

## God Unaccommodated

Martin Heidegger, the German philosopher, begins his *Introduction to Metaphysics* asking: “Why are there beings at all instead of nothing? That is *the* question.”

I’m sure you have thought about this question, Why is there something, rather than nothing? Heidegger goes on to recount how as we grow older, develop, explore, and question, in quiet moments, we come to be touched by what he calls, *the concealed power of this question*. The question has a concealed power, because it simultaneously is the most theoretical and the most personal. As Heidegger recounts, sometimes in despair, when all dwindles away and life grows dark, we ask why? Why are we here, why am I here? What’s the point? Is this whole universe just a bit of sound and fury signifying nothing? Or sometimes in heartfelt joy, when we can’t believe the luck that we were gifted this life at all, we just can’t quite grasp why *we* happened to exist.

And science, for all its power, cannot answer *this* question. Ludwig Wittgenstein another of the 20th century’s greatest philosophers said: “We feel that even if all possible scientific questions be answered, the problems of life have still not been touched at all...Not *how* the world is, is the mystical, but *that* it is.”

Sometimes, in order to avoid the power of this question, we try to make it less profound. We try to make it, not about how why there is something *at all* rather than nothing, but about how things came to be arranged the way they are. People sometimes falsely think the big bang answers this question, but it doesn’t. It assumes an initial state with something, from which the universe expanded with blinding speed. Evolution doesn’t answer this questions, but answers how complex life forms evolved from simple ones. Even quantum physics or quantum indeterminacy can’t answer these questions. All of these theorems assume something already existing, an initial state. Even a vacuum governed by the laws of quantum theory is not nothing, it is already something. Scientific laws are not things-in-themselves with creative power of their own, but are terms we use to describe the way *things are*. So any scientific explanation assumes *something* exists to be described, so it cannot in principle explain why there is something rather than nothing. As Stephen Hawking himself, at least at one time, seemed to note: *What is it that breathes fire into the equations and makes a universe for them to describe? Why does the universe go through all the bother of existing?*

I have really wrestled with this most personal and theoretical of questions, and I myself, like many other people I think, came to a place like St. Andrews, seeking to wrestle with questions just like this. But I do have a fear as a Christian wrestling with these questions. It is articulated well in a wonderful popular-level book on these themes, not written by a Christian or theist of any kind. It’s called, *Why Does the World Exist?: An Existential Detective Story*, by Jim Holt. He wonders why it took so long for him to be struck by this question and says: “*In retrospect, the answer was obvious. My natural curiosity had been stifled by my religious upbringing. From my earliest childhood I had been told—by my mother and father, and the nuns who taught me in elementary school—that God created the world. That’s why the world existed. That’s why I existed. There is no such thing as the ‘mystery of existence.’*”

Sometimes I fear this is true, that religion stifles our curiosity. That it says to us, “There is no mystery. You have the answers already that everyone else longs to have.” And so we come to the world, to science, to philosophy, even to a sermon, not wanting to learn, but wanting to hear what we already think we know to be true. And so when we come here to the most profound and mysterious of life’s questions—which has boggled some of the world’s greatest minds for centuries—I fear Christians might be heard to say: ‘Nope! No mystery here! Nothing to be explained. God did it, and that settles it.’

But in fact, this profound question of Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Hawking, ushers us in to what the Christian belief in creation is most fundamentally about. Creation is not, most fundamentally, about the way things are arranged or even about the first moments of the universe. Its not first and foremost about what happened in a garden many years ago. It touches on those things, but at its centre its about something more profound. It is an answer, to the question of why there is something rather than nothing. And the answer it gives, doesn’t say: “there is no mystery here, stop

being curious.” It opens a door and leads us by the hand from enigma to riddle to wondrous mystery. And yet to a mystery which speaks immediately into our lives, and, I hope, into our hearts this morning.

