What is Creation *For*?

William Paley

In crossing a heath, suppose I pitched my foot against a stone, and were asked how the stone came to be there; I might possibly answer, that, for anything I knew to the contrary it had lain there forever: nor would it perhaps be very easy to show the absurdity of this answer. But suppose I found a watch upon the ground, and it should be inquired how the watch happened to be in that place; I should hardly think of the answer which I had before given, that, for anything I knew, the watch might have always been there.Yet why should not this answer serve for the watch as well as for the stone? Why is it not admissible in the second case, as in the first? For this reason, and for no other, viz. that, when we come to inspect the watch, we perceive (what we could not discover in the stone) that its several parts are framed and put together for a purpose, e.g. that they are so formed and adjusted as to produce motion, and that motion so regulated as to point out the hour of the day; that if the different parts had been differently shaped from what they are, of a different size from what they are, or placed after any other manner, or in any other order, than that in which they are placed, either no motion at all would have been carried on in the machine, or none which would have answered the use that is now served by it.

To reckon up a few of the plainest of these parts, and of their offices, all tending to one result: We see a cylindrical box containing a coiled elastic spring, which, by its endeavour to relax itself, turns round the box. We next observe a flexible chain (artificially wrought for the sake of flexure) communicating the action of the spring from the box to the fusee. We then find a series of wheels, the teeth of which catch in, and apply to each other, conducting the motion from the fusee to the balance, and from the balance to the pointer; and at the same time, by the size and shape of those wheels, so regulating that motion, as to terminate in causing an index, by an equable and measured progression, to pass over a given space in a given time. We take notice that the wheels are made of brass in order to keep them from rust; the springs of steel, no other metal being so elastic; that over the face of the watch there is placed a glass, a material employed in no other part of the work; but in the room of which, if there had been any other than a transparent substance, the hour could not be seen without opening the case. This mechanism being observed (it requires indeed an examination of the instrument, and perhaps some previous knowledge of the subject, to perceive and understand it; but being once, as we have said, observed and understood), the inference, we think, is inevitable; that the watch must have had a maker; that there must have existed, at some time, and at some place or other, an artificer or artificers, who formed it for the purpose which we find it actually to answer; who comprehended its construction, and designed its use.

For every indication of contrivance, every manifestation of design, which existed in the watch, exists in the world of nature, of being greater and more, and that in a degree which exceeds all computation. I mean, that the contrivances of nature surpass the contrivances of art, in the complexity, subtilty, and curiosity of the mechanism; and still more, if possible, do they go beyond them in number and variety: yet, in a multitude of cases, are not less evidently contrivances, not less evidently accommodated to their end, or suited to their office, than are the most perfect products of human ingenuity.

Aristotle

Some identify the nature or substance of a natural object with that immediate constituent of it which taken by itself is without arrangement, e.g. the wood is the 'nature' of the bed, and the bronze the 'nature' of the statue... This then is one account of 'nature', namely that it is the immediate material substratum of things which have in themselves a principle of motion or change.

Another account is that 'nature' is the shape or form which is specified in the definition of the thing. For the word 'nature' is applied to what is according to nature and the natural in the same way as 'art' is applied to what is artistic or a work of art. We should not say in the latter case that there is anything artistic about a thing, if it is a bed only potentially, not yet having the form of a bed; nor should we call it a work of art. The same is true of natural compounds. What is potentially flesh or bone has not yet its own 'nature', and does not exist until it receives the form specified in the definition, which we name in defining what flesh or bone is. Thus in the second sense of 'nature' it would be the shape or form (not separable except in statement) of things which have in themselves a source of motion.

The form indeed is 'nature' rather than the matter; for a thing is more properly said to be what it is when it has attained to fulfilment than when it exists potentially.

- *Physics*, Book II.

Aquinas

Every being in any way existing is from God. For whatever is found in anything by participation, must be caused in it by that to which it belongs essentially, as iron becomes ignited by fire. Now it has been shown above when treating of the divine simplicity that God is the essentially self-subsisting Being; and also it was shown that subsisting being must be one; as, if whiteness were self-subsisting, it would be one, since whiteness is multiplied by its recipients. Therefore all beings apart from God are not their own being, but are beings by participation. Therefore it must be that all things which are diversified by the diverse participation of being, so as to be more or less perfect, are caused by one First Being, Who possesses being most perfectly.

- *Summa Theologica*.

