



# INTRODUCING THE ULTIMATE QUESTIONS

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**T**he ultimate questions are those whose answers would give us a working framework for life. As such, they are integral to what we call our worldview. A worldview is simply the mental grid or lens through which we think about and understand the world and our place in it. The more directly we have studied the ultimate questions, the more consciously, and hopefully the more consistently and effectively, we will live out our worldview.

Few people do the hard work to answer all the ultimate questions, but everyone either answers them or makes assumptions about them in order to function as a human being. The seven ultimate questions are the questions of:

1. Teleology
2. Happiness
3. Ethics
4. Theology
5. History
6. Epistemology
7. Ontology

It's from the first letters of these seven questions that we take the acrostic title for our classroom conversation we call THE THEO discussion.

I introduce the seven ultimate questions and some of their derivatives on the following pages.



## Teleology

**“What is my purpose?”** This is the persistent question of *teleology* (from Grk *telos* = end, purpose). We phrase this question in many different ways:

“Why am I here?”

“What is the meaning of my existence?”

“What is the purpose of my life?”

This ultimate question spawns related ones:

“Does our existence have any meaning?”

“Does life need to have meaning?”

“Why is everyone wired to operate as though life has meaning?”

“How can I discover the meaning and purpose of life?”

Phillip L. Berman’s book, *The Search For Meaning: Americans Talk About What They Believe and Why*, documents the many different ways people answer, or attempt to answer these questions. New Age Movement (NAM) followers fervently seek for meaning, but many find that nothing in their worldview really satisfies the hunger of their hearts.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, some NAM folks are content for now to believe that our purpose is “to create,” or to truly know ourselves, or to decide for ourselves what we want our purpose to be. On the other hand, today’s vocal atheist tells us that we need to accept the fact that life has no meaning, while the cosmos enthralled naturalist says “life is its own meaning” (whatever that means).

Sadly, many Christians have difficulty articulating the purpose of man in general and of their own lives in particular. When pressed, many fall back on the Westminster Shorter Catechism:

Q: What is the chief end of man?

A: Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.

This is a great response to the question of teleology, but when asked what it means “to glorify God,” contemporary Christians often resort to negative commandments, saying, “Well, you know, don’t kill, don’t steal, don’t commit adultery.” In other words, the purpose of man in the minds of many believers is *to not do stuff!* No wonder our secular culture thinks of Christians as killjoys.

If today’s Christians could really grasp the Bible’s teaching about *purpose* and discover their own unique callings, it could bring a revolution of joy in our churches and communities.

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<sup>1</sup> James P. Eckman comments on this in *The Truth About Worldviews*.



## Happiness

***How can I find happiness?*** Asked explicitly or expressed tacitly, this question is posed by people perhaps more often than the question of purpose. Naturally so, since many more things than a lack of purpose make us feel *unhappy*. By definition no one enjoys feeling unhappy, and so everyone wants to know how to attain the most possible happiness. Here in America, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable

Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Well, we’re wavering on our belief that a Creator has anything to do with it, but we insist on our right to pursue happiness. What is the best path to that goal?

My younger students have often chosen this question for their term papers, mistakenly believing it to be the easiest of the seven ultimate questions to address. Their approach to the assignment has been to list all the dead-end streets that people explore in the pursuit of happiness, and then conclude by saying, essentially, “the Bible says happiness can only be found in Jesus.” Unfortunately, this is not a compelling message for today’s unbeliever. Clarence Darrow, the lawyer who defended John Scopes at the famous Monkey Trial of 1925, would have replied,

Some of you say religion makes people happy. So does laughing gas. So does whiskey.<sup>2</sup>

To say that Jesus is the answer to the question of happiness *because the Bible says so*, sounds like a fallacious appeal to authority (*argumentum ad verecundiam*). How would we feel if someone said, “There is no God because Darwin’s *Origin of Species* says so”? Such arguments only become cogent when the target audience concedes that the authority cited indeed has the final word on the subject under consideration.

Furthermore, the pat answer that “happiness can only be found in Jesus” forgets to define what happiness *is*. Until we know what we mean by *happiness*, we cannot begin to offer a plausible rationale as to why Jesus should be the answer.

