.

Mankind – created in God's image

So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.
(Genesis 1:27)

Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made mankind.
(Genesis 9:6)

The statement that mankind was created in God's image is the key point in Genesis 1 that sets mankind apart from the other animal species. The quotation from Genesis 9 is also important because it establishes two facts. Firstly, that the image of God was not destroyed in the "Fall" (the original sin of mankind described in Genesis 3). God can still speak of human life as being special because mankind is in God's image even after the downward spiral of the events of Genesis 3 to 8 with all that they reveal about the sinfulness of human beings. Secondly, the fact of creation in God's image is presented in Genesis 9:6 as the starting point of human ethics. It is this fact that makes human life special and the taking of human life a serious (even capital) offence. To move towards a biblical understanding of what it means to be human, then, we must understand what the "image of God" means. Before considering different interpretations we must clarify one additional point. In Genesis 1:26 God says "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness". Some people reading this statement have tried to distinguish between the image and the likeness of God, for example suggesting that the image is something that was unaltered by the entrance of sin whereas the likeness was destroyed. This separation of the two terms is, however, difficult to sustain from the text itself. The statement seems to be an example of parallelism, a common literary motif in Hebrew writing, with the two words serving as synonyms or at least as complementary concepts that are inseparable. God made mankind in His image and likeness. What does this mean? There have been numerous suggestions, which can broadly be grouped under five terms:

- **Physical** – the suggestion that God's image is seen in a physical trait such as the ability to walk upright, the ability to look upwards ("heavenward"), or the complexity of our brains. Whilst the brain of *Homo sapiens* is indeed remarkable, it seems that any such physical differences are of "degree" rather than "kind", whereas the image of God must be a difference of kind if it truly sets mankind apart from other animals. Another major problem with the physical explanation is that it finds no support in the context of Genesis 1.

- **Intellectual** – another line of thinking has been that the image of God describes a unique intellectual capacity, perhaps for rational thought, creativity or communication. Once again, however, these appear to be differences of degree, not kind, between human beings and other animals and once again this suggestion does not find any support in the context.

- **Social** – some theologians have suggested that the "image of God" is found in our relationships with one another in community. This is the first suggestion that finds support in the context of Genesis 1. In verse 26 we read of God conversing with Himself about the creation of man in "our image". Christians will immediately read back into this verse an idea that is not clear in the Old Testament but becomes clear in the New Testament – that God exists as a community of persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. These three are all described as God in the New Testament, yet Christians continue to believe in one God rather than three gods. Although this concept is a mystery that we appear to be incapable of fully comprehending, it is an important concept in our understanding of God and it sheds light on the idea of God's image. Perhaps the "image of God" is found in a unique capacity for true community. Against this idea someone might argue that this is also a difference of degree rather than kind when compared with other species, but the complexity of human communities and our capability of cohering as families and nations may well be unique. Certainly the kind of selfless love we can experience within our relationships appears to be unique. Added to this reasoning from the community within the Godhead is the wording of verse 27, which emphasises the fact that God created mankind both male and female in God's image. It is only as male and female together in community that humanity can truly reflect God's image. A male or female human being alone cannot fully reflect God. This lies behind the idea in chapter 2 that it was not good for the man to be alone (v18). He needs a helper who is His equal – someone who can complement him. This aspect

of Genesis 1 and 2 is a helpful corrective to the abusive nature of male dominance over women throughout much of history in virtually every culture. Genesis 1 and 2 teaches equality in status of men and women with a complementarity of their respective roles.

- **Spiritual** – another popular understanding of the image of God is that it refers to a unique potential for relationship with God. Again this concept finds support in the text, as verse 28 of Genesis 1 describes God blessing mankind and speaking directly to them, something He does not do to any of the other creatures He has made. It also fits with chapter 2, where the nature of the relationship is further elucidated. Mankind is to relate to God as His stewards. The depth of the relationship becomes clearer still in Genesis 5:1-2, where God's creation of Adam in His likeness is placed at the beginning of a genealogy of Adam's descendents. Adam's son is said to be "in his own likeness". The implication is that God's relationship with Adam is like a father to his son. In the New Testament this idea becomes explicit, as in Luke's genealogy of Jesus Adam is called "the son of God" (Luke 3:38). The spiritual understanding of the "image of God" is of a relationship with God as Father. Mankind has a unique potential for this kind of relationship. In the New Testament, the idea of individuals becoming God's children through faith in Jesus Christ is a central way in which salvation is described (e.g. John 1:12-13).

- **Regal** – this final view of the image of God focuses on the task God gave to human beings to rule over His creation as His stewards (as discussed earlier). Again this idea finds support in the text, as verse 28 describes the giving of this responsibility. Proponents of this view also argue that the phrase can be translated "as God's image" rather than "in God's image". If this translation is correct, then the idea is of mankind representing God to the rest of Creation. We represent in a tangible, visible way the invisible God. He is the King over all Creation, and we are His stewards or vice-regents. Our purpose is to be the agents of God's rule as it is worked out in His world.

