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# On the Futility and Absurdity Of 'Why' Questions in Science and Philosophy: Towards A Pragmatic Emphasis on Alleviating the Suffering of The World

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## Abstract:

The arch pessimist philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer, along with countless other thinkers, most notably Leibniz and Heidegger, famously proposed that a 'why' question – roughly along the lines of 'why is there something rather than nothing?' – was fundamental to all metaphysical enquiry. However, unlike many of his philosophical descendants, he did not dwell long on this notoriously fuzzy and, arguably, vacuously unintelligible question, but moved quickly on to seek answers to what he saw as the root cause of human suffering in the blind, striving will. In spite of the eminently practical turn in philosophy since Schopenhauer – the linguistic turn inspired by Wittgenstein and J L Austin, American pragmatism, and the emphasis on the useful and practical in moral philosophy by Peter Singer and others – there remains a tendency in current culture and theory to be bewitched by the 'why' questions in one form or another. The principal thesis of this article is that certain 'why' questions – the so-called big metaphysical questions of science and philosophy – are still accorded far too much importance and attention and should be downplayed in favour of activity directed to alleviating suffering in the world, both natural and anthropogenic.

**Keywords**: **Metaphysics, Practical Ethics, Engaged Science and Philosophy, Secular Spirituality.**

## 1. Introduction: Why, How and Perhaps

The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it - Karl Marx - Theses on Feuerbach, 1845, No.11

Many 'Why' questions in philosophy, humanities and, especially in science, seem to be really 'How' questions masquerading – for no sensible reasons – as profound interrogatives. A perfect example of this tendency is well illustrated in a recent video in Robert Lawrence Kuhn's invariably excellent *Closer To Truth* series of interviews with scientists and philosophers (plus the occasional psychologist and theologian). In a recent interview with the mathematical physicist and Nobel prize-winner, Sir Roger Penrose – under the heading of *Why Did Our Universe Begin?* (Kuhn, 2021) – the discussion goes on for a short while before it transpires that the 'why' question has suddenly disappeared from the enquiry. Instead of asking why, Penrose immediately begins to talk about certain particular features of the microwave background which was an immediate consequence of the big bang singularity and the special role of gravity in the construction of stars, planets and galaxies. In short, Penrose is concerned to describe and explain *how* our universe came to be the way it appears to be – indeed with additional speculation about what might have preceded its emergence – without any reference to any 'why' questions.

In a similar vein, Kuhn's interview with the late physicist and theologian, John Polkinghorne, with the title of *Why Is There Anything At All?* (Kuhn, 2025) doesn't even pretend to be answering the titular metaphysical question but quickly degenerates into a vehicle for allowing Polkinghorne to advocate his well-worn views that the world is as it is because it was created by God. Leaving aside the vast number of philosophical objections to this dubious insertion of God to explain questions about existence (Dawkins, 2006; Stenger, 2008), this fails to acknowledge the many alternative theories which attempt to answer questions of existence. The Penrose thesis referred to earlier is one such possibility as is the idea of Lawrence Krauss (2012) that the findings of cosmology and quantum physics combine to explain how the universe could have arisen from nothing. He observes that:

Quantum gravity not only appears to allow universes to be created from nothing – meaning, I emphasize, the absence of space and time – it may require them. Nothing – in this case, no space, no time, no anything! – is unstable. Moreover the general characteristics of such a universe, if it lasts a long time, would be expected to be those we observe in our universe today (p.170).

Such theses – and we can add to these the many ways thinkers have attempted to explain the findings of quantum physics (Gribbin, 1995; Carroll, 2019; Deutsch, 2011) – offer rational, plausible and purely naturalistic ways of accounting for what we observe about the cosmos and our place within it. Given all that is on offer, the attempts to contrive supernatural, theological explanations of the universe appear desperately question-begging and irrational in the sense that they solve nothing and still leave all the key questions to be answered. Schopenhauer (2014 edn), as indicated earlier, though acknowledging that there are serious metaphysical puzzles emanating from the simple fact that there is something rather than nothing, quickly moved on from this futile daydreaming to talk of the 'vanity of existence'. This was said to be:

revealed in the whole form existence assumes: in the infiniteness of time and space contrasted with the finiteness of the individual in both; in the fleeting present as the sole form in which actuality exists; in the contingency and relativity of all things; in continual becoming without being; in continual desire without satisfaction; in the continual frustration of striving of which life consists (p.17).

