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Live the Questions | N.T. Wright & Heidi Maibom

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The Veritas Forum

Earlier this year, we hosted New Testament theologian N.T. Wright in dialogue with professor of philosophy Heidi Lene Maibom at the Veritas Forum at the University of Cincinnati. Unlike many Forums, where dialogue focuses on a singular topic or question, this Forum widened the purview. In the vein of a 'greatest hits' album, we asked these scholars the most fundamental human questions: Who are we? How do we know what we know? What is the meaning of life? While each of these questions could occupy an entire Forum, the scope of this conversation allowed for a meaningful survey of two different worldviews, while cultivating a space for further discussion.

Transcript

So, for me, humans are discovering constantly who they are by loving and particularly by being loved, and in that process, stand at the intersection of heaven and earth with responsibilities as it were in both directions. Earlier this year we hosted New Testament theologian NT Wright in dialogue with professor philosophy Heidi Mybaum at a Veritas Forum at the University of Cincinnati. And unlike many forms where dialogue focuses on a singular topic or question, this form widened the purview.

In the vein of a greatest hits album, we asked each of these scholars the most fundamental human questions. Who are we? How do we know what we know? What is the meaning of life? While each of these questions could occupy an entire form, the scope of this conversation allowed for a meaningful survey of two different world deals, while also cultivating a space for further discussion. Well, welcome to our events day.

The first thing I'm going to do is to introduce our two speakers and then I'll go over the first format and then we can get on with what we're going to get on with. First of all, let me introduce Professor Mybaum here. Professor Mybaum comes from Denmark, and if you know anything about that part of the world, she already has the moral high ground.

So perhaps actually starting with this disadvantage for Professor Wright here. Professor Mybaum read for her first degree in philosophy at the University of Copenhagen and

then for her PhD at the University of University College London. Professor Mybaum has held fellowships at Cambridge and Princeton University's postdoc at Washington University, in St. Louis, at the program for Philosophy, Neuroscience and Psychology.

She comes to the University of Cincinnati, where she's a professor from Colton University and also a Canada. This is Professor Mybaum's work and numerous publications have focused on understanding other minds, emotions, empathy and responsibility. She is currently finishing a book on the nature and use of taking other people's perspectives entitled *Knowing You, Knowing Me*.

Professor Wright here on my left won't recall this, but he's actually written a letter to me ahead of time. This was for some time ago, by the way. His letter was a reply to a letter I had sent, in which I was asking if he would consider taking me on as one of his PhD students.

His terribly gracious response letter was a detailing of the many other opportunities that might be found elsewhere, of which I might avail myself. Thank you. I appreciate it.

At least he wrote back. I mean, that's saying something. So anyway, Professor Wright's probably, perhaps most well known for his performances on the Northumberland County under 19, first 15 rugby union team.

This would be the late 1960s. Because of those heavy days of tackling and punting for penalties, everything sort of plateaued a little bit. Really for Professor Wright securing just two bachelor degrees at Oxford Exeter College and then reading for an MA in a D fill at Oxford's Merton College.

And then later, Professor Wright was awarded a Doctor of Divinity degree by Oxford for his prolific and outstanding work in New Testament theology. His publications are obviously too numerous to mention, but perhaps he is best known in New Testament studies for his 4.5 volumes series on Christian origins and the question of God. And then outside of New Testament studies is known for many accessible books, including a series for everyone's series.

Professor Wright is currently among other things. Professor of New Testament and early Christianity at St Andrews University in Scotland. Okay, so the way this is going to work is that they will each have seven minutes to deliver their personal worldview.

And then after that time, I will go through the questions that have been presented to us from their process that's been going on here at UC for the last few weeks. And those questions will be roughly 10 minutes each. There's five of them, so it would be like essentially a 50 minute discussion.

And which, you know, if you want to ask questions about things they are saying, you'll find on your seat a postcard that has a phone number to which you might text a

question. At that point later or later on, after these, after Professor's, my bum and Wright have responded, we will have Lydia back up and she will deliver those questions to our guests and see what they have to say. Okay, so let me start with Professor Mybom over here with her description of her worldview.

Thank you. Can you all hear me? All right, let me position myself. I think that there are two broad ways of thinking about, let's say, what matters in life.

One of them is an imminent view that all there is, meaning, beauty, truth, what have you is in this world, another is a transcendent view, that it's somehow outside in some extra terrestrial intelligence or something like that. My view is an imminent, imminent view with an A, not imminent. It's not just about to arrive.

I believe we are evolved biological creatures, we are human animals. We are made of flesh and bone and blood and we're part of a great chain of being with all other sentient creatures. We're born.

We mature. We mate. We have offspring.

We experience pain. We experience happiness and then we die, just like every other creature on this Earth. Now I don't think that that's a particular pessimistic view.

I believe that in that view you find a great fellowship with all living creatures. We're all subject to the same conditions. What we experience, somebody has probably experienced before us.

And the joys and the pains are something that most living creatures have experienced. So in that context we may ask ourselves, how are we to live our lives? I agree with Aristotle that the ultimate good is happiness. Now that's not to be taken as in a crude hedonistic sense that we should sort of, it's just what is a sex drug and rock and roll.

I think that's a mistaken view of happiness. But the flip side of that of course is that there is one thing that is really terrible and that is suffering. But Buddhists were big on that if you know Buddhism.

And so I think that if we're going to in a very few minutes talk about the good and the bad in life, good is happiness, bad is suffering. If something is good like happiness, it's not just good for me. It's good for every creature capable of happiness.

The same thing is true of suffering. So to put things very briefly, I think that what we ought to do is we ought to increase the happiness for all creatures, all living creatures, not just those that we like, that we hang out with, not just our fellow humans, but all creatures capable of happiness and suffering. Now of course, it's all very easy to have these sort of lofty ideals, you know.

And so the question is how do we implement that on the ground? And there I'd like to turn to sort of ancient Greek practices that you see in Stoicism, where you have a daily practice that they in fact called meditation. Some of you might have read Mark was a really as meditation, so I've read some of Seneca. And the idea here is that you engage in a daily practice where you reflect upon your life, you reflect on what you think the fundamental values are and how you have managed to implement those values in your life during that day.