John 1, which is our text today, would have been utterly baffling to the original hearers, and even for centuries later, would have left its hearers scratching their heads in utter astonishment. It would have struck them as strange, mysterious, and even shocking. To understand why, we need a bit of context. The context I give today is not only the immediate context, but concerns actually the wider context of the ancient world, and let me say by way of caveat, that this is going to be a shocking over-simplification. A heuristic device more than anything else:

There were at least two primary ways of thinking about the divine in the first few centuries of the common era:

**The gods of the poets.** These gods are relative, time bound, space bound beings, living in the highest reaches of the universe, perhaps on Mount Olympus. These are the greatest beings in the world. They grow and develop and change. They have their own life-stories. They require sustenance and have needs. In sum, though they are higher and better and more powerful and more mighty than anything else, they are still *things* in the world, just the most exalted, powerful, good, and divine things. Therefore, when you ask ‘why is there something rather than nothing’, they cannot be the answer, for they are part of this ‘something’ which needs explaining. The answer to the question, ‘why is there something rather than nothing?’ can’t be part of the world of things that we are wondering about, even if it is the highest being in the universe. This is, interestingly, why many people today are frustrated by the claim that ‘God’ can be the answer to why there is something rather than nothing. They think God can’t be the answer, because then they say, ‘well then who made or who explains God?’ This shows that they think the only kind of God on offer is like Zeus, the highest being *in* the universe who therefore *himself* needs explaining. Oftentimes we as Christians today actually believe in a God like this too (as do many theologians!), but we will return to that later.

But of course, in the ancient world, there was another sort of God on offer, **the ‘gods’ of the philosophers**, the unmoved mover of Aristotle, or ‘the Good itself’ of Plato, or the the summit of the cosmic hierarchy, ‘the One,’ of neoplatonism like Plotinus (of course not all of these were called ‘God,’ but whatever it is, it is the creative source of all else). For these philosophers, at the summit of the cosmos lies an utterly transcendent source of all perfection which is unlike everything else. From this perfect source of perfection all good things flow. This deity is not just another finite entity, it is not a part of the universe, but is the absolute. It is necessary and uncaused in a way nothing *in* the world can be. This deity does not need to grow, or develop, or change, it does not have any needs at all, nor is it bound by space or time. All the world of movement and flux, all the world of small striving creatures, flows out of from this transcendent source which is removed from the system. This deity is not just another thing in the world, and it *can* offer an answer to the question of why there is something rather than nothing.

—But what does this mean about this source of all things? What allows it to answer the great question? Its separation from our world. It can explain why there is something rather than nothing because it is utterly separate from all the things which come from it. For Plato, therefore, there must be a demi-urge, which is that through which all things came to be, because the good itself must be untouched and unaffected by the physical, changing, temporal world. In the great Neo-Platonic systems, for example, from ‘the One,’ the utterly transcendent, perfect explanation of all that is, comes emanations, overflows, a great chain of being, each stage being less perfect. These mediators go-betweens **separate** “the One,” from everything that comes from it. Do you know what the first thing that comes from the one is, the first emanation for the greatest of the Neo-Platonists? it is *Nous*. Mind. Order. Rationality. Or, *Logos*. The Logos is the greatest and most divine of things, aside from *the One*, and separates *the One* from everything else.

And into this, world filled the gods of the poets which can’t explain the universe and the philosophers which can explain the universe only by being utterly separate, comes, what David Bentley Hart calls, the metaphysical revolution, that is Jesus Christ the God-man:

*In the beginning was the Word (**the Logos**), and the Word was with God, and **the Word was God**. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life (He has Life in and of himself as John proceeds to explain), and this life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it....And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have **seen his glory**, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John bore witness about him, and cried out, 'This was he of whom I said, He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.')* For from his **fullness** we have all received grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.) John 1:1-18  
Can you even begin to imagine what this mean for the ancient world?

### The God of the Poets and Philosophers:

Creation is **Grace upon Grace**: Because this God is not just a god of the poets. He is not needy, he is not the biggest thing around grasping for more, and needing to be served to fill himself up. Everything he does is grace, it is gratuitous favour and love, because he needs nothing, he has life in and of himself, he only gives and does not receive

But this *Logos*, this source of all things, is not an emanation from God. He not a pseudo-God. He is not less than God, but is GOD, full stop. This God, this perfect unchanging pure life and light, just as perfect, and bright, and unending and utterly full of being and life as **any** God of the philosophers, also is that through which the world was made, and his relation to his creation is so close, so intimate, so utterly and scandalously immediate, that he can take on flesh, and dwell among us without sacrificing his deity. His utter and complete difference from the world does not require a hair-breadths of separation.

