

“Chaos in Creation”

There’s an old story about Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson in which, Holmes and Watson go camping. During the night they woke up and Watson says to Holmes, “When you look up and see the stars spread out above and realise the immensity of space, that our sun is just one of a hundred billion stars in the galaxy and our galaxy is just one of a hundred billion galaxies we seem so tiny and insignificant, just random specks of atoms in a mindless universe. What does it make you think, Holmes?” “It makes me think,” said Holmes, “that some scoundrel has stolen our tent!”

Isn’t it funny how two people can look at the same thing, the same evidence and come to quite different conclusions? Two men looked into the darkness, one saw only stars and atoms, the other saw that a crime had been committed. One saw only material stuff, the other saw that the universe turned on a moral axis.

About 500 years ago a young man called Nicolas also looked at the darkness of the night sky and saw it differently to everyone else. For over 1000 years people had thought the stars, the planets, the sun and moon revolved around the earth. But Nicolas looked at the same evidence and reached a different conclusion – the stars and the sun weren’t moving, it was the earth that was spinning round and round. People thought he was crazy. Why did tables and chairs, animals and people not fly off into space? Why was there no wind from the air rushing past? Nicolas’s theory alone could not explain everything, but it still made sense. His was an idea ahead of its time. Nowadays we know that Nicolas Copernicus – for it was he – was right, even if he couldn’t explain a lot of things.

This world can be a dark place at times. Terrible disasters kill thousands, diseases kill millions, vast numbers of men, women and children starve and live in miserable conditions. We can also experience dark times in life – physical, mental and spiritual pain, the dark night of the soul. Atheists and materialists, like some of my Oxford colleagues, look at this state of affairs and say it is just what you would expect if there is no God. The materialist is one who believes that the only things that are real are atoms and molecules. Everything else is a delusion. There is no meaning or purpose to life. There is no morality, only molecules. Everything ultimately can be reduced to Physics.

Jacques Monod, in his book, “Chance and necessity” puts it like this:

“Man at last knows he is alone in the unfeeling immensity of the universe out of which he has emerged by chance.”

But as a Christian I look at the same world with all its darkness, even its moral evil, and say – there is another way to look at it. There is a God and this makes sense even if we can’t explain everything.

We are often told that Science has proved God does not exist because it has found no evidence that he exists. But Science limits itself to natural explanations for things *in* nature. It excludes God or anything outside Nature. So saying God does not exist is a “faith statement” – it is an assumption of the scientific method not a result of scientific research.

The philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe, wrote:

‘This often happens in philosophy; it is argued that “all we find” is such-and-such, and it turns out that the arguer has excluded from his idea of “finding” the sort of thing he says we don’t “find”’.

But the mistakes of scientific materialism go deeper and are ultimately fatal. For, if it is true that the only reality is atoms, then even our thinking is just the result of what atoms do. So our thoughts are neither true nor false – they just *are*. So we can’t trust our brains or our reason to tell us the truth about anything. J B S Haldane was a pioneering evolutionary biologist and an atheist but he recognised the problem. He wrote:

“If my mental processes are determined wholly by the motions of atoms in my brain, I have no reason to suppose my beliefs are true ... and hence I have no reason to suppose my brain to be composed of atoms.”

So atheistic materialism is self-contradictory – it cuts off the branch it is sitting on! We need a rational basis for our own reason and rationality. Science can’t provide this – it has simply to assume it. Christianity, however, does give us a basis. The bit in Genesis that we read earlier tells us we, men and women, girls and boys are made in the image of God.

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

Our minds are therefore a bit like God’s. Our reason is valid because it has its origin in the mind of God. So Science is not only compatible with the Christian faith – it actually, in a way, depends on its truth. For, as C S Lewis observed, “Unless our reason is valid, no science is possible.” God gives us rationality and he made the world in a way that it can be understood using our reason. This explains the quotation from Albert Einstein you may have heard from Professor Keith Fox at the beginning of this series,

“The most incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it is comprehensible.”