Based on this brief consideration of these five concepts, we can conclude that there are three ideas within the concept of creation in God's image. The physical and intellectual ideas can be rejected on the basis that they find no support in the text. The other three ideas are all supported from the text and so we can accept that they are all integral to what it means to be (in) God's image. Interestingly these three ideas are all about relationships – with one another (social), with God (spiritual) and with the rest of Creation (regal). Genesis 2 paints a picture of human life in harmony in all three of these dimensions. Nowhere in the Bible is the image of God **defined** explicitly, but it is **described** in the accounts of Genesis 1 and 2. It seems that Christian thinking about the nature of mankind has too often focused on "what?" questions, whereas the Bible speaks much more in terms of "why?" The true distinguishing characteristic of human beings as distinct from other animals is the purpose for which God has created us rather than a quality intrinsic to what we are.

This is not to say conclusively that there is nothing intrinsically different about mankind but that identifying some intrinsic quality that sets us in a separate class from animals is not necessary for the biblical description of man to be vindicated. There is a danger that the debate amongst Christians between dualistic and monistic understandings of human nature focuses on questions that the Bible is not intended to answer and misses the most important point, which is our purpose in God's plan. Attempts to explain the image of God that focus on what we **are** rather than what we **are for** fall short of the "biblical story of creation" and may reflect an excessively anthropocentric approach to Christian faith. It is a human obsession to think more about our identity than God's purpose. The image of God, it would appear, is found in relationships, responsibilities and potential. Genesis 1 and 2 may not define to our satisfaction what we are, but they do something much more important, something science can never do – they tell us why we were created! Theologian Charles Sherlock explains the significance of this realisation:[60]

> *Rather than asking, 'What is the image of God?' we are invited to explore the question, 'What does it mean to be made in the image of God?' In this way we acknowledge that we live as those who know our status as bearing the divine image. Rather than trying to tie this notion down, perhaps so that we may control both ourselves and God, the Scriptures call us to a pilgrimage of discovering both God and our own selves. And, as Augustine argued, only on*

[60] Sherlock, Charles 1996, *The Doctrine of Humanity* in the 'Contours of Christian Theology' series, IVP, p.33

such a spiritual journey may the meaning of the classic philosophical advice, 'Know thyself, and to thyself be true', take on a deeper, and truly Christian, meaning.

So, then, even if science could prove that all the differences between mankind and animals that are open to scientific investigation are only differences of degree rather than kind, the foundation of the Christian view of humanity would still not be shaken. It is difficult to identify differences of kind between animals and human beings in Scripture other than in terms of our purpose and place in God's plan. When the writer of Psalm 8 looked at the immensity and majesty of the cosmos he asked the question "what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?" (v4). In answering this question the writer does not attempt to define characteristics of human beings that qualify us to be cared for by God. To do so would surely be arrogant in the extreme. Rather, his conclusion is that it is because of the purpose that God made us for, to rule over His creation (v6). If there are differences of kind they are there because they fit us for God's purpose.

Mankind – moral creatures whose real choices have real consequences

And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die." (Genesis 2:16-17)

In the opening chapters of Genesis no limits are set by God on the actions of other animals (Genesis 1:30), but the verses above show that God does limit the activity of mankind. God set a moral standard by which the human beings must live. "Morality" in other animals, if it does exist, is simply at the level of instinct, but for human beings it is about faith – trusting that God is true in what He says and acting in obedience. Human beings alone are capable of sin since only human beings are given a restriction by God, a rule to obey. Whatever the significance of the name of the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil", the point of this rule must surely be that it elevates mankind into being a moral creature, capable of choosing whether or not to obey God. This makes the relationship between mankind and God one that must be based on trust and love – we are not simply robots with no choice. Furthermore, the choice presented by God has real consequences. The man and woman are free to choose and their choice really does affect the nature of things. God gives them this freedom. God's relationship with human beings is never coercive. He desires a willing relationship of love. This sets us apart from the other animals, as does God's response when human beings failed to trust Him and fell into sin. Although God makes a covenant with all living creatures in Genesis 9, in which He promises to sustain the world and their life in it, all subsequent covenants, which are about God's restoration of the world broken by sin, are made only with human beings, starting with Abraham in Genesis 11-22 and leading relentlessly to Christ. The restoration of Creation is intimately tied up with the redemption (buying back or rescuing from captivity) of human beings (see Romans 8:18-21). Only mankind needs to be redeemed and only mankind is of such pivotal importance in God's plan for the cosmos that He would launch a plan to redeem us that would be immensely costly for Him.

8. The rest of the story

Genesis 1 and 2 are only the beginning of a story that runs throughout the Bible. They describe God's original purpose for mankind, but this is not the present reality that we experience, nor is our present experience our ultimate destiny. In this section I will consider the rest of the Christian story under three headings:

1) Two problems – what went wrong?
2) One solution – how can it be put right?
3) One response – how should we respond?

Finally I will summarise the Christian story as it relates to an understanding of what it means to be human.