Just in your interactions with other people, in your emotional reactions. And in that way, I think you can actually achieve real change, but I think that the idea that the Stoics had of a daily practice, not just a one-off decision where you think, "Okay, I got to do better when you feel really bad about having done something." That is not really the way to go. One of the things that I also think that the Stoics had right was that they thought one of the important things is a therapy of desire, therapy of emotions.

So we don't get stuck in a cycle of action and reaction, so we get angry and we lash out and we cause more suffering. A lot of times we can stop out and reflect on how we're feeling, whether that actually reflects reality. For instance, somebody like Seneca wrote, "I think a wonderful piece on anger that I highly recommend for anybody to read." Lastly I do, of course, as a philosopher, I'm big-time into truth and questioning and seeing if we can look at things a different way, whether we can explore different ways of living that may be better for everybody considered.

So that is, I think, is also a good thing to include in our daily practice. Thank you. [applause] Thank you very much.

Is this coming through? Here at the back? Yeah, good. Thank you. Waving.

Does that mean yes or no? Yes, good. Okay, thank you. I'm very delighted to be here.

It's the first time I've done anything here at U of C. I have been in Cincinnati before but not for a long time and it's good to be back and add my thanks to those who've organized this and laid it on. This wonderful question about the big questions in your personal worldview in seven minutes starting now is a huge challenge. As I reflect on human life and as I look at human life being lived in the world as a whole and in my family and my children and my grandchildren and the society that I know and other societies of which I care, there are certain key features which everybody is interested in and everybody is puzzled about.

And I'm interested in the universality of that interest and the universality of that puzzlement and I've listed them seven features as justice, spirituality, relationships, beauty, freedom, truth and power. More or less all humans cross culturally are more or less interested in all of those things and I think this is why philosophers do what they do and by the way part of my first grooves in philosophy so I'm glad to hear about Seneca

and people who are old friends. We are all puzzled about them and I'm just going to give you the example of justice that we all know that justice matters.

If you imagine living in a society with no justice all the time then that is an absolute nightmare. At the same time even though we all are signed up to that in theory both societally and internationally and in our personal relationships we find it very difficult to achieve and if we are involved in a particular justice issue ourselves we are always inclined to give ourselves the benefit of the doubt and even though we all know we do that we still do it anyway. And so justice is something we all say yes to but we all find it difficult and I would say the same about the others so I'm not going to take the time to spell that out except perhaps to say about freedom and truth that freedom is again something that most human beings cross culturally would say yeah that's a good thing but what exactly it consists in and what we are free from and what we are free for these are actually much harder to figure out even theoretically and harder still to figure out in practice and truth well if you're in a contemporary university as you know in the words of a famous book truth is stranger than it used to be truth is not simply the sum total of agreed facts but actually truth is a more slippery and odd concept than that and we all know truth matters one of the reasons we are at university is because this is a place where people ask the big truth questions and yet in the things that really matter it still slips through our fingers.

How do we explain this and how as humans do we go about achieving them? In both cases humans tell stories humans are basically storytelling creatures and you can look at the big stories that have been told and my colleague has mentioned particularly some of the great philosophical stories from Aristotle and then from the Stoics who tell a story about the way the world is and a story about the way humans are within that world and it seems to me that each of the great stories told by the great philosophers and the great religions is in a sense a way of constructing a narrative within which we can make some sort of sense of justice, freedom, truth and all the others and for me the Christian story makes an interesting kind of sense it isn't that the Christian story gives you a knockdown answer to all those questions so that there's nothing more to think about far from it in my experience the Christian story raises fresh questions in all sorts of directions but as it does so it plugs into the ancient Israelite story which comes through in first century Judaism in which unlike the Epicureans in one direction unlike the Stoics in another direction they believe that heaven and earth are meant for one another they go together they are supposed to be complementary they are the two parts of a good creation and that all human beings living on earth in the imminent world are nevertheless aware in some way or other of things which don't really work if all you have is an imminent world and hence they are looking for something different and beyond and yet something which isn't very far away from any others and within the Jewish world and then within the Christian world this is talking about a God who makes a world a God who wants human beings to live in that world wisely because they bear God's image and a

God who will one day call time on the whole thing by producing a renewed creation in which justice and truth and peace and freedom and all those other things will actually be enhanced and completed in some sense which it's actually hard for us to describe but then many important things are hard for us to describe so that within all of that the Christian vision which I hold of the place of human beings is of being image bearers because if you're in the ancient pagan world you build a temple to your God and the last thing you put into that temple is an image of the God so that the influence of the God may be there in the world and so that the world may see who the true God is through the image and this is the picture which we have from the Book of Genesis right on through radically renewed in the New Testament that God made a sort of temple called heaven plus earth called the cosmos the creation and put into that temple an image namely human beings so that we are supposed to be reflecting God into the world and reflecting the world back to God and in the Jewish story this is a project in search of an ending and in the Christian story the climax to that and not a conclusion exactly but certainly a climax comes with Jesus of Nazareth who is the true image the truly human being and who in mysterious ways is also the living embodiment of Israel's creative God and when Jesus does what he does particularly his launching of God's kingdom is death and his resurrection and his sending of the spirit then people are energized in a new way not so much for Aristotle's happiness though that's really important as a kind of a byproduct in the Christian language that might be part of what is meant by joy not quite the same thing as Udaiania happens not too far away but we are energized in order to be genuine human beings which is to reflect the living God into the world and in terms of praise and worship to reflect God back to the world and as I reflect on that larger story and see how it relates to or bounces off the other story that people have told from time to time I find a deep satisfaction both in being part of that narrative myself and in observing the way in which at least it refrains and points towards an answer to those questions about justice spirituality relationships beauty freedom and truth and power I'm wondering if it's correct then before we go for the questions to just reflect for a moment on how you both position the human in your respective worldviews is it fair to say that Professor May my bomb that the elevation of humanity above the rest of the world the living of a living creatures and whatnot is really a function of the narrative that we've told ourself because of our intellectual preeminence and so on and so forth or is or would you say that there is a uniquely held position for humans and then for Professor Wright in his description clearly Professor Wright has an elevated role a unique role for humans insofar as they become image bearers so if I was thinking about a distinction between the two guess I think it's the location of the significance of being a human would you care to respond to that Professor I will do my best I tend to think that we thinking of ourselves as being extra special is a bit self-congratulatory right it's in our interest of course you would think that we're special if there is a God it really loves us more than everything else etc and so there is a it's a sort of expanded egotism in a certain sense on the other hand I think that there's no doubt that we are amazing creatures right we have incredible brains we have produced we have changed the entire world in some respects