Schopenhauer thus seeks to address what is given, what humans are required to deal with as they are born into a world over which they had no choosing, one in which – as he elaborates in graphic detail in his major work *The World as Will and Idea* (2004 edn) – he contends that our existence is a product of the blind, striving will to live which is a 'constant source of suffering' (p.225). In his essay *On the Suffering of The World* (2014 edn) he elaborates this vision with considerable gusto:

If the immediate and direct purpose of our life is not suffering then our existence is the most ill-adapted to its purpose in the world: for it is absurd to suppose that the endless affliction of which the world is everywhere full, and which arises out of the need and distress pertaining essentially to life, should be purposeless and purely accidental. Each individual misfortune, to be sure, seems an exceptional occurrence; but misfortune in general is the rule (p.3).

Looking around at the present state of the world, with its constant wars, poverty, famines, and human-induced cruelty at all levels, there is plenty to support Schopenhauer's central claims and – in direct contradiction of Steven Pinker's (2011,2018) optimistic visions of a world gradually getting better on all fronts – to say that the pessimistic philosopher got things about right (Lent, 2018). However, the correct question here is definitely not 'Why' – why are humans like this or why is the world like it is – but, after Marx, *how* we can change things by systematic investigation and the construction of ways to alleviate suffering. Schopenhauer himself made a number of suggestions in this respect – through the pursuit of knowledge, by aesthetic appreciation, and in forms of secular spirituality drawn from Eastern contemplative traditions (Hyland, 1985) – and contemporary philosophy is full of rational and pragmatically useful recommendations in this respect which do not involve futile mysterian soul-searching or dubious theology (Nagel, 2012; Lent, 2021; Ord, 2020).

Given all this, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the persistence of such 'why' questioning is prompted by ulterior non-philosophical and non-scientific purposes to, either, maintain an element of esoteric mystery which is linked to natural human curiosity or – on a less justifiable level – to allow those inclined towards some sort of supernatural or God-centred view of the universe to try to provide a basis for their views (Stenger, 2008; Dawkins, 2017). I want to argue that science and philosophy is better off without any of these ultimately futile elements.

## 2. Science, Philosophy and Human Curiosity

In his book *Why? What Makes us Curious* (2017) the astrophysicist, Mario Livio sets out to explain the underlying mechanisms of human curiosity in a broad range of fields and activities. Livio presents us with a number of reasons – by reference to scientists and philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, Leonardo Da Vinci and Richard Feynman – why human curiosity is an extremely valuable human trait which is responsible for much of our progress on earth and one which evolved 'at least partially to aid survival'. As he explains:

An understanding of the world around us, its causal connections, and the sources of changes have helped humans to reduce prediction errors, cope with the environment, and adapt. Curiosity about other humans has no doubt played a role in mating and the creation of social structures (pp.188-9).

He makes a convincing case for the power of curiosity in dealing with our fears about the unknown, uncertain and unexpected features of life, and asks whether we could 'even imagine a world without exploration of our external universe and our internal self' Ibid.,pp.95-6). In view of his advocacy of curiosity throughout the book, this is clearly intended as a rhetorical question as is the 'Why?' on the front cover since there is a conspicuous absence of 'why' questions in his arguments but lots of examples of scientific and philosophical issues which have been settled through discovery and exploration motivated by curiosity.

### 2.1 Scientific Questioning

In identifying the contours of contemporary philosophy of science, Barker & Kitcher (2014) outline what they call the dominant 'analytic project' of current science guided by the search for a 'theory of confirmation' and 'theories of theoretical language…and explanation' (p.22). They are insistent that 'science is, or at least should be, a value-free zone'. As they argue:

One distinctive feature of scientific investigation is supposed to be its antipathy to wishful thinking: Scientists follow the evidence without interference from their values and hopes. Another lesson drawn from the historical development of the sciences is that nature does not supply goals and purposes. The world disclosed by the physics, chemistry, and biology of the past few centuries is no longer suffused with value. Scientific investigation of nature cannot disclose to us what is valuable, or what we ought to want (ibid.,p.47).

Richard Dawkins – perhaps the most atheistically militant of contemporary scientists – has been a lifelong campaigner against those he calls 'history deniers' (2009), people who, for predominantly religious reasons, wish to deny or at least manipulate the findings of physics and biology so as to make a case for a world created by a transcendent God of some kind. In answering the question: 'How is it that we find ourselves not merely existing but surrounded by such complexity, such elegance, such endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful', he replies:

The answer is this. It could not have been otherwise, given that we are capable of noticing our existence at all, and of asking questions about it….We are surrounded by endless forms, most beautiful and most wonderful, and it is no accident, but the direct consequence of evolution by non-random natural selection – the only game in town, the greatest show on Earth (p.426).