### So why is there something rather than nothing?

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* When there was no thing. No created entity. No something. No universe. No laws. No principles. Nothing at all. There was God, but God was not alone. With him was the Word, and, as we will come to hear later in John Gospel, there was the bond of love between Father and Son, which is the Holy Spirit. And the answer to why there is something rather than nothing is that the love that this Father had for this Son in their Spirit, is so full, so utterly replete, that just for the love of it, they willed that this mutual love should overflow and make a world which might share in this same love. As Acts says "**in him** we live and move and have our being." The love, life, and light of God's own life is shared with the world and we live *in* him, not separate from him or at a distance from him. The Psalmist that we read earlier said it is the breath of the Spirit that gives us life and without him we return to dust.

This is the **revolutionary idea**: God's creation is not at a distance. It is not a separation, because creation is an image, a small-scale replication of the immediate, intimate, love of the Father for the Son in the Spirit. God's oneness is not his isolation, his separation, but intimate relation. If creation is the overflow of the love of this Father for this Son in his Spirit, then this God who is more transcendent than any philosopher could imagine, is also more intimate, immediate, and *present*, than even the most impious of the poet could dream.

This **revolutionary idea** was nearly too much for the early church to handle. It was *just nearly* too scandalous and too outrageous and too—and this most of all—mysterious, for their minds to grasp. The great Scottish theologian Ivor Davidson, once put it this way, and only he could put it this simply and profoundly, the desperate debates of the early church were all about one thing:

*How close can God come? How close can God come to us?*

The first 500 years of church history is the church's desperate, life and death struggle, to hold onto this mystery. Those who affirmed the mystery were called the orthodox.

1. There were and still are today, two ways to miss the mystery. One is to say, God must be a bit less intimate and bit more separate. Therefore, Jesus looks like God, but he's not really God.

God's somewhere in the distance, or God's totally separate from this man, walled off from him. He is so much like the god of the philosophers that he couldn't really, fully, and truly be a man.

2. The other way is to say Jesus is not quite the highest most transcendent version of God. He is God, but God-lite. He is God without some of those God-like qualities. He is God, but a slightly less

God-like version. He is God, but God demoted, so that he can now be intimate to creation, as he wasn't before. A bit more like the God of the poets.

Both of these approaches try to find a middle ground, between the god of the poets and the philosophers. They try to accommodate each approach and reach something less exalted than the philosophers and less 'human' (we might say) than the poets.

Do you see what is happening in both cases? The rejection of 'orthodoxy' of traditional Christian belief, is not an embracing of mystery, but a rejection of mystery. Sometimes we think secularism or heresy is cool, sexy, interesting, and bold, that it is open to mystery and exploring while—as Jim Holt says in the beginning—traditional Christianity is boring, tepid, uncurious, and unreflective. Heresy rather, is what happens when we try to accommodate the utter mysteriousness of God. When we can't handle the fact that even when we come to know God, he remains an enigma that exceeds our grasp, and so we try to tone him down, and make him less mysterious. When we say God must be less transcendent, or he must be less intimate, he must be less holy, or he must be less good, because he can't be mysteriously and totally without reserve... both. Chesterton famously describes orthodoxy as a rushing chariot, swerving this way and that, trying to avoid obstacles on both sides: *To have fallen into any one of the fads from Gnosticism to Christian Science would indeed have been obvious and tame. But to have avoided them all has been one whirling adventure.*

So let me ask you, do you believe in the God of John's gospel, or the god of the poets or the philosophers? Or perhaps a bit of both?

You may be thinking, well I don't think about these things at all. I'm not worried about these big ideas about God. But the way we tend to *live*—or at least I tend to live—is a diminishment of the true God, it is an implicit lowering of his transcendence.

