

1

Staging Points

He has also set eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

Ecclesiastes 3:11

Is Anyone Calling?

Before we plunge into the questions outlined in the Introduction, we need to address a fundamental one: what sort of a universe do we live in?

The traditional notion of calling presupposes a Caller. That is, it assumes a Person who communicates intelligibly with us. There is little point in a book about calling if there is nobody at home in heaven or if he mumbles. We will assume his existence throughout the book. But why, you might reasonably ask, should we? The answer, in summary form,

is this: the world as we actually experience it doesn't make sense without him.

Today's Fashionable Skepticism

A current fashion is to assume that all statements about God are in actual fact statements about the speaker. “G-o-d,” in other words, is a three-letter symbol for talking about our religious feelings and hopes, our religious perspectives and fears and frustrations—all of which have arisen as a result of a complex assortment of evolutionary instincts, psychological needs, and cultural (including family) training.

When, for example, I say to a friend, “God loves you,” I may think I am talking about the attitude of an eternal Person. But what I am really doing is using religious language to express my good will toward my friend and to encourage him in some way. Likewise, when I speak of God “calling,” I am not really talking about a communication from an eternal Person. I am, rather, using a “feel good” expression that helps me cope with cosmic silence or, at best, cosmic fuzziness. So why not drop the “God thing” altogether and do your best, with some help from friends and mentors, to figure out what life means on your own?

Many in our day find this idea compelling. It sounds both humble (Who am I to tell someone else what life means?) and liberating (I'm free to find a life purpose that works for me).

But there are some problems. First, this approach is humble only if there is no God calling; but if there is, then it can be a ruse for avoiding him. C. S. Lewis said in *Surprised by Joy* that our search for God is often hardly different from the mouse's search for the cat. Second, this approach is not necessarily

liberating. When, having abandoned the notion of a knowable Caller, we turn to creating our own reality, we will often find ourselves trapped in whatever people around us are saying. Or, if we are more independent types, we will tend to create a life direction that is ruled by whatever happens to suit our own preferences and needs—which means that we will be trapped inside ourselves.

Closed Box or Open?

And there is a larger problem. A major source of the skepticism we have been discussing is a particular belief about what is ultimately real—about what was there before we showed up. And this belief, if you press it, does not make sense of life as we actually experience it.

There seem to be only two possible answers to the question, What has always been here? The first answer—the one that feeds our skepticism about a real Caller—is this: matter (or energy) has always been around. That is to say, the highly concentrated stuff that exploded in what we call the big bang didn't appear out of nowhere. It has always been around in one form or another. According to this first view the cosmos is like a huge closed box, inside which everything, including atoms, ideas about what is good, and ideas about God, has its origin. Edward O. Wilson, Harvard biology professor, uses this language to explain the rise of our sense of right and wrong:

[The evidence of biology and brain science] favors a purely material origin of ethics. . . . Causal explanations of brain activity and evolution, while imperfect, already cover the most

facts known about moral behavior with the greatest accuracy and the smallest number of free-standing assumptions.¹

The second (and only other possible) answer is this: a personal God predated and produced matter (and energy). That is, at some point before the big bang, not even the highly concentrated stuff existed. There was nothing at all, except for God—an infinite and personal Being. In this case the cosmos is not itself eternal. It is rather like a huge God-built box which is open at the top, and into which God acts as he sees fit.

Neither of these views is provable—they are both expressions of faith. But the faith required to embrace the first view requires much more of a leap than the faith required to embrace the second. The idea of a “closed box” cosmos obliges us to believe a whole raft of things that simply don’t make sense. Here are a few of the big ones:

- Love is ultimately just biology and social engineering: “I love you—let’s marry” is more honestly rendered, “You’ve got good genes—let’s mate and propagate the species.”
- The universal human longing for meaning is itself meaningless.
- Beautiful music is nothing but the effect of certain patterns of electrical impulses on our brains, themselves stirred up by nothing but the working of certain patterns of sound waves on our eardrums.

1. Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 263.

- Our moral outrage at evil things (consider our response to the assault on the World Trade Towers or the Holocaust) has no grounding outside ourselves.

Such assertions are counterintuitive; they must be held despite deep and virtually universal human conviction and behavior. But if we take the other approach—if, in other words, we welcome a personal God (a God who loves and who is good and beautiful) into the picture, our quests for meaning, beauty, love, and goodness begin actually to make sense.

Let me illustrate. I had a friend in college named David who was a militant “closed box” type. During one of our discussions in our freshman year I asked him whether, given his view of ultimate reality, love was essentially chemistry. He said, “Yes!” and protested upon further questioning that this reality did not bother him.

Junior year David fell in love with Margaret. At an opportune moment I put the same question to him. This time there was some hesitation and consternation in his answer. David was not quite sure what to say. He found himself caught between his worldview and his experience. Though he did not change his worldview, I admired his willingness to admit the difficulty he had begun to encounter fitting his philosophy into life as he actually lived it.

A Faith That Fits

The recurrent and overwhelming need we have for meaning and love, the powerful intuitions we have about the reality of goodness and truth, the sense we have that beauty is an invita-

tion to a reality that is bigger than the sum of its parts . . . such common human experiences do not prove a personal God. But they make much more sense in a God-originated universe than they do in the closed-box universe.

To speak of calling, then, is not to indulge in a coping mechanism in the face of a silent cosmos. Nor is it meant to suggest that we can easily figure God out (the Bible readily admits to both our selfishness and our limits—both of which hamper our discernment).² It is rather to give expression to a faith that sits well with the world in which we find ourselves living and acting. It sits well with what we all seem to know intuitively about the nature of things—that we are made for relationship, that we are accountable, and that our lives count. It receives encouragement from passages such as this one from Psalm 139:

O Lord, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. . . . I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. . . . All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!³

2. “What is man that you are mindful of him” (Ps. 8:4); “The heart is deceitful above all things” (Jer. 17:9). Note that these dark realities are matched and overturned, happily, by the grace of a God who loves us enough to make himself accessible to us and who is powerful enough to do so despite our blindness.

3. Ps. 139:1–3, 14–15a, 16a–17.

Questions

for Reflection and Discussion

1. Compare the “open box” universe with the “closed box” universe. Do you agree that it takes more faith to believe in the second than in the first? Why/why not?
2. How and where do people who believe in a closed universe find meaning in life and direction for their life work? (Make this real: think of people you know—perhaps yourself.) Discuss the strength and stability of the sources of meaning and direction you just identified.
3. Discuss the following statement:

When, having abandoned the notion of a knowable Caller, we turn to creating our own reality, we will often find ourselves trapped in whatever people around us are saying. Or, if we are more independent types, we will tend to create a life direction that is ruled by whatever happens to suit our own preferences and needs—which means that we will be trapped inside ourselves.
4. What is “calling”? Try to come up with a full definition.