Two Problems

Blaise Pascal wrote about the weakness of philosophy as he perceived it:[61]

> *Your principal maladies are pride, which cuts you off from God, and sensuality, which binds you to the earth. And [philosophers] have done nothing but foster at least one of these maladies. If they have given you God for your object, it has been to pander to your pride. They have made you think you were like him and resemble him by your nature. And those who have grasped the vanity of such a pretension have cast you down in the other abyss by making you believe that your nature is like that of the beast of the field and have led you to seek your good in lust, which is the lot of animals.*

Pascal identified two problems with mankind, both of which are described in the Bible as manifestations of sin.[62] The first is pride, a tendency to exalt ourselves to the level of God. Genesis 3 describes this clearly in the original temptation and sin of the first human beings. They believed that by eating the forbidden fruit they could be like God (v5). By disobeying the one rule God had given them they were rejecting Him as King and staging a coup. They thought they could live in the world and rule over it without having to be accountable to God, deciding for themselves what was right and wrong. The tragedy is that when they did this they discovered that they did not have the power within themselves to do it. They could not shape their own destiny and they remained accountable to God. The harmony in all three dimensions of relationship was shattered – they were ashamed before God and before one another, and God pronounced a curse on the ground that would make their relationship with the rest of Creation a struggle. Pride was the root of the first sin, and it remains a major temptation for mankind today. The Bible is fundamentally opposed to an anthropocentric view of the world because it elevates man to the position of God. We cannot decide our own destiny and we cannot live without God. A related problem is any system of human religion in which God becomes a means to an end for us, a petty deity who we can manipulate and control to achieve what we want. Such a "god" is not the Creator revealed in Genesis.

The other problem is sensuality, a tendency to live like animals, simply following our own desires. The roots of this problem are described in Romans 1:18-32. According to that passage, our rejection of God led to a progressive neglect of what was known about Him and the replacement of this knowledge with religious systems fashioned after created things (v23). God therefore gave mankind over to our own desires – He allowed us to follow them to their full extent without checking or restricting us. We have a vivid description of human morality without God. Naturalist scientists argue that we follow our desires just as all other animals do, and that we only think we exercise a choice. In one sense they are right – that is not too far from how the Bible describes human beings without God, although even then it acknowledges the possibility of doing good through making a good choice. People who do not know God, however, are fundamentally following their desires and passions (Ephesians 2:3). In fact, this is a path that God allows us to follow when we reject Him – He gives us over to our desires. They are still **our** desires and we still make the choices to act, and hence we remain responsible before God, but we are fundamentally driven by self. It is worth noting at this point that although English translations of the New Testament sometimes speak about "evil desires"

[61] Blaise Pascal, quoted in Zacharias, p.246-7

[62] I would define sin as human beings' rejection of God, whether this takes the form of an open rebellion against Him or a neglect of Him. Sin is living as if God did not exist.

generally the Greek simply speaks about "desires". The problem is not so much that our desires are evil in themselves – they are, in fact, God-given gifts that are necessary for life. We need food to live, so the desire we call "hunger" is necessary. We need sex to be able to reproduce, so sexual desire is a gift. The problem arises when we simply follow our desires as our sole guide. This creates problems between human beings – when my desires conflict with yours, in the absence of anyone to adjudicate between us or of any motivation to selfless love, I may end up sinning against you. It also creates problems in our relationship with the world we live in – my desires become selfish and I abuse the world's resources rather than caring for it. Most importantly it leads me to act as if God did not exist – to behave in ways that offend and anger Him. We need the guidance of God to be able to direct our desires to God's purpose and the power of God to be able to control them. Just because something seems **good** to me, or even seems **right** to me, does not mean that it is acceptable to God. Something might come naturally to an individual but may still be morally wrong. We lack the ability to control our desires and they have become distorted because of our neglect of God. If scientific research suggests that some people have brain abnormalities or genetic traits that cause them to have a tendency towards behaviour that Christians understand to be sinful this is no threat to the Christian understanding of man. Christians simply recognise these genetic variations and brain abnormalities as part of the impact of sin on that person. The naturalist will argue that these individuals are not responsible for acting on these impulses, but the Christian will hold out the possibility of forgiveness for past wrongs and power from God to become a person who can overcome this inbuilt temptation. Sin has been active in mankind for many generations and its effects are undoubtedly at least partly mediated through mutations in our genetic make-up. Human desires unchecked by God lead to corruption in the world (2 Peter 1:4). The Bible is opposed to a biocentric view of the world (centred on all living creatures) in which man is no different than the other animals.

One Solution

According to the Bible the world is neither anthropocentric nor biocentric – it is theocentric (God centred). Listen again to Charles Sherlock:[63]

> *both anthropocentrism and biocentrism find their true meaning only in relation to God, in theocentrism. Likewise, our true place in relation to other people and to the natural world is found only as we, in partnership with otherkind and other people, live in relationship with God, our life-giver, Creator, sustainer, and true home. There is a sense in which humankind and otherkind share this earth as 'home', but we do so as co-participants in a fallen creation, in which human sin had the deceptive capacity to convince us that we can make our final home here.*

The Christian message tells us that mankind has lost its way – staggering between anthropocentrism and biocentrism like a drunken man grasping for support. All human beings are caught in this problem, and we are incapable of delivering ourselves from it. There is, however, a solution. To borrow John Lennox's illustration again, the cosmic Aunt Matilda has spoken and we know what the cake is for! God, our Creator has revealed Himself to us.