This argument is informed by a variant of the anthropic principle which, in general terms, can defined as a concept suggesting that

the universe's properties are such that they allow for the existence of observers, like human beings, and that our observations are therefore limited by the conditions that allow us to observe. It essentially argues that we can only observe a universe that is suitable for observers to exist in. In addressing questions about the fine-tuning of the basic cosmic constants which seem to suggest to some observers (particularly those seeking theological explanations) that the universe was somehow designed for us, Nick Bostrom (2023) comments:

Was the Universe made for us? It appears that there is a set of fundamental physical constants that are such that had they been very slightly different, the universe would have been void of intelligent life. It's as if we're balancing on a knife's edge. Some philosophers and physicists take the 'fine-tuning' of these constants to be an explanandum that cries out for an explanans, but is this the right way to think? The data we collect about the Universe is filtered not only by our instruments' limitations, but also by the precondition that somebody be there to "have" the data yielded by the instruments (and to build the instruments in the first place). This precondition causes observation selection effects - biases in our data that may call into question how we interpret evidence that the Universe is fine-tuned at all (p.1).

This is a strong version of the anthropic principle which is advocated by a number of scientists and philosophers (Carter, 1974; Penrose, 1989; Barrow & Tipler, 1986) and will be utilised later in discussing the emergence of current arguments about the existence and purpose of the universe

Arguing along generally similar lines, Peter Atkins (2012), after noting that the 'spreading of matter and energy is the root of all change' in the universe, goes on to observe:

Even though at heart all change is driven by purposeless decay, our mental activity ensures that our lives are full of personal purpose. The sense of purposefulness is so great that there is then a natural tendency to extend the notion to cosmic entities…This extrapolation from the personal to the cosmic is false…Why should the universe have a purpose? The question of the purpose of the universe is an invention of human minds…There is considerable grandeur, I think, is the presence of our spectacularly majestic universe just hanging there, wholly without purpose (pp.20-21).

This radical view of the universe and our knowledge of it is shared by Krauss (2012) who, as mentioned in the previous section, has little time for views which posit that the universe was designed by a creator god with some purpose in mind. After demonstrating how the cosmos may have emerged from 'nothing' – since there is always 'something' even in the so-called quantum vacuum – he suggests that the idea of the multiverse (now accepted by a number of physicists as an alternative to more orthodox interpretations of quantum mechanics; Deutsch, 2011; Carroll, 2018) tends to 'change the playing field when we think about the creation of our own universe and the conditions that may be required for that to happen' (p.176). As he further explains:

In a multiverse of any of the types that have been discussed, there could be an infinite number of regions, infinitely big or infinitesimally small, in which there is simply "nothing" and there could be regions where there is "something". In this case, the response to why there is something rather than nothing becomes almost trite: there is something simply because, if there were nothing, we wouldn't find ourselves living there! (ibid., p.177).

Just recently the paradigm-shattering observations of the James Webb space telescope – especially, the totally unexpected discovery of fully formed galaxies only hundreds of millions of years after the big bang (Cosmic Prodigy, 2025) – has led to a wide range of speculations such as whether we are looking at other universes that preceded the singularity which is thought to have started the present one. Another, admittedly extremely speculative notion, is that these observations – analysed by Google's Quantum Core AI Computer (Spacialize, 2025) – are emanating from other parallel universes as predicted by the many worlds interpretation of quantum theory advocated by Deutsch and Carroll referred to earlier. Whatever the final theoretical outcome of all this, the new perspectives offer more than enough scope for the notion that the cosmos we see around needs no designer or creator, and has likely always existed in one form or another.

### 2.2. Philosophical Questioning

As mentioned earlier, although a variant of the 'why' question seems to be at the heart of much metaphysical speculation, this is often a purely rhetorical device to allow more productive arguments and ideas to be explored. Even that supreme master of logical analysis, Wittgenstein, used forms of such questions to indicate that all such metaphysical speculation cannot escape the limits of language. As he notes in the *Tractatus* (1921/1974 edn):

The world and life are one. I am my world…The world is *my* world: this is manifest in the fact that the limits of *language* (of that language which alone I understand) mean the limits of *my* world (p.57, original italics).

Such logical empiricism is even more to the fore in *Philosophical Investigations* (1953/1974 edn) in which Wittgenstein remarks that 'philosophy puts everything before us… the work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose' (p.50e). Moreover, we are asked to keep in mind that 'what has to be accepted, the given, is – so one could say – *forms of life* (p.226e, original italics). Such forms of life include the acceptance that we are in a world in which our observations are constructed by our language and the contexts in which language is used.

In a special edition of *Philosophy Now* (2025) the question 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' was discussed by a range of philosophers from different traditions, and their responses make fascinating reading. Larry Curley, gives the question short shrift:

The easiest way to show that there must be something rather than nothing is to try to define nothing. Nothing must have no properties:

No size. No shape. No position. No mass-energy, forces, wave forms, or anything else you can think of. No time, no past, no present, no future. And finally, no existence. Therefore there must be something. And this is it. (p.1)

This is a thumbnail version of the anthropic principle, and Alanna Blackshaw argues along similar lines in remarking that:

To answer the question of 'why', one must realise that the answer may lie within itself, that the world may be a 'necessary being', holding its own reason for existence within itself. An example of such could be provided by arithmetic, whose underlying laws exist as of themselves. So we come back to the simplistic reason that there is something rather than nothing just because there is (ibid.)