we've changed for better in some respects of course we've also caused the most evil than any species on this planet has caused so it depends a little bit on where you want to place a special status I would like to say I think that one of the things that I don't like about human exceptionalism is the cruelty that we expose other non-human animals to I thoroughly dislike and disapprove of that as well and I don't know whether I laid myself open to the specific charge though I could kind of see it coming of a kind of selfish exceptionalism which is a real problem and many people have pointed out that people who have exploited the natural world including non-human animals have tried to claim the authority of Genesis chapter one and other similar passages to do that my problem with that is that the more I see both in the Bible and in the wider Christian tradition about what I think is a genuine Christian doctrine of of God as creator is that it is about God's generous love and that the image bearing thing is not about exalting humans over the natural world but about a responsibility a stewardship of and for that world and as you say the extraordinary capacity humans have is then seen both in when humans really get that right and then in when they get it wrong when selfishness takes over and instead of stewardship it becomes exploitation or even worse so that I would say that that capacity for generous love is the thing about God the creator which above all else is revealed in the vocation which humans have to look after the world and looking after can sound patronizing but as you say since we are demonstrably significantly different maybe that does constitute some kind of responsibility and then of course the theme of generous love is precisely what for Christians is embodied radically and shockingly in Jesus himself so I very much take what you say as as it were an exposition of what in Jewish and Christian thought would be the problem of evil or in specifically Christian thought the fall that there is something wrong and that we are part of that and have contributed to it but that doesn't mean there wasn't a true vocation in the first place. Yeah I mean I guess I would disagree with a sort of deeper vocation idea I suppose although I do think that with the kind of power and intelligence we have we do have a responsibility we do have a responsibility to treat the world if I may say so rather broadly much better than we do and much less selfishly. Hey thank you very much so we are going to go to the prepared questions now.

Our first question for our guests is how very simple of course how do we know what we know so have a go with that you've got five minutes each or a ten minute conversation. What do you think sweetheart? How do we know what we know this is of course one of the big philosophical questions and since I'm with the professional philosopher I'm kind of nervous to see what's going to happen here but let me put my head let me put my head on the chopping block I mean traditionally you can do this either upwards or downwards you can either start with well I know that there's a stage here because I can feel it and see it. There's a water bottle and a listen to that and then gradually build up to some sort of a bigger picture or I can start with ideas in my head about the way the world is which I then test out and try sort of experiments to see if that does in fact correspond to the reality or around me and obviously the problem of knowledge the

question of what's known in the traders epistemology theory of knowledge has gone this way and that down the years and part of the problem is do we do I actually know that this is a stage or am I simply dreaming it or am I simply part of somebody else's experiment some mad psychiatrist who is manipulating my brain so that it looks as though there's a stage here etc etc.

Now these sorts of questions are common coin in some philosophical circles at least and I want to register a gentle protest against some of that and say that we're missing an element here and it's the element of love because the danger with talking about knowledge is that it either tries to get to an unattainable objectivity where I get out of the picture entirely and I'm simply telling you objectively what is out there which is actually unattainable or it collapses into subjectivity to which somebody can say well you only think that because it suits your interests that it may be true for you but it's not true for anyone else etc etc and I want to say that in many philosophical traditions and certainly in mind the notion of love transcends that subject objects divide because when I genuinely love someone or something I celebrate what it is or what that person is in themselves but at the same time this is not in my own interests in the sense that if it is then it isn't love it's simply manipulation of some sort and I want to say that actually when you run an epistemology of love through whether it's scientific knowledge whether it's artistic knowledge whether it's theological knowledge it then sheds light in both directions on the nature of the ideas we have which then can get tested out in ordinary everyday reality or on the question of how we know what we know which is in front of us so I would want to put love back into the picture and I observe that in Western culture over the last 200 years love has been systematically screened out the old Faust legend had as one of its features that when Faust makes a pact with the devil the deal is you must not love you'll get all kinds of other wonderful things but you must not love and I think one of the reasons why the Faust legend has been so important in the modern world from Gertie to Thomas Mann and beyond is precisely because it reflects something profound about contemporary Western culture maybe I'll stop there and see how my boss will bring. Well I would want to say I love love as much as the next person which would be you but I would be but I would be perhaps is am I too loud is that the problem okay but I guess I'm not entirely sure how that works with knowledge I'm writing a book right now on taking other people's point of view and it turns out that in relationship the most important predictor of relationship satisfaction is that you feel understood but that bears no relationship to actually being understood so it certainly seems that there is a short coming in understanding even in love so I would like to at least keep love and what we know to some extent separate it seems to me that a number of things that we do know we do learn through our feelings I think our feelings can be very wise that way so I think sort of a kind of pure intellectual knowledge entirely shown off our physicality and our emotional being is probably a misunderstanding at least if we want to understand everything right perhaps if you want to understand things about the universe how planets work etc that you know we can do it in a different way but I guess at heart I'm a