Revelation is a kind of evidence that lies outside the naturalistic methodology of science as it suggests that a "supernatural" being exists and has communicated verbally to and through people and in events experienced by people. That is not to suggest that revelation cannot be tested in the same way that any phenomenon can be tested. The Bible, for example, claims to record events of history and these can be tested by historians and archaeologists. They can show how the biblical record compares with what is known from other sources, but what they cannot "prove" is whether or not the Bible had its origin in a divine author. Christians believe that God has revealed Himself in several ways. We can broadly speak of two types of revelation, within each of which there are two predominant forms:

a) General Revelation

This is revelation from God about Himself that is available to all human beings. J. Budziszewski writes about five different types of general revelation,[64] but we will focus on just two which are most clearly identified in the early

[63] Sherlock, Charles 1996, *The Doctrine of Humanity* in the 'Contours of Christian Theology' series, IVP, p.127-8
[64] Budziszewski, p.180

chapters of the book of Romans. General revelation is universally accessible to human beings, but it is limited in its scope.

Creation – *the evidence of order in the cosmos*

God's revelation in the first place is through the order and majesty of the cosmos. The intricate workings of the universe, the delicate balance of factors that makes life on earth possible and that makes it an ideal place from which to observe the universe, and the diversity and complexity of living organisms are all indicators of design by a powerful and creative person. Paul writes about this in Romans 1:20:

> *For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.*

This revelation is available to all, but it can only give us a glimpse of the Creator – we can infer from the appearance of design (which is acknowledged even by atheists) that there is a designer and we can begin to understand something of his qualities. Certainly we can say that if there is a Creator He must be immensely powerful and we can say something about His nature, that He must be highly creative and (presumably) loving. This falls far short of complete knowledge about God, and it does not offer any suggestion of how we may come to know the Creator or what He requires of us. It is simply enough to set us on a quest to discover whether He exists and to seek more revelation from Him. It is possible to deny and reject this revelation, but Paul warns that those who do will not have an excuse before God.

Conscience – *the evidence of natural law*

I have already written earlier about the idea of natural law in Christian thinking and its basis in Romans 2:14-15. I highlighted at that point the distinction between the natural law itself and the conscience which is our subjective experience of a dimmed awareness of natural law. I also spoke about the limitations of natural law. Conscience is often effective in helping us to realise that we need guidance and even forgiveness, but it cannot tell us who the guide and forgiver is. The tension we discover within ourselves between good and evil and our constant desire for meaning is a gift from God to lead us to Him. In Christian belief, however, God has not left us with simply an echo of His character and will in our hearts, He has revealed Himself in other ways that show a much clearer picture of our moral responsibilities. According to Christians, the conscience must be tested and trained against the standard of the Bible, the revealed word of God. To quote J. Budziszewski:[65]

> *There is a natural law, and it can be known and philosophically analyzed. But that which is beside the Scripture can be vindicated only with the help of Scripture; that which is revealed before the gospel can be secured against evasion only in light of the gospel.*

So, then, conscience is limited in its usefulness but is still a form of general revelation from God. The mention of the Bible prepares us to consider the second type of revelation.

b) Special Revelation

In addition to general revelation, which is available to all people, there are means by which God has revealed Himself more completely. We can describe these as examples of "special" revelation because they are not available to everyone, only to those who have heard about them. General revelation can show us that there is purpose in the world (Creation especially shows this) and that something has gone wrong (Conscience especially shows this), but we need special revelation to know God more. Christians believe that God can reveal Himself directly to individuals, for example through dreams, visions or inner voices, but that there are two forms of special revelation that are objectively available to all who hear of them and are the standard by which more subjective forms of revelation can be tested.

Covenant – *the history of God's relationship with Israel and the Church as recorded in the Bible*

Christians claim that the 66 books of the Bible are the record of God's interaction with people through events in human history, especially with the nation of Israel and then with the early Christian Church. It is, however, more than simply a record of history – it also contains God's commentary on that history, His interpretation of the

[65] *Ibid.*, p.183.

events. We are given an insight into the purposes of God, a grand epic story that runs from Creation to a new Creation. It is not a complete record of God's interaction with all people or people groups – it focuses on God's central purpose to call one nation which would receive His words and from which a Saviour for all nations could be born. It is vitally important at this point to realise what the Bible claims for itself. It does not claim simply to be the words of people about God (as if they saw certain events and attempted to explain how God was working through them) but to be God's words about people and events. It is a collection of books by different people living in different periods of history and cultural contexts and with different personalities, but it tells one united story of God's love for mankind and His plan to rescue people from their lostness and sin. The idea of covenant is central to this story, a covenant being a binding relationship based on promises. The Creator can be known and has bound Himself to His people. He is faithful to do what He has promised. Sadly, John Gray appears to be ignorant of the Old Testament. He claims that: [66]

> *Neither in the ancient pagan world nor in any other culture has human history ever been thought to have an overarching significance… The idea that history must make sense is just a Christian prejudice.*

Yet that idea did **not** originate with Christianity – it was present in Hebrew thought centuries before Christ.