It is not an accident that modern Science grew up in a Christian culture. It was faith, of Christian philosophers, in the rationality of the universe that led to discovery of laws of Nature.

These laws of nature show a deep order in the universe. From the largest galaxy to the smallest bit of an atom, we find order all the way down. This order is a big fat clue that there is a Mind behind the universe. That’s another thing we find in the Creation story of Genesis. Note that this story was never meant to be a scientific or historical account of how things came into existence. But it was, and is, intended to tell us that the world was made in an orderly way by an orderly God and that it is the Creator himself who should be worshiped not the things he has made like the sun or the moon.

Likewise, our Gospel reading from John chapter 1 echoes the Creation story – “In the beginning was the Word ...” The Greek word here for “word” is *logos*. To the Greeks this *logos* was the underlying rational principle of the universe. The Christian faith identifies this with the second person of the Trinity, the Son of God, Jesus Christ. He is God’s best way of expressing himself to us. Sure, he shows himself in Creation, in the order and beauty of Nature, but Jesus – God in human form – is his best revelation to us.

Just as Science cannot establish the basis for rationality, neither can it find the moral axis about which the universe turns. Science tells us what is, not what ought to be. Charles Darwin recognised that Science cannot explain the “**moral order,**” right and wrong, good and evil. He recognised that his theory of Evolution could not explain what he called that ‘imperious word, “ought”’. Science can tell us what *is*, but you can’t get an “**ought**” from an “**is**”! The Christian faith, however, gives us a basis for morality. Adam and Eve are “Everyman” and “Everywoman” and we ought to be like God. But, as St Paul put it: ***All have sinned and fall short of the glory (or nature) of God.*** So the basis of morality is the character of God and we all fall short of that moral standard. When we are honest with ourselves we know that, and we need to be forgiven. Science can give us no moral standard, no forgiveness, no salvation.

You might be wondering by now, after all this talk about “order,” why the title of this talk is “Chaos in Creation”! And there *is* chaos in Creation. When we look at Nature it looks disordered, random, chaotic. The shapes of trees, clouds, patterns of stones on a beach or leaves on a woodland path are all random. Evolution – the way new life forms come into being – is a result of chance variations and the necessary effects of the laws of physics. It seems our very existence is the result of chance. But would a Creator leave anything to chance? Some atheists say the very existence of Chance shows God is a delusion. Many religious people, however, say God does exist so Chance must be a delusion – everything is determined by God. I would like to suggest that they are both wrong!

Chance is not an illusion. It is real and serves an important purpose in creation. I came across this idea in my own research in atomic physics using laser light. I found that some processes that were forbidden by the laws of Quantum Theory *did* occur if there was a bit of chaos present! The usual orderly, deterministic, laws were broken when the atoms or the light had random fluctuations. So the iron grip of determinism was broken by chance or a bit of chaos.

This breaking of determinism gives freedom to nature. This is how evolution works too. New species evolve when some chance changes occur in the genes and then the orderly laws take over. We can see a role for chaos in creation in the Genesis story too. Let me remind you that for the Hebrews, “waters” or the “deep” was a metaphor for chaos.

In the beginning ... the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light; and there was light.

Genesis 1:1-3

So the first thing to be created was “chaos” and out of this chaos God brought order.

I believe also that chance, or chaos, has another purpose and it’s a rather surprising one. I think it may help us understand something about, what for many, myself included, is perhaps the most difficult problem – the problem of pain, and in particular, random suffering. Suffering is a bad enough problem, but why does it also have to be so random?

Now some believe it is not random. Eastern religions have the idea of Karma; people suffer because they have done something to deserve it in this life or a previous one. The Jews of Jesus’ time thought in something like the same way. When they came upon a man who had been born blind, they asked

Jesus who had sinned, the man or his parents. Jesus told them, the man was not blind because he, or anyone else, had sinned, but here was an opportunity to see how God could heal. For John, who tells us the story, this was a sign that God could heal everyone of spiritual blindness, for there are none so blind as those who *will not* see.