sort of empiricist so the empiricist famously said there's nothing in the mind that wasn't previously in the senses now I do think that our minds are made in a certain way so there are certain things we like more than others and there are certain things that we find difficult to grasp so I imagine that most of you have problems grasping the fundamental particle wave duality that as far as we know is the underlying nature of the atom that builds up everything around us right that is something that our minds are not well equipped to fully grasp then there are other things that we like that that come easier to us that seem more satisfying because it's familiar I think that one of the tasks that we have when we try to move forward in knowledge is that we question things or truths that seem to come to us easily and test them that we have public discourse that we have a certain methodology that we can all agree on so we can have public discourse and that we don't simply rely on easy fixes or easy truths that we only want to believe what we want to believe what we feel comfortable with I think that we're at a point in history where we know more than any other humans before us and we can make great use of that knowledge and it doesn't seem quite that we are because that knowledge is uncomfortable or unwelcome to some but I guess to conclude I think we know what we know through simple method of using our senses forming theories testing those theories and engaging with other people who do the same thing and what we learn is accumulative right we're standing on the shoulders of maybe not giants but the shoulders of a and a lot of normal sized human beings all stacked up. I think that's I think it's fair enough but I think the engagement point particularly important I mean in in my business New Testament scholarship it's basically a branch of ancient history trying to figure out what these people thought and meant and I would be very interested to hear you on discovering what's going on with other minds and I'm not sure if that's my Michael I'm just holding it still so I'm sorry about the crackles but I think as we do that it's what I mean by love is part of that engagement with with other knowers who are also trying to know things at the same time as we are and who will say no you've got that wrong or you've forgotten that bit of evidence or whatever but it's also the kind of generosity of the relationship with the evidence itself whether it's the observation of planets letting the planets be what they are and letting them surprise us unlike the kinds of astronomers who've got their fixed theories and we're going to make sure the data conform to that and then Mutatis Mutandis in all sorts of other fields as well having the generosity of spirit to allow the data to say to surprise us and perhaps to shock us but at the same time not imagining that this is objective in the sense of it's just out there and I'm just a fly on the wall observing it but recognizing I am in a relationship with this data in some sense or other and that therefore I have to be self critical about that and I have to allow myself to hear the critical voices saying are you sure you're not just manipulating us so that's part of what I mean by love in that context and as I say I think we have got into a bit of a trap in the western world we'd certainly do in our generation know far more than has been known and half of its goodness is out there in distorted form on Wikipedia but the question is what are we going to do with that? Yeah I mean I guess the way that I look at things is we're trying to move in a certain direction we're

trying to move towards more objectivity I think that you're right objectivity is a certain sense of pie in the sky but we can do better and we can do worse and what we aim to is exactly I mean you call it love I guess I wouldn't perhaps necessarily put it that way I mean I think the Buddhist has a way of talking about emptiness how objects are empty and if I understand it correctly the idea is that we should try and see things how they are in themselves as opposed to simply a foil for our projections and I take it that that's some of the things that you are talking about I think so but I think for a Christian epistemology and so far as I would articulate it I would say I shouldn't be trying to say something which is not my point of view there is no such thing as a point of view which is nobody's point of view and we can have different points of view of the same object and we can talk together about that and there's a lovely line in an old English poem about painters in God's new world who will paint the thing as they see it for the God of things as they are in other words there's a sort of epistemological humility which says only God actually sees them as they really are but God wants us to paint the thing as we see it to bring our perspective on what we're looking at into the public world into the public space and perhaps in the form of beauty not least now there's a two and four to be had there but we may have gone as far as we can get down that track.

So might I just clarify when you were saying love is a part of epistemological mechanism and you effectively are using that metaphorically to describe a disposition to the object that we must know and then Professor Maivom took that to be oh this is you know a one of the ways in which we can sort of relinquish ourselves of our own narratives and stop using the object as a foil for reinstituting those narratives but then you mentioned Professor Wright's that oh but we still must have a point of view so you're suggesting that we still retain something even though we're sort of subordinating our own ourselves. I think one of the part of the human vocation is to take responsibility for speaking the truth as we see it while having the humility to hear other voices which may say you need to modify that or you need to get rid of that and do something else instead. So it's the responsibility to say this is how I see it and I'm going to articulate it as clearly as I can and I'm going to confess any particular interests personal interests that I have in this to make sure that if that's distorting you can all see that etc etc.

And the point about love then is that it's neither purely objective nor purely subjective and that to think of knowledge as either objective or subjective is to try to put the wind of love into a rather rationalistic walking and I just don't think that works. Okay our next question is going to jump down to question number three here. Who are we? We had to have a conversation about how do we understand this question.

I think we've arrived at something. Let's start with Professor Maibam here. Yeah well the way that I took it was to be a question about personal identity because I've taught courses on personal identity and then of course I think well who are we? Well we're human animals.

What makes us the kind of creatures that we are is our consciousness that probably includes I would say consciousness of the world outside us self-consciousness. It includes having projects that extend over time, having goals, having values and so on. Now a question might be how do we persist through time right.

So philosophers like to talk about the question of what matters in survival. Now that doesn't mean surviving death but it means surviving from one moment to the next right. That makes you the same person from one act as we all know at any one moment we have one act of consciousness and then we have another that follows what makes that part of the same thing right.

Somebody like Locke said oh it's our memory the fact that we can recall having been having had thoughts earlier on and so forth. And I think a lot of philosophers would now like to add extra things because of course our memories really aren't that good and if we're relying on that we're really not going to sustain ourselves very long over time. And so one might add what makes you the person that you are over time is having similar values or at least having values that change in a sort of gradual and identifiable way and so on right.

Now one of the things that I wanted to push with this line is the thought of a favorite philosopher of mine, Derek Parfett who worked on personal identity. He poses a lot of thought experiments about division of cells. So suppose for instance that I have a terrible accident and part of my body is destroyed.

Now for some reason or other perhaps there's a shortage of female philosophers. They decide to reconstitute me into different bodies right. And so now the question is am I the one person, am I the other, am I both or have I ceased to exist altogether.

Parfett calls us an empty question because there's no further fact of the matter that we can learn about this particular thing but it does seem as if it would be rational or sensible for me to care about both and in a certain sense I have expanded and now I can do more, I can fulfill more projects. But I think that what that suggests is that what matters to survival is not uniqueness, that it's a very same thing but it's other things, values that we have, intentions, experiences and happiness and one of the things that Parfett sees his view as doing is breaking down the barrier between subjects. So we come in a certain sense we can use this way of thinking to liberate as a little bit from the sort of egocentricity or egoism that we're all inevitably caught up in.

And of course that is also closely related to I think the Buddhist idea of the no self. We're realizing that the self to some extent is an illusion will liberate us from a very narrow-minded focus on ourselves and us getting more and us being happy and extending that out to other creatures. That's fascinating.

When I read this question, who are we? My mind went back to a differential loss for

namely Descartes and said I think therefore I am, Kogito, and much of Western philosophy for the last 400 years has been in a sense footnotes to Descartes including obviously the Locke's very interesting discussion of personal identity. But again my fear with that is that it's led us into a sort of rationalism and that actually a Christian response. Descartes was a devout Christian.

I'm not saying he was a pagan or was denying the faith or anything. He was indulging in a thought experiment which was also an experiment about thought and what you could deduce from the fact of thought. And I want to say again that the risk of sounding like a cracked gramophone record, am more ogosum, I am loved therefore I am.