The task before us as Christians is to (1.) listen to our culture well enough to be able to repeat back to them what their hearts are really hungry for, and then (2.) explain why Jesus Christ is the only hope for satisfying that hunger of the heart.

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Huberman, Jack; *The Quotable Atheist* (Nation Books, New York, 2007).

## Ethics

Of the seven ultimate questions, none provides more lively debate in today's marketplace than the question of ethics. ***What is right and what is wrong?***<sup>3</sup>

Because the Church of the West grew accustomed to a "Jerusalem audience" that respected the authority of the Bible, we became lazy in our public articulation of ethics. We developed the habit of simply stating that "x is right and y is wrong because the Bible says so." This argument from authority is no longer compelling for today's "Athens audience." We Christians are now forced to ask ourselves questions like, "is fornication wrong because the Bible forbids it, or does the Bible forbid fornication because it is wrong?" If we cannot provide a rationale for *why* the Bible forbids fornication, we will have already lost the battle of ethics.

However, the problem goes much deeper. Today's naturalistic culture inclines toward rejecting the ideas of right and wrong altogether! Therefore, the task before us is not simply to declare the wrongness of abortion and homosexuality, but to *uphold the real existence of objective good and evil*. We must understand how to persuade our neighbor that right and wrong exist and that morality as an overarching reality can only be jettisoned to our profound peril.

Of course as Christians our biggest problem in ethics is the gap between our talk and our walk. British novelist, Susan Ertz (1894-1985) complained,

Parsons always seem to be specially horrified about things like sunbathing and naked bodies. They don't mind poverty and misery and cruelty to animals nearly as much.<sup>4</sup>

Such criticism ignores ages of Christian philanthropy, but we nevertheless face disdain from our culture when we condemn homosexuality on the one hand but remain blissfully ignorant of human trafficking on the other, or when we preach against fornication but have the same divorce rate as our secular society. We must become competent in discussing the theoretical aspects of biblical ethics, but nothing will take the place of actually living them out.

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3 For an introduction to one facet of the ethics debate, I recommend Tabitha Thiemens' essay, *Is Morality Relative*, available on our website at <http://www.tmin.org/pdfs/relativism.pdf>.

4 Quoted in Huberman, Jack; *The Quotable Atheist* (Nation Books, New York, 2007).



## Theology

The question of theology — *Is there a God, and if so, what is He, She or It like?* — is the question that we Christians will feel most comfortable addressing. After all, we know a lot about this subject from our Bible training. However, once again we must realize that if we have any interest in evangelism and cultural transformation, pat answers about God from our Bible no longer have cogency for general society. For us, the Bible is the final authority and provides both the corrective for our false ideas

about God, and the revealed information about God that we could not have discovered from any other source. For our secularized neighbors, however, we must learn how to demonstrate that the Bible confirms what nature, common sense *and our consciences* already tell us about God.

A large part of our task in evangelistic theology will be to clear away the brush-like tangle of atheistic pronouncements currently proliferating in our media. This task will involve reminding our neighbors that no one can prove God's non-existence (for the simple reason that a finite person cannot explore every corner of the universe in all its dimensions). Responding to atheistic propaganda will also involve demonstrating the logical fallacies employed by those who deny God's existence on the basis of crimes committed by people in His name. The hardest task for us will be to answer the philosophical Problem of Evil (PoE), which is the atheists' number one argument against God today. (I'll comment further on the PoE under the question of History.)

Once we clear away the brush of atheistic foolishness, we will have to learn how to discuss the nature of God with our New Age neighbors. What cogent arguments can we develop to defend the idea of one transcendent God as opposed to the idea that "God is all and we are all part of God"? More challenging still, what compelling reasons can we give our neighbors for believing in a Trinity?