A fascinating take on the question if offered by Christopher Cokinos who comments:

This is one of those questions which, as the Buddha says in a sermon attributed to him, "tends not toward edification", if by edification we mean achieving a final answer. Perhaps one is possible, but attempts to answer the question by appeal to the principle of sufficient reason devolve quickly into infinite regress: God created everything, but who created God? Appealing to multiverse cosmology, we might say that we happen to live in a universe finely tuned for existence of certain particles and, especially, stars. Other universes may be an absence of things. But what created the multiverse?...So I'm not interested in trying to justify an answer to a seemingly unanswerable question. I'm saying that the motives for asking it mean we are enraptured by the material world – a world which too many philosophers, beginning with Plato, have denigrated, much to the detriment of reason, understanding, compassion, reverence and equity (ibid.).

The reference to the Buddha in Cokinos's answer is interesting and links well with my central thesis that pragmatic questions concerned with human well-being are far more important in science and philosophy than unanswerable metaphysical ones. The Buddha famously eschewed metaphysical questions about the creation of the world in favour of pragmatic questions concerned with the alleviation of human suffering. He declared that 'I teach one thing and one thing only, that is, suffering and the end of suffering', and this results in the moral dimension of this spiritual tradition concerned with social engagement in all forms of life with the overriding aim of alleviating human suffering in any form and in any way possible (Hyland, 2011; Batchelor, 2011). I will return to this pragmatic dimension below but for now I want to discuss a recent thesis by Philip Goff which calls for a revival of interest in just those teleological issues about the nature and purpose of the universe that are criticised above.

### 2.3. Does the Universe Have a Purpose?

The contemporary philosopher, Philip Goff, is notable for his advocacy of forms of panpsychism – the idea that consciousness is an ontological primitive and foundation of all experience of the world – as a means of dealing with the hard problem of consciousness (Goff, 2019; Hyland, 2021). I am in broad agreement with these general theses on consciousness – and the growing body of work by Bernardo Kastrup (2023) and Donald Hoffman (2019) which supports this approach – but Goff's recent work, *Why? The Purpose of the Universe* (2023) extends beyond this to suggest that there may be purpose in thus underlying consciousness. In my recent review of Goff's thesis (Hyland, 2024), I expressed agreement with many of his basic ideas – primarily that consciousness is an ontological primitive out of which everything can be said to emerge – but I took exception to his broader thesis which he labels 'pan-agentialism'.

Pan-agentialism, Goff (2023) contends, differs from the original version of panpsychism:

in holding that particles have a kind of proto-agency of their own. Particles are never compelled to do anything, but are rather disposed, from their own nature, to respond rationally to their experience (p.94).

This thesis is connected with a preference for David Bohm's (1980) pilot wave interpretation of quantum mechanics which attempts to obviate the wave/particle duality with the additional claim that the:

wave function does not drag the particles around, but rather causes particles to have certain conscious inclinations. The particles then freely respond with the most basic rational response: they do what they feel inclined to do. It is particles responding to the conscious inclinations produced in them by the wave function that results in the standard predictions of quantum mechanics (ibid.,p.96).

The apparent strangeness of attaching rational agency to the quantum world is explained by linking the argument with fine-tuning – the fact that nothing would exist if certain basic constants such as the cosmological constant, the ratio of the gravitational force to the electromagnetic force, and the strength of the strong nuclear force (Rees, 2001) – to produce the notion that a 'pan-agentialist world is, by definition, a world that embodies purpose' (Goff 2023,p.118). Moreover, Goff argues:

fine-tuning and rational matter need each other to produce creatures that can understand and respond to what things are and mean. Without fine-tuning, rational matter would be unable to evolve into complex organisms which are responsive to their environment, a pre-condition for the emergence of experiential understanding (ibid.,p.119).

All of these claims are intended to justify the central teleological argument that the basic structure of the universe is directed by purpose and value. This is where 'cosmopsychism' comes in; as Goff explains:

In order to combine teleological cosmopsychism with pan-agentialism, we need to identify the cosmic fine-tuner with the wave function itself. On the resulting view, the wave function is a conscious entity that is aware of the complete future consequences available to it and acts by choosing the best one…the best available option to the wave function was to put itself in a state whereby the universe would become life-permitting (ibid.,p.205).