And I put it that way rather than I love therefore I am. Though I would say that as well because it seems to me that as humans we discover who we are when somebody loves us or some creature loves us it might be a dog, it might be some other non-human creature who makes us feel more truly who we are but ideally in some kind of a family or friendship or ecclesial or communal context we discover who we are because of other people's love at whatever level. And it seems to me that has to do with the Christian idea which in the nature of the case is not just a Christian idea but sheds light on other things of being made in order to be part of a community of discovering who we are within and for a community because of course if you are loved then the most natural thing to do is to love in return and in turn to be part of that wider community of love.

Now one of the biblical phrases which sums up a lot of what it means to be human is a rather odd sounding technical phrase called the royal priesthood. The priests and kings in the ancient world were the crucial mediators between the divine and the human between the transcendent and the imminent or whatever but in the book of Genesis the idea of this hierarchy these very few people in a society who mediate between God and the world is democratized and all humans are to be people who stand in between our at the convergence of heaven and earth with heaven seen here not Allah the Epicureans as a long way away but Allah the Jews as the thing which is the other dimension which is mysterious which is around us and which actually desires to make its home with us so that as Jesus taught us to pray by kingdom come on earth as in heaven. So for me humans are discovering constantly who they are by loving and particularly by being loved and in that process stand at the intersection of heaven and earth with responsibilities as it were in both directions and the responsibility of caring for other creatures which you approached in what you said through the Buddhist idea I'm not quite sure how that emptying the self really works but maybe you can say more about that for me it's more about actually discovering the extraordinary value of a self but the paradoxical value because the most important thing you can do with yourself is to give it away and that is what love is all about.

Did you want to respond to that? Yes I had a clear idea what I was going to say just a couple of minutes ago. Well why are you talking I would just say Professor my mom

actually just alleviated a great concern I've had about teleporting because as I watch Star Trek and then wonder about the day I'm going to be teleported I think about that moment where I get dissolved but I appear somewhere else and think is that really me what's happening but apparently it is me I just maintain my values and and so on and so forth. Well I mean so Sir Derek Parfett has a famous example which is a tele-transportation example right and he after he goes through his various examples his final conclusion is that ordinary survival is no worse than tele-transportation.

We change I mean so this is of course another sort of Buddhist idea but it's also a very philosophical idea if you remember Heraclitus you never step in the same river twice everything is changed we change all the time. And I think that's something that stated bolder like that a Christian can say absolutely because we are within time this may be moving on to the next question or back to question two which we reverse the order of that where are we we are in a world which is in a state of flux and we ourselves are in a state of flux as we know every molecule in your body changes over more or less seven years so that you are quite literally not physically the same person as you were a decade ago and I assume I'm not a physiologist at all but I assume that that includes brain cells that they're being renewed and restored and that nevertheless they have some sort of memory even though you're right we know the more we know about memory the more we realize how unreliable it can be but that there is continuity such that if that continuity is broken by say a terrible accident of another sort which results in somebody having as we say a different personality then there is a real shockwave goes through the community of other lives that that person then touches or is touched by where they don't know who this is anymore and when somebody has had a really serious illness that that is a problem and I think one of the reasons we find dementia so difficult to deal with in families and so on is because this doesn't seem to be the same person that we have known and loved and that's part of the brokenness of the world to which the only answer of course is more generous love more ability to go out to meet this person where they now are and to assure them of safety and love and so on though that's that's tough but I think that is part of some of the some of the most alive people I have ever known are people who in that sense make sure they are going out and living for others and looking out for others and who as a result seem to grow in themselves precisely because they're not taking themselves in a selfish sense seriously I take it that the part of the no-self view in Buddhism is very similar right that this this kind of notion that we have of a self that's completely separate from others and so forth and so on is an illusion that there is a self that abides through time that you are exactly in some interesting sense exactly the same person that came out of your mother's womb and so forth and so on I think we have a lot of mistaken ideas about that and one of the things that I think we can do is if we think really seriously about it I think we realize that not only is that an illusion but that also shows the interconnectedness with other people and the world around us in a way that we like to kid ourselves this is just me this is this that and the other but everything that you do potentially affects other creatures other fellow beings and so on

and it's I think at this point there is a Christian critique of the modernist idea of the self you know the modernist idea is I am the master of my fate I am the captain of my soul I am who I am and I'm just coming through and doing my thing and get out of my way that kind of modernist arrogance which I think goes back particularly to certain 18th century European attitudes but is very prevalent still in some quarters postmodernity responds to that by saying that the self is just a massive shifting signifiers and different narratives that swirl to and fro and that we actually reinvent ourselves the whole time and the Christian response to both of those I think would be in in traditional language and practice to talk about baptism that something happens at the moment of initiation however you do that and so on in which at least from a theological theory you actually cease to be as your primary identity the person that you were and become a new person in some sense or other a person in Christ a member of the Messiah's family a member of this new large multi-ethnic and very odd shaped family and that that is now your primary identity that you are that the self you now are is now one who is formed and reformed within that new world it's about new creation ultimately and finding of the self within the new creation which nevertheless enables the self as it's always been since it was conceived in its mother's womb to to to to grow and become more fully the human being that it was designed to be but obviously we're moving on there into quite other areas right well given those things let's get on to the next question which is what's wrong with the world GK Chesterton great British writer from a hundred years ago wrote a letter to the London Times because somebody had written an article on what's wrong with the world and the way that you signed letters to the editor of the Times in those days was you said I am your sincerely anti-writer whatever and Chesterton wrote sir what is wrong with the world I am yours sincerely GK Chesterton which is a cheap and cheerful way of saying something profoundly Christian which is that when you ask the question what's wrong with the world you do not sit on a position of moral neutrality yourself and say if there's wrong in the world it's all out there but I am the one who can sit above above it and judge it we are all in this mess together and if we are talking about what's wrong in the rest of the world we have to be prepared to have the critique bounce back at us that will be move number one perhaps I'll pass over before we move to move number two right yes I I agree with the you know to say that what's wrong with the world you could answer say nothing except for us I mean that would be one way of looking at it of course a lot depends on what you expect the world to be and whether your expectations are in fact false right so that's one thing but I but I guess I would come up with some suggestions why not lack of compassion egotism greed the illusion that what we do we have a right to do no matter how it affects others around us the idea that the world or the environment is out there and whatever happens out there is not going to affect us um anger aggression hatred the division that we've seen increasingly I think in the United States the political partisanship that leads to incredible derogation of the other side of hatred of fellow citizens and so on I mean those are just some suggestions I don't know what you want to add to the list well yeah I mean naturally I don't like any of those things either and and I'm tempted to be very aggressive towards the people who