## History

Many of our most familiar apologetics battles fall under the heading of History. *Has the universe always existed? How did life begin? If a good God exists, why is there evil in the world? Did human nature really evolve through natural selection? Does man have free will? How can Christians pooh-pooh all the other religion?* Do these questions sound familiar? While some of them also tie into the other ultimate questions, they all involve issue of History: ***What happened in the past that can account for the way things are now?***

As I mentioned above, the philosophical Problem of Evil (PoE) is number one on the atheists' list anti-Christian arguments. If God is almighty, and God is all good, how can evil exist in the world? This question is a question of Theology, but also of History. Given the biblical proposition of a Good and Almighty God, how did evil *begin*? What happened in the past that opened the door to evil? Is there anything in history that can shed light on this seeming contradiction between God's goodness and evil's existence?

The Greek myth of Pandora's Box alerts us to the fact that mankind since antiquity has wondered about the origin of evil. Can we hope to answer this question? We can point to Satan — not Pandora — as the one who introduced the human race to evil, but how did Satan get into the garden? How did Satan become evil in the first place? And by the way, just as with the question of Happiness, we have to back up and define *evil*. We've got our work cut out for us!



## Epistemology

*Epistemology* will be an unfamiliar word for many, but let's not be intimidated. Epistemology is simply the study of knowledge, that is, the study of how we know what we know (from Greek *epistamai*, to understand). Every time we ask, "How do you know that?" or "How could anyone possibly know?" we're asking epistemological questions.

Today, when someone asks us, "How do you know there is a God?" or "How do you know Jesus is God?" the questions don't just have to do with evidence. People aren't just asking, "What's your evidence for God's existence?" They're more probably asking, "What makes you so arrogant to think you can even *know* whether God exists or not?" Agnostic Margaret Atwood has written, "the only things you can call knowledge are things that can be scientifically tested."<sup>5</sup> Such challenges present us with the problem of epistemology. *Is it possible to know that God exists? More fundamentally, is it possible to know anything at all?*

We will discover that epistemology is one of our strongest Christian apologetics. While our neighbors echo the question of Pontius Pilate, "What is truth?" we can provide them with a rationale for why they can trust their senses, and why they can indeed expect to define and discover truth. In contrast, and in spite of all their talk about reason and rational thinking, today's Darwinistic naturalists have undermined the very idea of rationality by denying God, the soul, the mind and the very concept of self. Epistemology is an exciting front in the spiritual battle for our culture!

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5 Quoted in Huberman, Jack; *The Quotable Atheist* (Nation Books, New York, 2007).

## Ontology

Another unfamiliar word for many, *ontology*<sup>6</sup> is the term we use for the study of *being* or *existence*. Ontology is a subject of lively debate today, thanks in part to the rise of the New Age Movement with its ideas of Eastern pantheism. For the mind reared in good ol' American Common Sense Realism, questions of ontology may seem esoteric. After all, I exist, you exist, the world around us exists and the design in nature assures us that God exists, so why the discussion? Well, consider this quote from the famous Buddhist monk and reformer of Thailand, Buddhadasa Bhikku:

Even the present life does not exist. How could the after-life exist?<sup>7</sup>

It's strange but true: some of our neighbors believe that our existence is just an illusion, and so take a fatalistic approach to the future. *Don't fix it if it doesn't exist!*

Strictly speaking, *ontology* deals with the question of **“What really exists as opposed to that which appears to exist but does not?”** and **“What does not appear to exist, but really does?”** Descartes famously probed the depths of these questions with his project of doubting everything that he could possibly doubt. Descartes doubted everything he could think of until he arrived at something that he simply could not doubt as hard as he might try. In the end, he realized that the very act of doubting implied the existence of a doubter; he could doubt everything he perceived with his senses, but he could not doubt his own existence. Hence his famous line, *Dubito ergo cogito, cogito ergo sum*. (“I doubt therefore I think, I think therefore I am.”)

Ontological questions have been with us for a long time. The Greek philosopher Democritus (c. 460-370 BC), perhaps the originator of the atomic view of matter, and apparently a strict materialist, purportedly said, “Nothing exists except atoms and empty space; everything else is opinion.”<sup>8</sup> Democritus sounds very contemporary, because naturalism is keeping these same ontological ideas on the front burner for us today with its well publicized insistence that “The [natural] cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be,” to quote Carl Sagan. For us to disagree and say that God, heaven and the supernatural realm really exist, is to make ontological statements, and our culture is challenging them on the ontological level.