Christ – *the perfect revelation of mankind and God*

The ultimate revelation of God, in Christian thought, is in the person of Jesus Christ, a man who lived nearly two thousand years ago and whose life and teaching are recorded in eyewitness accounts contained in the Bible. The message about this man has been transmitted throughout the generations of the Christian church. God did not simply show us what man is like through the history of Israel (graphic though the Old Testament's depictions of humanity are) or His comment upon it (incisive though the words of prophets in Israel were). He revealed what man was intended to be through the life and words of a perfect man, who was without sin. The idea of the "image of God" finds expression in the New Testament only in the person of Jesus Christ, "the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15). It is not that the New Testament denies that all people are created in God's image, but that it recognises that we all fail to live up to His standard and so fall short of perfectly expressing His image (Romans 3:23). Jesus was the only true human who has ever lived – in perfect harmony in all three dimensions of relationship – and in Him we see mankind fulfilling its God-given purpose (Hebrews 2:6-9). Jesus was fully man. He entered into our darkness and confusion like a shining light illuminating the tension at the heart of every one of us. Yet Jesus' life was more than a revelation of humanity, it was also a perfect revelation of God. God's ultimate revelation of Himself to us was by becoming one of us – by being pleased to have His fullness live in a man (Colossians 1:19). Jesus was the Word of God (the revelation of God) incarnate (John 1:14), the exact representation of God's person and the perfect revelation of God (Hebrews 1:1-3). Equality with God was His rightful position, but He chose to become human – to enter our world as a man (Philippians 2:6-8). Christ's incarnation is key to a biblical understanding of humanity.

The dignity of mankind is found ultimately in the fact that God could become one of us, the purpose of mankind is seen in the perfect life of Christ, and the full extent of the sin of mankind is seen in the fact that God had to become human to die and so to deal with the problem. Jesus did more than set an example and teach people about God. As a perfect human being he was able to become our representative and to stand before God and take responsibility for our rejection of God (Hebrews 2:14-18; 1 Peter 2:24; 3:18). He could take God's wrath (His righteous anger at sin), accepting the punishment we deserved, and through His death deal with the problem of sin once and for all. His resurrection from the dead proved that His death accomplished this and through it He became the first of a new human race. He is the first of a new kind of human being who will live in relationship with God forever. His resurrection is the guarantee that those who trust in Him will also be raised in the future to receive a new body in which we can inhabit a new creation where the effects of sin are removed and everything is as God intended it to be. The Christian Church is intended to be a community of this new humanity, expressing the reality of life under God's rule and living out Christian ethics in genuine community.

[66] Gray, John 2002, *Straw Dogs: thoughts on humans and other animals*, Granta, p.47

One Response

If you are an atheist or agnostic you may be thinking, by now, that this talk of the Christian life sounds a little far-fetched. I realise that it is difficult to understand the power of God if it is not something you have experienced, but Christians will testify to their experience of God's power in their own lives. You may wonder what would happen if you started to accept the possibility that God may exist and to seek Him. Christians also claim that the Bible makes sense of life and has the ability to transform people who read it with openness. Why not begin to read it and consider its claims? Furthermore, the Christian message is dependent on historic events that can be tested. Did Jesus really exist? Did He die as Christians claim? Did He rise again from the dead? If this Christian message, which claims to be good news ("gospel"), is really true, then there can be only one possible response – to humble ourselves before our Creator, acknowledging our sin and asking for forgiveness, asking Him to guide us from now on and to change us into what He intended us to be. Only He can teach us who we really are and what our life is for, and He alone can be trusted with our lives. We can entrust ourselves to Him. You may be ready to take that step of faith, or you may not be at that stage, but I would encourage you to keep seeking, to be open to the possibility that your life has a purpose and that the One who made you knows and loves you and wants you to know and love Him too.

The Christian Story in Summary

The Christian message as it relates to mankind tells us that:

- Mankind was created by God to be His image – reflecting His nature and living in harmonious relationships with Him, with one another, and with the rest of creation and acting as God's stewards in tending His creation. Being human means to be born into an unbroken line of humanity tracing its ancestry to God, the Creator.
- We have fallen into the error of rejecting God, believing we can live without Him. As a result, we alternate between anthropocentric and biocentric views of the world – acting as if we were God or as if we were animals. We are blinded in this sin.
- God has revealed Himself, shining His light into our darkness through the order of Creation, the law written on our hearts as testified to by conscience, the biblical record of His covenant relationship with Israel, and ultimately through Christ who was fully God and fully man.
- Christ revealed perfectly who God is and what mankind can be. He died as our representative to deal with the problem of sin, and He rose again as the first in a new restored humanity.
- We must respond in humility, recognising our sin and asking for God's forgiveness and His guidance through life. We must adopt a theocentric view of the world.
- God accepts those who respond to Him into a new relationship with Him. They become part of the new humanity in Christ and will share eternally in God's good purpose and in His life.