embrace them but I like your opening point particularly about false expectations because I think most human beings most of the time would think that there is something wrong with the world and even if we accept the obvious problem spots in the world like sort of Syria or wherever at the moment nevertheless there is a sense of a malaise which despite all our education and our intelligence and our smart machines and all the rest of it we don't actually seem to have made any advances at all in terms of some pretty basic human qualities um however the idea of false expectations raises the question why should we think there's something wrong with the world I mean some philosophers have said that actually we live in the best of all possible worlds and there couldn't be anything better than what we are in at the moment and if we rebelled against that they would say you're just living in a fantasy land you want to be cossited you want to be in Disneyland all the time where everyone is sort of nice to and gives you hamburgers every time you want them and whatever and and you just don't like the world because it's not like that and I want to say from a Christian point of view there is this thing called the problem of evil which actually goes much wider than the things you mentioned to include classically things like earthquakes and tornadoes I shop to see tornadoes safe zones there we don't we don't um okay let me know if you see one coming because we we British don't know don't know about those things usually um but uh but actually if you're an atheist then you have a problem of good um why should you think what why should there be in a random world things like love and beauty and things that make the heart sing why should are they just a cruel joke are they just evolutions trick making us think that there is meaning to life when in fact there isn't so we can probe that a bit further um so I think behind all the symptoms which you mention then for the Christian there would be an analysis which says that humans are out of joint with the way they're meant to be and that some of that out of jointness contributes to a larger out of jointness in the world as a whole now you can't say that because humans are fallen whatever that means that that's why earthquakes happen it seems to me that earthquakes etc are part of the way that god has made the world because the world is not made like an 18th century machine designed to work like clockwork with god as the as the clockwork maker that's that's actually a very modern idea of how god made the world um but nevertheless there is a sense which comes through in some key biblical passages that creation itself is waiting for a new day a new world to be born and that we see signs of that in the present not least in human love but then specifically in the story of israel and the story of jesus and particularly his death we see things which say there is a god who is going to make a new world and we get to be part of that and that merely increases the sense of slippage of tension at the moment now of course that's a faith position but it seems to me it's the sort of faith position which then when you take it and look around yourself you say actually that position makes sense of what i'm looking at what i can see and as we were saying before about knowledge it's not i actually know not as you saying before because you you confess to an empiricist position where you start from the bottom and work up and make sense of it yeah is that sort of sort of yeah okay um as i i want to say it's neither induction nor deduction it's more about abduction that is to say like the shell of

homes things yeah here's all the evidence but now we need imagination we need a story we need something which will tell us how it all makes sense and then when we have an intuition a hypothesis about how it all makes sense we then notice other bits of evidence which we haven't noticed before and so the epistemological circuit goes and so i want to say when i look out at the world as a christian i see all sorts of things which are wrong which i see a symptomatic of a larger out of jointness which i believe that the god who made the world is in the business of putting right yeah i mean i i i i simply don't see what meaning positing some kind of if you don't mind me saying so paternalistic figure much like a father who has created the world is going to give the world i don't i don't see it that doesn't make it any more meaningful to me that somehow we're supposed to reflect his glory or whatever the story is that to me gives normal meaning than not having it there's question well why would god be there why would there be a supernatural creature that looks so suspiciously like your dad and where's your mom anyway where she got i mean there there is something about that whole story that to me you know insofar as um i find religious or spiritual idea attractive i'm much more on the mystical side or the gnostic side even you know god is within you and and the devil or the bad is within you it is not something external it is not some kind of external exist in some kind of male figure or anything like that if if there was i mean i i find the whole question of supernatural beings kind of puzzling i think once we start thinking harder and harder about it we might go with you know you know my monadiz guide to the perplexed at jewish uh philosopher um you know he would ask questions like says in the bible god turns his back what sense does that make this god have a back right and so there's lots of lots of questions here where where you know it seems to me that the way that we've conceived religion is a reflection of the limitations of our ways of thinking that's that's exciting and i'm glad you you included some of the new elements in that because the whole question of gnosticism was a major problem obviously in the christian world of the second and third century gnostic basically comes from the greek word which means to know and the gnostics were people who believed that they had got secret knowledge about who they were about the way the world was etc which meant that as you say there was something inside themselves which was a kind of a spark of light and i see inevitably i see that as a parody of a judae of christian truth and obviously your parody of a judae of christian god as somebody who looks rather like your dad which leaves your mum out of consideration etc etc i mean actually curiously there are lots of us christians who have never really seen god as like i'm sure i didn't see god as like my dad or vice versa that wasn't an issue however i'm not saying that lots of people haven't made that mistake but this is why in the new testament it says again and again that actually god is a puzzle we don't know who god is until we look at jesus and sooner or later all these questions come back to jesus now there's a problem about that as well because particularly in some christian circles there's a sort of sense of whatever the question is jesus is going to be the answer to it so you don't just don't just stick up your hand and say jesus it'll probably be right in sunday school um but the new testament is saying something much more subtle than that that jesus is actually an extremely interesting