Our job, then, is to learn how to explain first of all that it is reasonable to trust our senses regarding the real existence of rocks and trees and cars and DVDs. But then we need to make a case for the real existence of entities not immediately apparent to our senses like angels, demons, radio waves and superstrings. Further, we need to explain in what sense we believe that we were created *out of nothing* but are currently *something*. Finally, we should take a stab at the ultimate question, *why is there something instead of nothing?*

Welcome to THE THEO discussion!

6 Not to be confused with *oncology*, the study of tumors.

7 Quoted in Huberman, Jack; *The Quotable Atheist* (Nation Books, New York, 2007).

8 Ibid.





## A WORD ABOUT CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS

Roderick Graciano, March 2008

In Christian usage, *apologetics* means the study of evidences for the veracity of the Bible and the truthfulness of the Christian worldview. Christian Apologetics examine evidences as diverse as ancient manuscripts, geological phenomena, archaeological and historical corroboration, and philosophical presuppositions. ***THE THEO Discussion*** is an exploration of Christian apologetics at the philosophical level, and as such it has a goal of arming believers with insight to use as “we persuade men” (2Co 5.11).

However, we must never make the mistake of thinking that rational arguments will convert unbelievers to Christian faith. No amount of sound apologetics, whether philosophical, historical or even based on the internal evidence of Scripture, will ever bring a person to new birth. There are two reasons for this. First, the fall of man in Eden rendered Adam and all his progeny spiritually dead (Eph 2.1,5; 5.14; Col 2.13) and incapable of a self-initiated spiritual response. Secondly, while fallen man did not lose his reasoning faculty, “the god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2Co 4.4). So, the mind of unregenerate man has been blinded to the point of incapacity when it comes to gospel truth, and even if understanding did somehow seep into his consciousness his spiritual deadness would prevent him from responding!

Then, what’s the use? Why do we even try, as Paul says, to “persuade men”? Again there are two reasons. First, when Jesus stood up in the Nazareth synagogue to read from the prophet Isaiah, He announced that the year had arrived that commenced the era of the Lord’s favor (Luk 4.19). We have subsequently come to understand that this meant that a time had begun (and continues to this day) in which the Lord is pleased to



initiate unprecedented spiritual harvest. When we evangelize, it is safe to assume that God Himself is counteracting Satan's blinding influence among our hearers, and is sovereignly dragging people toward Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit (Joh 6.44; compare the same Grk word *elko* in Joh 21.6 and 21.11). Secondly, God has chosen to grant the gift of faith in conjunction with the hearing of His word (Rom 10.17), and so we proclaim God's word in the expectation that God is about to regenerate our hearers!

There's more. As the Father begins to *draw* a person (to use the gentler translation of *elko*), He is drawing a person whom He intends will love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul and *mind* (Mat 22.37). Therefore, depending upon the specific calling and gifting that God has planned for the soon-to-be believer, the Holy Spirit will intentionally engage the seeker's intellect to a greater or lesser degree. What this means for us is that any given prospective convert may *need* us to answer intellectual questions for them as they progress along the path toward faith. Therefore, we must "always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks [us] to give the reason for the hope that we have" (1Pe 3.15), whether their question aims only at the surface of our personal experience, or whether it probes to the depths of philosophical issues.

However, to return to my previous point, *philosophical arguments will not convert people*. We must have all our rational arguments ready for those times when the Holy Spirit will call for them, but we must understand that such arguments have an initially brush-clearing function. We reason with people *in order to expose their sin and their need for salvation*. Once that occurs, the moment has come, not for more evidence (plenty of time for that later), but for a direct appeal to the God-given conscience and for a clear proclamation of the gospel facts!

So, while apologetic arguments are neither the sufficient nor ultimate means of bringing people to salvation, we nevertheless see that such arguments are vital in the complex process of conversion. In our current Western culture, the debate between unbelief and belief is delving down deeper and deeper into the most fundamental of philosophical issues. It is often no longer adequate to be able to explain away apparent contradictions between the four gospels. People are now asking deeper questions like, "Are miracles even rationally possible?" That's why we are developing ***THE THEO Discussion***.