Here the reference is to the wave function of the whole universe which emerged in the 'Planck era', the first microseconds of the

Big Bang. Thus, the teleological drive towards life was established at the outset, and the next stage of the argument identifies life with purpose, value and the move to 'make reality better'. The idea is that:

We have the ability to make ourselves and our world better, we can choose to live in the hope that by achieving the highest state that is possible for our form of existence (we've got a long way to go!) we will somehow lay the foundation for the next leap forward. We can call this way of living 'cosmic purposivism' (ibid.,pp.206-7).

In the final parts of the book, Goff fleshes out this purposivism in terms of the moves towards secular spiritual advancement (a theme of his earlier work) and the drive towards global justice, equality and harmony.

As I noted in my original review, this is indeed a bold and highly creative thesis but I believe it tries to do rather too much with the notion of the fine-tuning of cosmological constants and quantum theory and, moreover, tends to dismiss too readily a number of alternative explanations for the nature of the universe we observe. The principal error here is the failure to consider seriously the force of the anthropic principle which was discussed in earlier sections. In simple terms, we can only observe a universe that is suitable for observers like us to exist in. Added to this the range of alternative explanations of the fundamental questions of existence – the many worlds thesis, the potential existence of prior universes, and the vacuous absurdity of the notion of nothingness – all serve to count against the idea of purposiveness in the cosmos.

Of course, there is a sense of purposiveness in the natural world but this is fully explained by the non-mysterious theory of evolution by natural selection. Although it is now undisputed that we are 'Darwinian creatures, our forms and our brains sculpted by natural selection, that indifferent, cruelly blind watchmaker' (Dawkins, 2017,p.34), this does not mean that our future development must be strictly determined by the blind watchmaker. Darwin had allowed for the development of moral instincts in humans which rise above the 'selfishness' of our evolutionary endowment to build communities defined by trust and benevolence. Our big brains were ideally suited to the precarious and desperate struggle for existence by our ancestors as hunter-gatherers living on the Savannah plains 200,000 years ago but once we had such brains they could then be used for purposes beyond mere survival such as making art, language, music and building settled communities characterised by laws and moral codes. Daniel Dennett (2018) puts the case powerfully in noting:

Dawkins's title *The Blind Watchmaker* nicely evokes the apparently paradoxical nature of these [evolutionary] processes: on the one hand they are blind, mindless, without goals, and on the other hand they produce designed entities galore, many of which become competent artificers (nest-builders, web-spinners, and so forth) and a few become intelligent designers and builders: us (p.37).

The upshot of all such reasoning is that there is a source of value and purpose in the universe but this is not to be found in quantum particles or cosmic fine-tuning but in the consciousness of human observers. However, this search for transcendent or mysterious purposes in the cosmos – along with the persistence of the apparent need for need for designers or creator gods – in spite of all the alternative philosophical and scientific explanations on offer stands in need of an explanation beyond wishful thinking and the next section tackles such questions.

### 2.4 Terror Management and the Quest for Cosmic Design and Meaning

Beliefs in creator gods – especially those who are able to exercise control over human lives – and cosmic purposes, values and meaning would seem, on the face of it, to answer deep psychological human needs. No doubt this is why the first gods to be worshipped – such as those concerned with maintaining order and life cycles in nature – can, as Dawkins (2012) argues, be interpreted as primitive attempts to answer fundamental questions about the natural world, about animals, trees, the sun and the moon. Such supernatural explanations of the world – though gradually replaced since the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods with rational, scientific accounts – still cling on stubbornly due to persistent psychological needs for security, control and reassurance, and these tend to be satisfied by religious belief. In later work, Dawkins (2017) suggests that arguments that religions satisfy our curiosity about the universe or help us to manage our fear of death are too simplistic and need a more precise Darwinian explanation. He comments:

'What is the survival value of religion?' may be the wrong question. The right question may have the form, 'What is the survival value of some as yet unspecified individual behaviour, or psychological characteristic, which manifests itself, under appropriate circumstances, as religion?'. We have to rewrite the question before we can sensibly answer it. (p.256).

A tentative answer to the question is provided – not strictly by simple heredity or genetic evolution – but by the reproduction of group selection practices which involve the inculcation of beliefs to preserve and maintain group reproduction. Dawkins concludes his hypothetical account:

Ordinary genetic selection sets up childhood brains with a tendency to believe their elders. Ordinary straight-down-the-line Darwinian selection of genes sets up brains with a tendency to imitate, hence indirectly to spread rumours, spread urban legends, and believe cock-and-bull stories in chain letters…I believe that religion, along with chain letters and urban legends, is one of a group of phenomena explained by this kind of non-genetic epidemiology, with the possible admixture of non-genetic Darwinian selection. If I am right, religion has no survival value for individual human beings, or for the benefit of their genes. The benefit, if there is any, is to religion itself (ibid.,p.265).