What would it mean for suffering to come only when we did wrong? If we were immediately sick every time we sinned we would not really be free in our choice to do good or evil. The fact that suffering is often random means it is not directly related to our actions. So we are free to make moral choices without God intervening every time we make the wrong choice. We have free will. If God had to ensure good people never suffered it would mean He would have to interfere every time anyone of their own free will tried to hurt another person. God could be forced to act in a predictable way – we could control God's action. God would no longer be sovereign and in control. Randomness prevents this from happening. We cannot control God because things happen randomly and we can't force God to act predictably. So God stays in control – randomness protects his sovereignty.

But does this not mean that God is also at the mercy of randomness and chance? Does He lose control? No! Consider "Free will" itself. How can our will be free if God ultimately determines the outcomes? William James used a nice analogy to explain this paradox. Imagine you are playing chess against an infinitely wise Grand Master. You are free to choose any move allowed by the rules of the game, but we know the Grand Master will always win in the end. He can adapt his moves to take account of whatever we do. In the same way God can allow random, chance, events to happen in nature and adapt his continuing actions in the world to take account of them. In the same way Chance means we may suffer accidents or illness but Jesus promises that God can be at work in all these circumstances to bring good.

When I taught my children to ride a bicycle, at first I held the saddle to stop them falling. Then as they learned to balance I let go but stayed close to catch them if they fell. They gradually learned to cope with the random bumps, and to ride by themselves. In the same way, God our Father wants us to grow spiritually so we can cope with the ups and downs of life. It is in the dark times of life that we really get to know the presence of God. Jesus reassured his disciples that even though they would suffer, God loved and valued them. In Matthew 10 he speaks these words to them,

Do not fear those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul ...

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father ...

In other words, suffering, even unjust and unfair suffering, will come to you but you will come to no eternal harm. Rupert Brook put it this way after his experience of random death and destruction in the First World War,

***Safe shall be my going. Secretly armed against all death's endeavour
Safe though all safety's lost; safe where men fall;
and if these poor limbs die, safest of all.***

500 years ago Nicolaus Copernicus looked at the dark night sky and realised there was another way to see things. His idea, that it was the earth that moved, was ahead of its time. It did not explain

everything but it gave a big picture that made sense. Many years later evidence from the work of Kepler, Galileo and Newton proved him right.

About 3000 years ago someone wrote a story about a man called Job who experienced tragic accidents and loss, causing him immense and unfair suffering. When all around thought it was Job's fault, he saw another way to see things. Although it didn't explain everything, he saw a big picture where all would be redeemed. His idea was also ahead of its time.

***For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth:
And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God:***

Job 19:25,26

He did not know how this would be possible – but he trusted in what he *did* know about God. Many years later the evidence of Jesus' resurrection proved him right.

Job's insight is that God can be trusted even when things look very black and dark. When it looks like there is no God, just blind purposeless chance, remember there is another way to see things that makes much more sense. It makes sense of our reason – it makes sense of Science and it makes sense of Morality. Yes life brings sorrow and pain. But we can see the stars only when it is dark. Yes, there is random suffering, but there is also love and joy and hints that all will be redeemed. Our suffering will be healed and our sins forgiven.

So the Christian faith makes sense. It makes sense of Science. It makes sense of morality. It makes sense of that inkling that we have all experienced at some time that there is a God - this is "The light that lightens every man ..." John 1.9

Of course we cannot explain everything, and, even if we could, explanations are not really what we need. Understanding doesn't ease the sorrow, the grief. One ounce of God's grace, however; the comfort of his presence, is better than all the theology in the world. But, perhaps if we can grasp the big picture it may help us take that first, small, step of faith to trust in God. Then, as many down the years have found, we may experience God's comfort and grace in the darkest of times and the peace that passes understanding.

I leave you with the motto of the University of Oxford, "Dominus Illuminatio Mea" from Psalm 27:1

The LORD is my light and my salvation

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