

WHY DO WE EXIST? - The Ultimate Question!!

2021

Thomas A. Burns PhD.

Klamath Falls, Oregon

Why do we exist as a species and as individual humans? This is the First Cause question, and every other question that we can possibly ask is a subset of this fundamental inquiry.

Essential in considering the “Why Do We Exist?” question is our recognition that the question only arises in the context of self-awareness, which is the basis for consciousness. Because we can conceptually separate ourselves from our physical selves, we are “aware of ourselves.” We are aware of our own existence, and we can, in a sense, stand outside of ourselves and view both ourselves and others – recognizing at the same time that all humans share this ability. Other species may possess this capability to different degrees, but humans seem to be highly developed in this regard – comparatively. The development of the sophisticated use of language by humans may well play a very important role in this differential condition of self-awareness. Through language – especially written language and mathematics – we can both conceptually explore all sorts of questions as well as share and discuss our “answers” with one another – all the way to formal debate of abstract concepts.

In the Context of Human Consciousness,
Let’s Explore Our Attempts to “Answer” the Why Do We Exist?” Question.

Spirituality and Religion

I will distinguish between religion and spirituality. Religion is the secondary institutional effort to “define” or “codify” the primary spiritual experience of the self and reality. Myth is the narrative form that this process takes, and ritual is the formal behavioral vehicle to carry the individual and the group of believers in this narrative to the spiritual experience of unification. And religious specialists [priests, shaman, swamis, imams, etc.] - to the degree they are differentiated – are the bureaucratic assistants and controllers of both understanding myth and access to ritual. Importantly, none of these “structures” of religion are necessary for humans to achieve the universal spiritual experience of unification. Access requires only a certain state of mind that creates access to the subjective perspective on self and reality. When this frame of mind is engaged, what it reveals can be explored – more or less exclusively – to lesser or greater degrees. There is only one subjective or spiritual reality, though there are many variations in the experiences that culminate in unification. There are many different religions with their more or less elaborate belief and ritual systems.

Since religion greatly elaborates and specifies spirituality, we can first consider the answer to the “Why Do We Exist?” question that spirituality offers. In spirituality, humans utilize their intuitive mental mode to activate subjective rather than objective awareness. In this mode, humans witness the connectedness and shared identity of all phenomena at all different scales, to the point of total unification – the condition of enlightenment. But, unfortunately, even the full condition of enlightenment provides no answer for what the meaning is of our experience of ourselves and reality as totally united in the ALL. Experiencing ourselves and our reality at different levels of inclusiveness does not answer “Why” that expanded reality exists or why we exist within it. It just pushes the question to the next higher level: “Why Does the ALL Exist?” In itself, the ALL does not constitute or provide a First Cause. So, even at its extreme limit of enlightenment, spirituality does not provide a satisfactory answer to the “Why Do We Exist?” question.

All religions are built on this problematic spirituality base. They then compound this core weakness by requiring belief in an elaborate narrative of creation and creators [Gods, Holy Ghosts, Spirits, etc.], of saviors and prophets, and of different forms of life after death – reincarnation or the soul surviving in some condition of heaven or hell depending on the extent to which the individual life led is assessed by some agency to be “good” or “bad.” Most importantly, in religion commitment to this regimen of belief is based on faith, independent of any confirming evidence from everyday reality. What are referred to as the Great Religions of the world are all built on a complex of interrelated Black Boxes where what is claimed is protected by being held to be unknowable. With several religions – each with its complex of unknowable Black Boxes, we have no way to determine which religion may be “accurate” – even if we ignore the underlying spirituality problem.

The Great Religions all come into being when the Earth was understood as the center of the universe. Within this Earth centered perspective, the belief systems offered by the Great Religions seem more acceptable. But with the successive discoveries since the 16th century first that the Earth is one planet among several in the solar system, second that our solar system is one among billions of solar systems in the Milky Way Galaxy, third that the Milky Way Galaxy is one among hundreds of billions of galaxies in the Universe, and fourth that our Universe may well be one among many universes in a Multiverse, the idea that Earth and humans on Earth – much less individual humans – are the special focus of “the gods” looks extraordinarily unlikely indeed! The discovery that all species on Earth – including humans – share the same DNA, have participated in a long shared process of evolution, and will eventually suffer the same extinction that has occurred for every other complex species further

diminishes the contention that humans occupy some special place in reality – whatever the role may be of “the gods.”