9. Christian ethics

Having considered the Christian story, we can now say something briefly about Christian ethics. So far we have mentioned the standard of Christian ethics, which is based on the fact that all human beings are created in God's image. Our problem, however, has never simply been about finding a standard for ethics, but our lack of power to do those things we believe we should do. Christian ethics is more than simply a standard for us to aspire to. This sets it apart from other ethical systems, and in fact sets Christianity apart from other religious systems. Christian ethics includes three dimensions:

A Standard

The starting point (or bedrock) of Christian ethics is the fact of creation in God's image. This tells us that God has a purpose for all of mankind and that every human individual has a part to play within that overall purpose. Therefore all human beings have the same significance and importance in God's eyes, however limited in their capabilities. Every individual is capable of life in three dimensions, at least as the recipient of love from God and others and a beneficiary of the goodness in the created world, even if they lack the mental capacity to appreciate it fully or to respond in love for God and others or by caring for the created world. All human beings are in need of transformation. We are all profoundly "disabled", most especially in terms of our inability to earn acceptance with God or to achieve His perfect standard. God, however, is capable of restoring every individual to what they would have been without the effects of sin. For those who are capable of making a decision their inclusion in God's restoration will depend upon their response to His revelation, but for those who are incapable of making a decision (and who but God can decide exactly who that is?) we can trust God to act justly and believe that He can restore them.

The "image of God" is the bedrock of Christian ethics, but God's revelation in the Bible has given us a much more complete picture of His intention for us. The Old Testament Law given to Israel to regulate their national life can teach us a great deal about sin and relationship with God, and the New Testament contains many exhortations to behaviour that is pleasing to God and warnings about behaviour that is displeasing to Him. The teaching of Jesus contains an ethical standard that is far higher than any of the other major philosophical or religious systems of ethics in the world. When Jesus presented His version of the "Golden Rule" (Matthew 7:12) He made a vital distinction. Whereas others said that we should **not** do to others what we do **not** want them to do to us (a negative statement aimed at limiting harmful actions), Jesus said that we **must** do to others what we **would** want them to do to us (a positive statement aimed at promoting helpful actions). Jesus spoke of love for our enemies and forgiveness for those who wrong us – He called us to mirror the perfect standard of God's goodness (Matthew 5:43-48). Christ's own life and behaviour is the ultimate standard of Christian ethics. He lived out exactly what He taught.

Motivation

Christian ethics presents a high standard for human behaviour. In fact it is so high that some writers have mocked it as impossible. Certainly it flies in the face of many of our "natural" instincts when we are asked to forgive or to help people who hurt us. Christian ethics, however, also contains a motivating factor that can spur us on towards this kind of behaviour – a personal discovery of God's grace. Grace, in Christian terms, means God's undeserved favour to us – His desire to do good for us and to give good things to us that is not earned by us but arises simply from His love for us. God's grace is the basis of His forgiveness of us. His grace becomes effective in our lives when we surrender to Him and trust Him to rescue us (Ephesians 2:8-9). As recipients of God's grace we are motivated to extend grace to others. Grace transforms us and teaches us how to live in a way that pleases God (Titus 2:11-12). Jesus told a parable (a story) to illustrate how a true appreciation of grace must motivate us to extend grace (Matthew 17:21-35). It is about a man who has a huge debt cancelled but then refuses to cancel a comparatively tiny debt owed to him. This

man has not embraced grace, and he ends up having the penalty for his debt re-imposed upon him. When we are constantly reminded of how much God has forgiven us, when we realise how weak and sinful we were, we start to see other people in a different way. We realise that God loves them and that they too are in need of His forgiveness and restoration. We start to desire to be a means through which God can bring His love into their lives.

Power

Christians have a standard of ethics and a strong motivation towards that standard, but we also need a third element. The Bible describes sin as a powerful force that can enslave and trap people. We can conceive of this in terms of addictions to substances, whether tobacco, alcohol or illicit drugs. What starts out as a choice eventually leads to a situation where the person has no choice, they are controlled by the substance. They are "dehumanized". The effects of addiction are evident and highly destructive. At another level, however, we are all addicts and slaves to sin. Jesus taught that "everyone who sins is a slave to sin" (John 8:34). We start out making a choice to act in a certain way, but as we repeatedly make that choice it becomes a habit and sin gains further control over us. It is too simple to speak of "free will" since our choices are never free from influence and sin has a kind of power over us. We need to be set free from sin and we need a new power to be able to do what God requires. Christian ethics includes the idea that Christ can set us free from sin. When a person trusts in Christ He liberates them to be able to serve God and do what is right. Shortly after his statement about sin's ability to enslave us, Jesus said "if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36). He understood His mission as one of liberation for people trapped by sin, and He saw His death as a ransom price paid to set people free (Mark 10:45).