Aquinas

The cause of all effects in a particular kind will be that whereof the kind is predicated to the utmost. Thus we see that the hottest body is the cause of heat in all hot bodies, and the brightest body the cause of brightness in all bright bodies. But God is in the highest degree 'being.' He then is the cause of all things whereof 'being' is predicated… What is by essence, is the cause of all that is by participation, as fire is the cause of all things fiery, as such. But God is being by His essence because He is pure being; while every other being is being by participation, because there can only be one being that is its own existence. God therefore is cause of being to all other beings.

- *Summa Contra Gentiles*.

Herbert McCabe

"Every 'How come?' question is how come this instead of what is not… Our ultimate radical question is not how come Fido exists as this dog instead of that, or how come Fido exists as a dog instead of a giraffe, or exists as living instead of inanimate, but how come Fido exists instead of nothing… to ask how come he exists instead of nothing is to put him in the context of everything, the universe or world. And this is the question I call the God-question, because whatever the answer is, whatever the thing or state of affairs, whatever the existing reality that answers it we call 'God'… To say as Russell once did: the universe is just there… seems to me just as arbitrary as to say: dogs are just there… As Wittgenstein said 'Not how the world is, but that it is, is the mystery'."

- ‘God and Creation.’

Herbert McCabe

"If God is whatever answers our question, how come everything? Then evidently he is not to be included amongst everything. God cannot be a thing, an existent among others. It is not possible that God and the universe should add up to make two… Whatever creation means it is not a process of making… God cannot interfere in the universe, not because he has not the power but because, so to speak, he has too much… If God is the cause of everything, there is nothing that he is alongside… What God accounts for is that the universe is there instead of nothing… Every action in the world is an action of God; not because it is not an action of a creature but because it is by God's action that the creature is itself and has its own activity."

- ‘God and Creation.’

Herbert McCabe

To love others is - we can put it two ways - we can say it is to give them themselves or we can say it is to give them nothing - the priceless gift of nothing, which means space in which to move freely, to grow and become themselves. Every gift we give to others (apart from the gift of ourselves) imposes something upon them - they have about them something of ours, if it is only a new tie or a drink. But love, which is the gift of ourselves, does not add anything to them from outside, it is the gift of the space in which they can be themselves. You can see this quite clearly in the love of parents for children, especially if we contrast it with counterfeit love and possessiveness. Children with genuinely loving parents are able to be free, they are secure enough to be spontaneous, to be really themselves. Without this love they are left to the impersonal world which hems them in and ties them down. They haven't got room to breathe. Nothing, empty space, is not what we start from, we cannot take it for granted as though it would be there anyway. Nothing is very precious and is created by persons for each other, itis the pre-requisite of freedom. God in this sense is the great primordial source of nothing. I should say, I suppose, that we should 'take it for granted' because it always has to be granted. And only if it is granted can we grow into ourselves. We receive ourselves at each other's hands. Not because we make and mould each other, but because we let each other be. Nature will not let you be. Only persons can let you be.

- ‘God.’

Pope Francis

"Modern anthropocentrism has paradoxically ended up prizing technical thought over reality, since 'the technological mind sees nature as an insensate order, as a cold body of facts, as a mere "given", as an object of utility, as raw material to be hammered into useful shape'… When human beings fail to find their true place in this world, they misunderstand themselves and end up acting against themselves…

Modernity has been marked by an excessive anthropocentrism which today, under another guise, continues to stand in the way of shared understanding… An inadequate presentation of Christian anthropology gave rise to a wrong understanding of the relationship between human beings and the world. Often, what was handed on was a Promethean vision of mastery over the world… Instead, our 'dominion' over the universe should be understood more properly in the sense of responsible stewardship.

When we fail to acknowledge as part of reality the worth of a poor person, a human embryo, a person with disabilities… it becomes difficult to hear the cry of nature itself; everything is connected. Once the human being declares independence from reality and behaves with absolute dominion, the very foundations of our life begin to crumble…

There can be no renewal of our relationship with nature without a renewal of humanity itself. There can be no ecology without an adequate anthropology. When the human person is considered as simply one being among others, the product of chance or physical determinism, then 'our overall sense of responsibility wanes'.

Questions

1. What is the difference between God as a being and God as Being itself, and why does it matter?

2. What are the pros and cons of the watchmaker account of creation?

3. What does McCabe mean when he says that ‘God is the primordial source of nothing’?

4. How does the Thomist account of creation:
   a. Change the terms of the debate between religion and evolutionary biology?
   b. Change the Christian account of the relationship between human and non-human life?

5. What does McCabe's 'how come Fido?' argument tell us about what we mean — or ought to mean — by the word 'God'?