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ULTIMATE EXPLANATION

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The “ultimate why question” is not just “*why* does the universe exist,” but rather “why does the universe exist *as it is*: why is it that the nature of physical reality is as we find it to be?”

Now for better or for worse this is a question that cannot be answered on scientific principles. And there is a simple and decisive reason why this is so. For scientific explanations by their very constitution as such must make use of the laws of nature in their reasoning. But this strategy is simply unavailable in the present case. For those laws of nature required for scientific explanation are themselves a part—an essential and fundamental part—of the constitution of physical reality. And they are thereby a part of the problem and not instrumentalities available for its resolution.

The reality of it is that that (revised) “ultimate why question” confronts us with a choice. Either we dismiss that question as being unavailable, inappropriate, and perhaps even “meaningless” (as logical positivists have always argued). Or we acknowledge that answering this question invites and indeed requires recourse to some sort of an extra-scientific, extra-factual mode of explanation—one that transcends the cognitive resources of natural science.

And with this second alternative the options become very limited. For at this point we are led into the region of teleology, where there are just two available alternatives.

On the one hand lies the *teleology of purpose*, which itself can in principle operate in two ways: either by the conscious purposiveness of an intelligent being (a creator deity), or by the unconscious finality of a creative impetus or nisus towards the creation of intelligent beings.

And on the other hand, yet another, decidedly different approach envisions a *teleology of value* which proceeds to account for the nature of the world in axiological, value-involving terms as being for the best (with respect to some yet to be specified mode of evaluative optimality).

Accordingly, four different doctrinal approaches confront us with respect to issues which that (revised) ultimate why question puts before us:

- dismissive positivism
- theological creationism
- anthropic evolutionism
- evaluative optimalism

Each option is available. And none is forced upon us by the inexorable necessity of reason itself. In the final analysis “You pays your money, and you takes your choice.”

But is the resultant resolution simply a matter of unfettered preference based on personal taste and inclination? By no means! Here as elsewhere *rational* choice must be based on the available evidence —and thereby on deliverances of experience.

So the question becomes: Given the kind of world that exists as our overall experience indicates this one to be, what sort of explanatory proceeding seems best suited to account for this situation? At this stage, however, the experience at issue will no longer be the observational experience of our (instrumentality augmented) human senses. Rather in matters of the sort now at issue this evidence will be a matter not just of observation, but of the cumulative evidence of the aggregate totality of one's life experience. And of course this "experience" has to be construed in the broadest possible sense, including not only the observational but also the affective, not only the factual but also the imaginative, not only physical experimentation but also thought experimentation, not only the personal but the vicarious.

At this point the distinction between relativism and contextualism becomes crucial. With relativism, the matter is one of arbitrariness and indifference—sheer groundless preference is the order of the day here. With contextualism person-to-person variation occurs once again, but not because they differ in point of preference, but because they differ in point of circumstances and situation with regard to the available evidence. And while in the former case there is no requirement of reason to go one way or the other, in the latter case there decidedly is. For the matter will in the end depend not on the individual's preference but in the individual's evidence as his experience determines it. And so while there will indeed be a lack of uniformity across the whole range of different individuals, nevertheless for *given* individuals, with their particular body of personal experience in place, there will, in all likelihood, be only one rationally acceptable and appropriate resolution in sight—only one "live option" to use William James' instructive expression. So here there will be no unique one-size-fits-all resolution—since everything depends crucially on the experiential evidence at one's disposal. But this is apt to be a

matter not of the arbitrariness of relativistic indifference but rather of the rationality of situation contextualism.