For the above reasons, many modern humans find it incomprehensible to accept on faith the belief system of any of the Great Religions. While many humans remain devoted to these religions – or alternative religious options, for modern human “skeptics,” religions in general fail to offer a compelling answer to the “Why Do We Exist” question.

So, it seems that neither spirituality nor religion can be viewed as offering a sufficient answer to our “First Cause” question.

Other options?

How about Science?

Science is philosophically committed to the principle that all paradigms and theories of reality are open to change – even radical change. Uncertainty with respect to answers to any question is fundamental. It follows that the perspective of science is to limit itself to addressing the “what,” “where,” “when” and “how” questions, and to leave any answer to our “why” question in abeyance. Astrophysics and Cosmology currently take us to the Origin of the Universe in the Big Bang. And science only speculates on what may precede that event. Why any of reality from the micro to the macro levels exists is not in the purview of science. So, science and the rational pursuit of the scientific method do not provide either the perspective or the means for discovering an answer to our “Why Do We Exist?” question. It’s discoveries do, however, offer information that reveals the inadequacies of other attempts to answer our “why” question – as in the case of the Great Religions.

Another Option?

How about Secular Humanism?

Sorry, secular humanism and all of the worldviews and structures of complex society that fall under its umbrella are content to avoid our big “why” question. Authoritarianism, socialism, democracy, communism, etc. spell out how humans should organize themselves and conduct their various activities. Questions of why are limited to justifying these internal structures and the activities that are appropriate within them, not to the question of why humans exist within these various structures to begin with. Secular Humanism, like existentialism in all of its forms, avoids the ultimate “why” question, and asks humans to content themselves with living lives “approved” by the imposed values and rules of their societies. The internal problem with evaluating the different secular worldviews resembles that for religions: which one of these forms of complex society is the most desirable, or are simpler societies in fact better? These questions can be

debated considering what may be claimed to be universal human values, but the ultimate “why” question remains unanswered – even if this value set for analysis could be identified and employed to some end. Secular worldviews just do not offer an answer to “Why humans exist in societies – even idealized societies – simple or global in scale?”

Conclusion

From the preceding review, there seems to be no satisfactory or sufficient answer to the “First Cause” question which our consciousness evokes. Maybe there never will or can be an answer since an answer offered at any scale immediately exposes the absence of a sufficient answer at the next greater scale of consideration.

As a social scientist, my entire career has been devoted to exploring what constitutes the “ideal” human condition and society. I have developed the perspective of Dynamic Humanism in this context and considered all kinds of current and historical social and ecological issues within this framework. But, in the end, I have no answer to the ultimate “Why Do We Exist?” question.

Perhaps it is our burden as humans to bear uncertainty about our existence in perpetuity – with the “Why Do We Exist?” question constituting merely an incidental “side effect” of our specie’s condition of consciousness. The “Why” question at all different levels has certainly encouraged human curiosity. The result has been that our subsequent technology has allowed humans to populate and dominate Earth to the point where the special ecology of Earth that has supported our florescence may well be being “overwhelmed.” Earth will survive. Will the “side effect” of our pursuit of the “Why” question contribute to our extinction as a species, or to the collapse of complex “civilized” society? Is the current “Best” that we can be really the precursor to our “Worst Nightmare?”

If humans want to avoid promoting this “Close Encounter” with their demise, maybe the Best solution would be to put the secular humanistic goal of creating a global complex society that is as socially and ecologically responsible as is reasonably possible together with the spiritual goal of encouraging all of the citizens of that society to experience themselves as connected to and sharing a positive identity with reality at all possible scales. Adopting this approach, humans could seek to live quality lives in the tiny objective or material domain that they “occupy,” while at the subjective level, they understand themselves to be participating in what may be a reality of infinite scales. This is pretty much what I propose in Dynamic Humanism. Maybe the Best that modern humans can do is to perfect living just short of the answer to the “Why Do We Exist?” question. Pursuing that goal would leave enormous room for growth!