Christians continue to have a choice, and they can continue to commit sin, but this is similar to a slave who has been bought from a cruel master by a generous and kind master returning to work for the cruel man. It makes no sense at all. Paul writes about this dynamic in Romans chapter 6. Not only has Christ set us free to be able to serve God, but He has given us the power to do so. This power is made available to us through the Holy Spirit of God who makes His home in the life of the Christian. He is the constant presence of God with us and He gives the power to do what we know God wants us to do as we follow Him (see Romans 8 and Galatians 5 for descriptions of this dynamic). His ultimate goal is to transform us so that we become increasingly like Christ – being transformed in our character into people who are like Him in His perfect humanity (2 Corinthians 3:18). This work will be completed when Christ returns – we will see Him in His perfection and we will be like Him, and this hope should spur us on to make choices that work towards this goal in our present lives (1 John 3:2-3). The future hope includes the redemption of our bodies as we will receive new resurrection bodies that are unaffected by sin and capable of life in God's New Creation (Romans 8:23-25; 1 Corinthians 15). Christians are in the process of becoming what God intended us to be. We might say that Christians are "human becomings" rather than "human beings". We realise that we are not fully human but that God can make us fully human. We make choices to obey God or to ignore Him and follow our own desires, and we experience the results of these choices in our lives.

Christian ethics, then, has a standard to aspire to, a motivation to inspire us and a power to enable us. When a person becomes a Christian they begin to follow God's leading. Their desires, which (as we have considered earlier) left unchecked lead to sin and destruction, are offered to Him for His purpose. They discover how to say no to their own desires at the point where they would lead them into sin and to follow the leading of the Spirit of God. Within the Christian there is often a tension between the desires of the "flesh" and the desires of God's "Spirit". We learn to listen to His voice and so to develop the quality of self-control that means our desires can be trained to His purposes. Desire can be domesticated and restored to its original dignity. Christian ethics is all about relationship with God. It is not about attempting in our own effort, motivated by guilt and shame, to live up to an external standard. It is about knowing God, listening to Him and allowing Him to change our hearts so that His standard is increasingly and ever more accurately written there. All the time we are motivated by gratitude and a constant rediscovery of His grace to us, and all along He empowers us to do what He asks of us. It is a dynamic loving relationship.

10. A choice to make

We have ranged into science, philosophy and theology in considering the question of what it means to be human. As I understand the issues there are only two logically coherent conclusions to which we may come, with very different consequences. Either we were created and designed by God, in which case we should submit and listen to Him, or we are the result of blind forces that have no purpose, in which case we should heed John Gray's advice in the closing words of *Straw Dogs*:[67]

> *Other animals do not need a purpose in life. A contradiction to itself, the human animal cannot do without one. Can we not think of the aim of life as being simply to see?*

Although I disagree with Gray about the fundamental nature of human life I must respect His logical consistency in exposing the fallacies of humanism. If naturalism is correct, then there can be no ultimate purpose and morality is merely an illusion – one we can accept or reject as we choose (or rather as our genes dictate). We must accept either a theocentric or a biocentric view of the world. The anthropocentric views of Enlightenment philosophy and humanism are untenable.

Faced with these two possibilities, we may ask the question, "Which makes more sense of our experience and which has the greater power to explain certain phenomena?" Consider, for example, the following:

- **Human religion** – John Gray is highly selective in his description of the history of religion in *Straw Dogs*. It is far from proven fact that all human beings were originally animistic. The tendency towards religion appears to be a universal trait across human cultures, and in most of these there is at least an idea of a single great god, although often this deity is thought to be too distant and powerful to be interested in human beings. Could human religion contain the echoes of a lost knowledge of a Creator? Could the instinct of religion be because of a constant need to fill a gap created when the first human beings rejected the true God? Could the desire to worship be a sign that we were created to worship the One who gave us life? Or is this instinct merely another illusion, as naturalism requires?

- **Human history and progress** – John Gray argues that progress is an illusion. Does history agree? What happened to people who dedicated themselves, often against all odds, to making a difference in the world? Of course many of them failed to make the difference for which they strived, but other individuals appear to have changed things in ways that are difficult to explain without some room for human will. The progress in human knowledge and skills has not been a straight line – at times knowledge has been lost and at others new discoveries have been made at great pace – but history does seem to testify to people who have bent things to their own will for good or for ill. At the same time, Christians claim that history has ultimately been shaped by a greater will, that of God. The history of Israel is a remarkable story full of strange "coincidences". The Bible makes sense of these by giving us insights into why God directed events in that way. Jesus of Nazareth stands out in human history as a man of unique influence, although He does not fit into any of the categories of people who normally made a great impact on history. This anomaly in itself is worthy of examination. The claims made by His earliest followers about His miracles and His resurrection can be tested for veracity by historical enquiry in the same way as any other historical documents. For the naturalist, on the other hand, the whole story of human history is simply an outworking of selfish genes and blind forces of nature.