human being if i could put it like that without seeming myself to be patronizing um but that as you look at jesus the new testament is saying hmm yeah god has been a bit of a puzzle and sometimes it seems to be absent and sometimes maybe it's just a voice inside your head and you're not sure but when you see jesus then you start to get a fresh idea of who god might be and and uh actually did one of these debates a few years ago with um one of your colleagues in yale and we weren't supposed to be talking about jesus but he ended up talking about jesus to me all the time and where i thought was no bad thing for supposedly philosophical discussion because then you get into history and and so on but um so for me it isn't the postulation of a supernatural being it's the deep awareness that many humans have across cultures that human life has a dimension to it which you can't put into either a test tube or a bank balance and which catches up with you either when you fall in love or when you hear a wonderful piece of music or whatever and if an evolutionary biologist says oh that's just because you have a distant ancestral memory of hearing a tune like that when you were thinking of hunting or something i just don't get that i think that's a reduction it's a sort of different kind of reductionism you weren't saying that but some might and i want to say that there are several clues and cues which strike us as humans which make us wonder about there being more than just is this all there is and that into that there comes the ancient israelite story and from the ancient israelite story about a god who made heaven and earth to work together see the natural supernatural distinction is not one that resonates well with the bible i think that's a modern way of trying to say something which is in the bible but actually distorting it in in the bible it isn't super nature and nature it's creation which is multifaceted and in which strange things happen and god seems to show up or some people think he's shown up and then the story about jesus kind of brings all that into focus i was going to ask you for some response but also a point of clarification when you're saying earlier this is for professor mibon um what's wrong with world hatreds uh um violence these sorts of things i was going to ask what you thought the source of those things were like what's behind that as a way to say that's why these are bad and by all means respond as well well i mean i take it that they're bad because they lead to suffering oh okay so the the common denominator being if it leads to suffering that's what constitutes it constitutes hatred for example is bad and sounds forward well i mean with hatred we all know it leads to the dark side right i think we do let's hope say no i was gonna i was gonna say that um i think that i guess i have different intuitions than you have and a lot of other people have when they look at the world and they see that there's something missing i don't think that there's anything missing i think it's only missing if you look at it in rather crude ways so um sorry that suggests that you're looking at it in crude ways but but there is a way of looking at the world as a sort of machine that just operates in this kind of crude way and looking at non-human animals is these creatures that you know there is not much going on etc etc of course then you turn television on and you see what remarkable things almost all creatures are capable of and you look at the beauty of the world and the intricacies of everything and i don't think we need to look beyond that to find meaning we can find meaning in fellowship in

each other in relationships with non-human animals i find a great joy in my relationship with my dog for instance um i think he does too but of course i would say that um but um so i i think that we have a tendency of projecting because of the way our mind works and the way that our understanding works we usually try to understand one thing by relating it in some way to experiences that we've had before thoughts that we've had before and that's one way in which we distort i think the world and meaningful activities and meaning that makes sense within sort of smaller areas of you know is it meaningful to read this book yes because you get pleasure but are you learn something or whatever we now extend that out and now there has to be some deeper meaning to life other than perhaps you know enjoying it and doing our best to help other creatures enjoy it more too the question of the meaning of life is it's such an easy question to ask what is the meaning of life i i was in a walk in this on a walk in the Scottish Highlands with some of my family last summer and my then seven-year-old grandson Sam was walking along with me and we were looking for eagles with binoculars and goodness knows what and suddenly out of the blue without warning he said grandfather what is the meaning of life and and to my horror several other people both in our party and other people who are walking nearby stopped to see what i was going to say and i thought this is not the moment to start in but i said Sam we let's let's talk about that a bit later i wimped out completely and said said something silly but but we did we did come back to it and even small children are are aware of a mystery of a puzzle and i mean i agree that we can say well this is simply that we want a bit more meaning a bit more understanding about how human narratives work but i think again and again and it comes cross-culturally it isn't just sort of western christianity or whatever the sense that we are made for something more than this cs Lewis one said that you can deduce most of theology from the fact that people feel uncomfortable in the presence of a dead body that there is something uncanny as we say there's something wrong we we humans are made for something more than this and some people even speculated that that clothes that we wear whether or not it's actually very hot in here we could all take our clothes off and be more comfortable and the answer is no clothes are an anticipation of the resurrection body that for a christian we are made for something more than what we presently are this is moving the conversation on from where we were but it seems to me there are profound intuitions in some of the ancient poetic accounts of adam and eve needing to clothe themselves in the garden and that kind of thing as though this world is a signpost towards something every spring i still feel even though i know i'm going to feel it and every spring i think wouldn't it be wonderful if this year spring would turn into a glorious summer which would just go on without the sorrow of fall and the death of the cesars and that's just probably because i'm at a certain age where i'm kind of in the talk getting towards the autumn of my life and so i kind of resent that but i think that humans humans have this intuition about being made for something more and you may say well some humans do and some humans don't and that's when i would say ultimately that for a christian it isn't a knockdown argument some people have these puzzles therefore there must be a god it's some people have these puzzles therefore let's look at the

stories that all sorts of different societies tell Gnostics Buddhists um ericlytus whoever and let's put the christian story into that marketplace of narratives and see if it makes sense more sense some sense of the puzzles that many people have that's the kind of starting point i would have so perhaps we could move this on to the last question which is response to essentially what you've just said what's wrong with the world we're asking for what you think the solution is it might be good to answer this with reference to personal responsibilities as well as philosophical concepts of what a solution might be as well uh professor my mom okay um well i uh i think that um obviously there are sort of large-scale things that you can do you can give to charities you can vote i was shocked when i realized how few americans vote last Danish election 96 percent of people voted what was it the last american was in the 40s or something like that this is that moral high ground i was mentioning earlier sorry um so they're all the sort of big stuff right and i think it's very easy to become sort of a little overwhelmed because clearly there are a lot of problems and it seems that we can do each individual one of us so very little and so i think maybe what might be more useful to talk about is things that you could do in your everyday life and i think that you can do things every day to make the world a better place you can be kind to your fellow beings you can help somebody who's got a lot of stuff they're carrying a lot of stuff opening the door you can um in various ways alleviate suffering my big thing is don't eat any or as little as you can of factory-farmed meat the way that non-human animals that we consume are being treated today in the western world i think is is horrific and all of these creatures are capable of suffering and of happiness and so but i think perhaps one of the most important things is for each one of us to be aware of the sort of greater issues where we find that what is really valuable what matters to us hold on to that in in what i talked about as a sort of daily practice but i also think that goodness comes in individualized forms right so the ancient used to think of virtuous being just like one thing i think virtue comes in many ways right if we look at historical figures over time that we admire they're often very different right they're very they're different things that are close to their hearts so maybe one thing that you can do is to think of what is really close to your heart where do i want to focus my energies as a way of not being overwhelmed as well right so do you care issue a concern the environment is your concern animal welfare issue concern all the children that go hungry in Cincinnati right what is your concern and then focus your efforts there and then just enjoy i think that the pleasure that we get out of doing good things for others and so we each in our own way do something every day to make the world a little bit of a better place that's that's a noble a noble vision of a generous i mean would you call it altruism no perhaps you wouldn't um i mean i i worry about the world altruism it seems a bit cold compared with the word love but what you're describing is something which in the christian tradition has been enormously highly valued down the years but is often forgotten by many christians in the western world who are so concerned with certain doctrines or whatever that they forget that in any list of christian virtues a kindness and generosity come pretty high up and that actually in terms i don't know how it is here i don't know how it is in denmark but in britain at the moment if you analyze