A related, though slightly different account, of the origins of religion is offered in comprehensive and graphic detail by the late

philosopher, Daniel Dennett (2006) who assigns himself the formidable task of explaining the origins and persistence of religious beliefs in human groups throughout history. Like, Dawkins, Dennett is also interested in the way religious groups bind together their members and suggests that there is some evidence that 'individual fitness is apparently subordinated to group fitness in religions' (p.185). Such fitness is interpreted in evolutionary terms as the capacity to adapt to changing conditions in order to survive and reproduce. In addition to this evolutionary story, Dennett advances the highly original thesis that it is not so much beliefs in religions (in gods, rituals, sacred texts) but the *belief in belief* which largely accounts for their continued survival (and, incidentally, many other political, social and cultural groups). As he puts it:

Once our ancestors became reflective (and hyperreflective) about their own beliefs, and thus appointed themselves as stewards of the beliefs they thought most important, the phenomenon of *believing in belief* became a salient force in its own right, sometimes eclipsing the lower-order phenomena that were its object (ibid.,pp.200-201, original italics).

Certainly, this thesis would explain the persistence of many religious and supernatural beliefs (such as astrology, folk medicine, urban legends, conspiracy theories, etc.) in the face of overwhelming evidence demonstrating the falsity of such beliefs. There is, moreover, an overarching body of research – terror management theory – which provides a framework of explanation for all such phenomena.

Terror management theory (TMT) is based on the work of existential writers – notably that of Ernest Becker's book *The Denial of Death* – which posit the notion that much of human behaviour is driven by the need to cope with the knowledge of their own mortality. As Clay Routledge & Matthew Vess (2019) explain in their handbook of TMT:

Because humans strive to survive but possess the requisite intelligence to understand the inevitability of death, they construct and invest in cultural structures to symbolically or literally provide perceptions of self-transcendence – a feeling that people have an essence that does not die with the physical body (p.387).

Central to such cultural constructions are supernatural beliefs about the afterlife and, in this sphere, organized religions take pride of place. As Cynthia Vinney (2024) explains:

Believing in religion may provide a chance at literal immortality, but beyond that, it can provide a cultural worldview that brings meaning and purpose to life and can alleviate mortality salience (p.3).

Along with the evolutionary and group selection arguments outlined earlier, TMT provides an effective means of explaining the maintenance of certain beliefs in the spite of all evidence to the contrary. I would suggest that this framework goes a long way in explaining the persistence of 'why' questions in science and philosophy with the attendant clinging to notions of a designer and creator god or superintelligence, and ideas about cosmic purposes and meaning. Against all this, I would want to argue that meaning and value is constructed largely through human interests and values and, in this respect, a pragmatic approach is recommended with the aim of dealing with existential challenges and alleviating suffering in all its forms.

## 3. Towards Pragmatic Reasoning and Questioning

Richard Rorty (2018) introduced his major work on pragmatic philosophy with the summary:

Pragmatism is a philosophical tradition founded by three American philosophers: Charles Sanders Peirce, William James and John Dewey. Starting from Alexander Bain's definition of belief as a rule or habit of action, Peirce argued that the function of inquiry is not to represent reality, but rather to enable us to act more effectively. He was critical of the 'copy theory' of knowledge which had dominated philosophy since the time of Descartes, and especially of the idea of immediate, intuitive self-knowledge. He was also a prophet of the linguistic turn, one of the first philosophers to say that the ability to use signs is essential to thought (p.1)

Applied to ethics, science, and language, this general approach came to be codified as a tradition that views thought and language as tools for action and problem-solving, rather than as representations of reality, and one that emphasizes the practical consequences of beliefs and ideas. It emerged as a commanding presence in many philosophical domains and research areas. Wittgenstein's radical approach to language and the world was referred to earlier, and similar down-to-earth principles inspired the work of J L Austin.

Eschewing the big metaphysical questions about existence, meaning and free will Austin pioneered the close analysis of words and concepts used in ordinary, everyday use of language. For instance, in place of discussing the general topic of moral responsibility and intentionality in an abstract sense, Austin tells a delightful story about a person who shoots a neighbour's donkey thinking it was his own, and asks us to contrast this with attempting to shoot his own donkey which moves at the last second resulting in him shooting the wrong animal. He then asks us to decide which action should be labelled an accident and which a mistake, an exercise which reveals so much about moral intentions (1970, p.185). Again, instead of discussing the large metaphysical questions surrounding free will and determinism, Austin asks us to pay close attention to sentences such as "I could have if I had chosen" or "he would have read it, if there had been a copy", and so on (ibid., pp.217,228). He was careful not to claim that this sort of analysis of ordinary language was the 'Last word' in philosophical investigation but was adamant that it was 'the first word' (ibid.,p.185).