Oftentimes our lives unveil what we truly believe in. For example, I claim to believe in the importance of medical professionals. I claim to respect their wisdom and expertise, but in the five years I have lived in Scotland, I have not been to a GP a single time. Likewise, a number of years ago I discovered a small lump on my back. My wife's reaction was to immediately call the doctor and schedule an appointment. My reaction, was to demand that we never to speak of this again, and to insist that we trudge on ahead as if nothing happened.

Now my wife's approach is not much better. She also claims to believe in the importance of medical professionals. In fact she herself is a nurse. However, yesterday when she ate a piece of pineapple and felt her throat being to swell up, she immediately logged onto WebMD and before the hour was out, was convinced she had contracted the black death or something worse.

See despite what we claim to believe, both of our actions reveal a different, more deep-seated belief than what is on the surface. So again I ask, which of these deities do you believe in?

I live as if I serve Zeus not Yahweh. I live as if God desperately needs what I have to offer him, and if he is desperately disappointed every time I fail him. I live as if God's purposes in the world are on the verge of collapse if I don't come through for him. I live as if every time I sin, I've so utterly failed that him, that he turns his back on me. I live as if life is a bargain and he's done his bit and he's waiting on me to do mine. Do you feel this way? This means you have *a god of the poets*. You have a needy God.

We were reading this week in our home group one of the many times in which Jesus says to the religious leaders, citing the book of Hosea, *Go and learn what this means, I desire mercy and not sacrifice*. So what does it mean? It is God saying: "Do you think the demand that you sacrifice an animal when you sin, is for my sake? Do you think I need your cow? Do you think I require your goat? Do you think the laws, the demands that you obey are for my sake? Do you think I judge sin, for my sake?" God says I don't need your cows! I desire, out of the same love which brought you into existence out of nothing, that you flourish in that love.

-See by making God less transcendent, you actually make him less loving. You make him grasping and needy and co-dependent. Do you have a god of the poets? Do you live as if God needs you rather than loves you? As if his laws were for his good rather than yours?

But many of us also have a god of the philosophers. We are scandalised by God's immediacy, his intimacy, and his presence. We implicitly believe in a god that is separate and distant. That feels far

away. Let me tell you how I experience this: I believe that in *theory* God is good, that theoretically he is perfect and loving, but regardless of that, I can't stop wondering, where in the world is he *now*? 'Where are you in my life, in my struggle, in my pain? Sure maybe you are doing in the world, or in heaven, but where are you in my life...*today*. Sure I believe you are theoretically good, but will you be good *to me*.'

Let me ask you, have you given up hope? Hope in your friends or family members who are far from God? Have you given up hope in your marriage or your family? Have you given up on your career or future? Or, most of all, have you given up on yourself? That you can change? That you can make a difference? That you can be the person you think you were created and called to be? If you, like me, are tempted to despair, then no matter what you say you believe about God's goodness, in your heart you feel he is distant and separate.

— Romans 4 tells us, that the God *who gives life to the dead* is the one who *calls into existence the things that do not exist*. If the Word through whom all things came to be, that exalted, pure, unchanging light, is the one who took on flesh and dwelt among us, the one who was touched and seen, the one who dragged a cross up a dirty hill in Palestine, was crucified, dead, and buried, the one who was raised from the dead for the sake of you and I, then we can trust him, when he says not a hair can fall from your head without me knowing.

—Christianity isn't about ending curiosity or banishing mystery. It isn't about telling ourselves or our friends and neighbours, 'I have life figured out. I don't have any more questions.' It's about waking up every morning with the dawning realisation that life is more wondrous and sacred than we could ever have dreamed, because behind the mystery of the universe itself is a greater wonder still. For the reason there is something rather than nothing, is that same mysterious love which drove the Creator to take on flesh, which sent him to the cross, and which raised him from the dead so that we, no matter our sin, shame, or failure, might share in his glorious life.

For John, the answer to the question of why there is something rather than nothing, is shown in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For it shows us that the God who is higher than the philosophers could dream, can come closer than the poets could imagine.