- **Science** – science is perpetually revealing new wonders in our world, but these must surely raise the "why?" questions in our minds. Where did information, which is at the basis of life, come from? Why is there such order in the cosmos and in living creatures? Is the appearance of design in nature evidence of a designer? How could random processes give rise to order and intelligence? Is the language of DNA evidence of an author? Christianity offers a logical explanation. In fact, science was based on the premise that because the world was created by God order should pervade it and it should be intelligible. John Gray suggests that if Darwin's theory had arisen in a

[67] Gray, John 2002, *Straw Dogs: thoughts on humans and other animals*, Granta, p.199

context other than the Christian West it would not have been so controversial.[68] He fails to ask the question that seems to follow logically: why is it that Darwin's theory, and modern science as a whole, arose in the "Christian West" rather than elsewhere? It was Christian thinking that laid the foundation for science in Europe, and many of the greatest early scientists were committed Christians.

- **Human longings** – within the heart of man there is a programme for morality which is increasingly being revealed by science. We are creatures of contradiction – sensing how we ought to live but feeling powerless to achieve it. Surely we should ask whether the law of morality points to a lawgiver and whether our contradiction points to our need for help? Some desires and fears seem to be universal in the human heart. There is a universal desire to be loved. Could this be an echo of our design for community and for relationship with a loving Creator? There is an endless longing for purpose. Could this reflect design for a purpose? In fact, mankind cannot seem to live without purpose. This was the conclusion of scientist D.L. Rue. He describes the idea of purpose in the cosmos as a lie, but calls it a "Noble Lie" that "deceives us, tricks us, compels us beyond self-interest, beyond ego, beyond family, nation, race". "Without such lies", he suggests, "we cannot live".[69] There is an interesting echo of Francis Schaeffer here, although Rue's conclusion is radically different. Christians insist that the idea of purpose is not actually a lie. Even John Gray seems to give in to the "lie". Otherwise why write a book like *Straw Dogs*? Why bother if you really believe that the response of your readers is outside their own ability to determine and is programmed entirely by their genes? Surely persuasion is pointless if that is true? And what of the universal fear of death and the hope of life beyond it that has been such a significant factor in shaping human cultures? Are we to believe German Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch (1885-1977), who argued that modern human beings hold on to borrowed beliefs about death and immortality from our religious heritage simply because we cannot face the fact that there is nothing beyond death? He writes:[70]

  modern man does not feel the chasm that unceasingly surrounds him and that will certainly engulf him at last. Through these remnants, he saves his sense of self-identity. Through them the impression arises that man is not perishing.

  Could Bloch be wrong? Could our fear of death actually be an indicator that it is unnatural and that we need to be released from it? Could the writer of the biblical book of Hebrews be correct when he claims that Christ "shared in [our] humanity so that by his death he might … free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death" (Hebrews 2:14-15)?

These are just some of the questions about human existence that must be explained, and you can ask whether Christianity or naturalism provides a better explanation. William Lane Craig records the following quotation from Nobel Prize winning physicist Steven Weinberg. His popular book on cosmology, *The First Three Minutes*, ends with these words, some of which were quoted earlier in this article:[71]

It is almost irresistible for humans to believe that we have some special relation to the universe, that human life is not just a more-or-less farcical outcome of a chain of accidents reaching back to the first three minutes, but that somehow we were built in from the beginning… It is very hard to realize that this is all just a tiny part of an overwhelmingly hostile universe. It is even harder to realize that this present universe has evolved from an unspeakably unfamiliar early condition, and faces a future extinction of endless cold or intolerable heat. The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless.

But if there is no solace in the fruits of our research, there is at least some consolation in the research itself. Men and women are not content to comfort themselves with tales of gods and giants, or to confine their thoughts to the daily affairs of life; they also build telescopes and satellites and accelerators and sit at their desks for endless hours working out the meaning of the data they gather. The effort to understand the universe is one of the very few things that lifts human life a little above the level of farce, and gives it some of the grace of tragedy.

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[68] Gray, John 2002, *Straw Dogs: thoughts on humans and other animals*, Granta, p.x11, 3
[69] D.L. Rue, quoted in Craig, William Lane 2008, *Reasonable Faith: Christian truth and apologetics* (3rd edition), Crossway, p.85
[70] Ernst Bloch, quoted in Craig, William Lane 2008, *Reasonable Faith: Christian truth and apologetics* (3rd edition), Crossway, p.82
[71] Steven Weinberg, quoted in Craig, William Lane 2008, *Reasonable Faith: Christian truth and apologetics* (3rd edition), Crossway, p.83

Is this really the best we can do – to elevate a farcical existence to a tragedy by distracting ourselves with scientific enquiry? Or could it be that there is a purpose woven through the tragedy? Could there be hope of a happy ending? Could it be that the story of human existence is in fact an epic story – the story of God and His purpose for His beloved creatures – a grand story stretching back to the first human beings created in God's image and forward to a new humanity in a new restored creation – a story whose hero is Christ? Which story – the naturalistic tragedy or the Christian epic – best explains the evidence and which is ultimately true? If you have a shadow of a doubt about naturalism (could I rephrase that as a glimmer of light from God?), then I would urge you to make it your life's goal to ask the question whether the Christian message might actually be true.

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