What Austin and Wittgenstein were doing may be called philosophical deflationism, the pragmatic reduction of abstract metaphysical concepts to more manageable common sense proportions in order to understand their core meaning and the impact they have on human affairs. Such deflationism can be used creatively to render the all-encompassing domains of ethics and moral philosophy more manageable so as to enable us to make sense of practical ethics and understand how moral values operate in all

spheres of life.

The autonomy of ethics was firmly established by Kant and contemporary moral philosophy has flourished without the need to ground values in anything beyond the empirical world of humans and their needs, capacities and interests. All moral codes have something to say about the preservation of human life, truth-telling, respect for other people's property and person, and so on. Trusted (1987) brings together many of these notions in her observation that:

Since morality is concerned with behaviour toward others what we seek must be a feature of human societies, and moreover of all human societies for we hope to find moral values that are universally accepted. I suggest that there are two universally accepted moral principles: keeping trust and benevolence. They are not to be taken as principles external to human nature, principles imposed, but as principles of behaviour that have developed from pragmatic rules to moral laws as human societies developed (p.65, original italics).

Dennett (2006) illustrates clearly how such fundamental moral principles are a part of human evolution and progress, and require no further explanation and justification beyond those which can be supplied by science. This is the point at which Harris' (2010) robust secularism comes into its own in terms of the enterprise of conceptualising and justifying morality by addressing the challenge of reconciling human values with scientific endeavour. The central thesis is that:

questions about values - about meaning, morality, and life's larger purpose – are really questions about the well-being of conscious creatures. Values, therefore, translate into facts about what can be scientifically understood: regarding positive and negative social emotions, retributive impulses, the effects of specific laws and social institutions on human relationships, the neurophysiology of happiness and suffering, etc....The more we understand ourselves at the level of the brain, the more we will see that there are right and wrong answers to questions of human values ( pp.2-3).

Conceptualised in this way, morality becomes an area within which science can contribute to an understanding and promotion of human flourishing in the same way that the concept of health operates. Just as we value health whilst accepting that it is a broad and mutable concept, so we can promote human flourishing or well-being without being able to define it specifically once and for all. In any case, we clearly have sufficient knowledge about what causes ill health (and how to avoid it) and what tends to foster or frustrate our well-being without having to refer to anything but our experience and knowledge of the world.

### 3.1. Tackling Moral Issues

The conception of practical ethics outlined above can help us to deal with what was identified in the first section as a principal theme of this article, namely that philosophy and science is better occupied when dealing with the major challenges to humanity in order to alleviate suffering in all domains. The work of Peter Singer (2023) illustrates fully the vast range of urgent problems calling out for immediate ethical responses at the present time. In terms of the pragmatic ethics advocated above, Singer has spent a lifetime in advocating forms of utilitarianism as both necessary and sufficient for dealing with contemporary social, political and economic issues.

Singer's famous "Shallow Pond" thought experiment was originally constructed in the context of an ethical argument for encouraging charity donations in the light of the 1971 refugee crisis in East Bengal and outlined in very brief form in *Famine, Affluence and Morality* (1972/2016). It is worth reporting in full:

If I am walking past a shallow pond and I see a child drowning in it, I ought to wade in and pull the child out. This will mean getting my clothes muddy, but this is insignificant whereas the death of the child would presumably be a very bad thing (p.7).

Singer goes on to claim that it 'makes no moral difference whether the person I can help is a neighbour's child tend yards from me or a Bengali whose name I shall never know, ten thousand miles away' (ibid.).

Over the years Singer has elaborated this thought experiment and defended its implications against a range of criticisms. A key challenge turns on the fact that the child in the pond is near to you whereas the starving children may be far away in foreign countries. The response to this challenge is that – if we use our impartial reasoning capacities – it will be acknowledged that 'there is no justification for having strong condemnation in one situation (i.e. in not saving the drowning child), and no such response in the other one' (ibid.,p.xxvii) concerned with relieving poverty abroad.

In the fifty years since Singer outlined the original thought experiment, his advocacy of charitable giving has advanced by leaps and bounds. Moreover, the movement – now labelled "effective altruism" (https://www.effectivealtruism.org/) – has been boosted by the organisation *The Life You Can Save* (2019) established by Singer to provide just that body of empirical social research which critics have demanded. Common misconceptions about charitable donating – such as philanthropy causing dependency, corruption or harming economic growth – are systematically dismantled by Singer who demonstrates forcefully the unfairness of the global economic system and explains in fine detail how systematic research by organisations such as *Give Directly* and *Give Well* has fostered public 'confidence that people in extreme poverty will benefit from your donation, and benefit in a manner that it highly cost-effective' (Kindle edn, loc.1013).