the people who volunteer to do the things in the community that you're talking about and actually give time and energy to it to the surprise of our cynical secular press a large number of such people are practicing christians and that's not because there's lots of practicing christians in the country because there aren't so you know church going is at the most about 10 percent in some cities um but a high proportion of those people are active in doing the sort of things that you mention and i inevitably i don't see that as a coincidence because i'm far from saying that christians are the only people who do good in society absolutely not st paul is very clear in one of his letters that there's all kinds of good stuff going on out there in the wider community and that christians should celebrate that and join in and be glad and and say this is all part of god's good creation but for me the solution lies at least one step if not two back from what you said because there is a certain point at which i can hear myself saying what you said to a group of people who would then go and turn on the television news and say really if this politician or that is going to start a thermonuclear war or going to do this or whatever um what's the point going to all that trouble to be nice to people on the street if we're all so is there a solution to the bigger question and that's that's a really tough issue but then behind all of that these solution from the christian point of view is that the god who made the world has launched the project of healing and renewing the world within the middle of history this is what the story of jesus is all about the kingdom of god not as an abstract idea but as a new way of being human which has been inaugurated and in which we are invited to participate and in which the best instincts of the best humans of every tradition such as the ones you've so well articulated uh can be affirmed as well yes absolutely we should be doing that but the point is we are doing that not whistling in the dark while the world goes to hell in a hand basket all around us but as part of a project which we believe will have a goal will have a telos and that's where the virtue thing comes home to roost because obviously for Aristotle virtue is a very individual thing um that you have to try to acquire these virtues that make you the perfect happy human being and for greater love has no one than this than to share his microphone with his friends thank you very much the um for Aristotle virtue is is an individual thing and it was aimed at producing leading men for the army for the society for generals for the army so in christianity virtue is always a team sport you can't do it by yourself it needs to be done in community and that's why love joy peace patience kindness faithfulness goodness gentle is self-control you can do hardly any of those by yourself you need to be doing practicing virtue within a community so the re-founding the re-energizing of a genuine human community which then creates a context within which it's easier for people to choose to do the sort of things you were talking about that's and having worked in the church as well as the academy for many years it's wonderful when you see that going on and when you see people who had been living very self-centered and selfish lives discovering the joy as you were saying as I insist you don't you don't have to be a christian to do that but it helps but when you're a christian doing it you celebrate other people doing it as well because it's part of a larger vision of the whole world yeah I mean I I guess I I think that why we should do it is not because it's part of a larger plan but because that's what we

owe to other human beings for their sake I do it for your sake no matter what else is true because you're a fellow creature capable of happiness and suffering and I owe you to do that for your own sake and so I suppose that would be my philosophy that we once we understand that others are other selves as it were right we understand the value of other creatures we understand their pains we understand their suffering and then hopefully we will be motivated to do things for others for their sake to what extent because obviously you've studied ancient philosophy and intensively to what extent do you think the greatest of the ancient philosophers would have agreed with that because when I look at Aristotle Seneca whoever even Marcus Aurelius I don't actually see that sense that every other human being is valuable and I owe them something I see a sort of wistfulness about Seneca but I don't see him actually thinking that his slaves and so on are on on the same level as he is and that he he actually owes them something because my sense is that quite a lot of the present social concern in the western world has actually crept up on us without our realizing it from in some measure not maybe all the from the Judeo-Christian tradition so that even where people don't believe in the Christian God there are still all sorts of I mean the value of public education the value of public health care I know that's a point of debate in your country and here we stand on the same high moral ground and say what what are you what are you guys about single-payer health care well but but I mean in the ancient world nobody was doing that stuff the Christians cared for the poor whoever they were they tried to provide medical help for people whoever they were they tried to provide a new nobody had ever imagined you could live like that if we now broadly in the western world with the notable exception of one rather large country and I think that all those are good things as well that's come to us from somewhere because it isn't there an ancient philosophy nobody was doing that in the first century is that fair um I I in the first century eating give or tip give or take I mean I I I'm actually not an ancient historian I would say that my own view is formed by obviously I'm a great fan of the ancient philosophers I'm also a great fan one can say so without sounding too superficial of the Buddha but also a lot of recent philosophy philosophy and ethics and in politics take very seriously this idea of what we owe to each other in in virtue of fellow humanities of course you can you can think of it a little bit if you want to think back to Kant Kant also have very much those kinds of thoughts I would say that probably my my view is an amalgam of a whole lot of different traditions and I suppose the standard a standard response to that might be so are you able to give a response to say Machiavelli and others in that tradition who say actually the only thing to do is to take what you can and if that means that you have to tell lies over here and have to manipulate people over there well it'll be for the good of you and your tribe and that's the best you can do I mean there's been a great deal in the last generation that some guy whose name I forget now because I didn't know this conversation was going in this direction um who uh Kaplan is that right Robert Kaplan possibly who's argued in the states that actually this is how foreign policy ought to be run on on lines which go back to uh to Machiavellium and way behind him to Tacitus an ancient thinkers like that um I'm let me give you a slightly different response so I want to bring out another ancient

philosopher he didn't realize this was going to be a philosophy class did you and a Plato right Plato in the youth of fro asked the following question right is something he uses the term pious but I'm gonna just say good because I think that he's a more contemporary term is something good because God loves it or does God love it because it's good and there I think the problem is if you just make it the case that something is good because God loves it it could be anything it makes good arbitrary and that I think is not what most religious people think they think God loves the good because it is good but that means that good is in some way independent of the will of God right and that I guess that would be my position that we have access to this idea of the good whether you know whether you want to go through it a religion or through what for lack of a better word since I am a philosopher I should say reason yeah fair enough um there's all sorts of things we can come back but you probably want to move on yeah I'm gonna test this oh it works okay great this is your old mind okay um okay so well actually this is the end of our questions I wanted to thank you both find more content like this on veritas.org and be sure to follow the veritas form on facebook twitter and instagram so so