In a similar way, the Oxford philosopher, William MacAskill, offers powerful reasons *in Doing Good Better (*2015) why all in the developed world should engage in effective altruism (EA). In reply to the common objection that anything we might do to try to relieve world poverty would amount to a futile drop in the ocean, he reminds us that:

we have the opportunity to provide a benefit for others that is one hundred times greater than the benefit we could provide for

ourselves. That we can't solve all the problems in the world doesn't alter the fact that, if we choose, we can transform the lives of thousands of people (p.30).

There are, of course, many more urgent problems facing us at the present time and, as Toby Ord (2020) reminds us, many of these require urgent attention, not just for those living today, but for future generations. In order to apply Singer's practical ethics to the rational reconstruction of society, it is worth incorporating Ord's future-oriented, inter-generational arguments into the discourse. In his seminal work on existential risks to humanity, Ord meticulously examines a wide range of threats, both natural and anthropogenic, that could potentially eradicate humanity or drastically curtail its future potential. He argues that:

Safeguarding humanity's future is the defining challenge of our time. For we stand at a crucial moment in the history of our species. Fuelled by technological progress, our power has grown so great that, for the first time in humanity's long history, we have the capacity to destroy ourselves – severing our entire future and everything we could become (2020, pp.2-3).

After examining a range of natural risks - such as the impact on the Earth of comets, supervolcanic eruptions, and stellar explosions (ibid.,pp.67ff) – Ord goes on to consider anthropogenic risks caused by humankind such as the threat of nuclear weapons, climate change and environmental degradation caused by technological exploitation of the planet's resources. There are, of course, practical remedies in relation to these threats but the prior question addressed by Ord is the philosophical and ethical one which consists in explaining how the present generation owes moral duties and obligations to future generations. Using an expansive version of the utilitarian and evolutionary frameworks outlined above, Ord argues that the value of human life and the capacity for flourishing needs to extend to the lives of humans not yet born. He argues that:

We need to take responsibility for our future. Those of us alive right now are the only people who can fight against the present dangers…When exploring these issues, I find it useful to consider our predicament from humanity's point of view: casting humanity as a coherent agent, and considering the strategic choices it would make were it sufficiently rational and wise. Or in other words, what all humans would do is we were sufficiently coordinated and had humanity's interests at heart (ibid.,pp.187-8).

There can be few better arguments for a pragmatic approach to the role of science and philosophy in human affairs.

## 4. Coda: Death, Ethics and Spirituality

As Francois de La Rochefoucauld observes in his famous quotation: 'Death, like the sun cannot be looked at steadily' (Manning, 2009), and the earlier discussion of TMT noted that the certain knowledge of our own mortality has the tendency to both shape and consolidate our beliefs, particularly when it comes to metaphysical and religious matters. There are clearly more or less wholesome, more or less rational, and more or less harmful and beneficial ways to approach this question of human impermanence. The poet, Philip Larkin, represented, arguably, an example of the less rational and wholesome in this respect. His pessimistic and curmudgeonly attitude to most things included a morbid fear of death. In his famous poem, *Aubade*, (Larkin, 1988, p.208) we find the words:

*Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,*
*Making all thought impossible but how*
*And where and when I shall myself die.*
*And interrogation: yet the dread*
*Of dying, and being dead,*
*Flashes afresh to hold and horrify.*

Larkin lived for the most part unhappily and died in the same manner as he himself predicted at the age of 63 (Sutherland, 2021) and – whilst acknowledging his substantial contribution to English poetry – I would want to argue that there are better ways of acknowledging our mortality. Martin Hagglund (2019), for example, argues forcefully that it is our mortality that makes us free. Moreover, Hagglund derives and justifies his secular morality from this foundation of human finitude. As he puts it:

The condition of our freedom, then, is that we understand ourselves as finite. Only in the light of the apprehension that we will die – that our lifetime is indefinite but finite – can we ask ourselves what we ought to do with our lives and put ourselves at stake in our activities (p.13).

Hagglund eschews all religions which promise eternal life and recommends secular faith whereby we 'treat others as we ourselves would like to be treated' and 'this requires that we recognize our shared finitude since only finite beings can be in need of mutual care (ibid.,pp.10-11), Such an ethics is very similar to the pragmatic approach of secular Buddhism alluded to above in Section 2. Questions of impermanence, emptiness, human suffering and the need to find meaning through transcending selfishness are at the heart of such secular spirituality, and provide the foundation for a socially engaged commitment to addressing the major moral issues of our time outlined earlier (Batchelor, 2011; Hyland, 2018).

A pragmatic approach that addresses the urgent ethical issues which stand in the way of human flourishing should, in my view, be front and centre in scientific and philosophical research and discourse rather than the endless futility of rehearsing the 'why' questions of our presence in the cosmos, most of which have been more than adequately answered anyway by contemporary physics and philosophy of science.

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