

OpenTheo

Imagination & What It Means to Be Human

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The Veritas Forum

This program was recorded at a Veritas Forum event on University of Cincinnati in 2021. The original title was, "Imagination & What It Means to Be Human" and featured Josh Swamidass, Professor in the department of Immunology and Pathology at WashU, and Peter Langland-Hassan, Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Cincinnati. If you enjoyed this episode, please rate, review, and subscribe. And, if you're interested in more content from Veritas, check out our Beyond the Forum podcast. Visit veritas.org to learn more about the mission of the Veritas Forum and find more resources to explore the ideas that shape our lives.

Transcript

This is the Veritas Forum podcast, a place for generous dialogue about the ideas that shape our lives. And, really trying to build empathy through imagination, I think, is one of the most important ways we can really start to pursue this. I really think through the people you disagree with most, understand their point of view, and where they're coming from.

And, to really, for a moment, kind of let leave aside the way you think about things to really understand where they're coming from. I think so much good comes from that. This is your host, Carly Regal.

Today, I'm sharing with you a conversation at a Veritas Forum event at the University of Cincinnati in October 2021. The speakers you will hear from are Josh Wisswahas of Washington University in St. Louis and Peter Langland-Hassan of the University of Cincinnati, as they discuss the role of imagination in our humanness and identity. You can learn more about the Veritas Forum and talks like these by visiting veritas.org. I hope you enjoy their conversation.

The Veritas Forum is a place for people to try to connect some of their more fundamental thoughts about the meaning of life and our place in the universe to research questions they might be pursuing, or specifically the question about imagination and its

relationship to being human. So I'll say a few things about that, just to introduce where I'm coming from with this. So I've worked on the question of imagination for a pretty long time now.

And I think of imagination most generally as the ability to think about possibilities to consider ways the world isn't, but could be. And a way that allows us as human beings, as organisms to sort of break free cycle of cause and effect of being sort of immediately caused by something in the environment to do something else, or to immediately, you know, always just to immediately pursue our desires, to instead step back cognitively think about different alternatives and then potentially act on those alternatives to bring new things into being. And I think one way I try to highlight the centrality and the importance of imagination is to say that if I was to awaken someday having lost my imagination, it wouldn't really be me who woke up, because being having an imagination is too central to the essence of what I am.

It's not something like vision, I could potentially lose the ability to walk, which I could potentially lose, and still be the same person. I think if I really didn't have imagination at all, it wouldn't be me. So, I do think it is really important then to what it is to be a human.

To connect all this about imagination to my more general belief about the way the universe is structured. I'm an atheist and a humanist, which means I believe there's not an intelligent designer behind our existence. And, but I also think that humans are capable of doing great good for each other and for leading people of leading meaningful lives.

And tying those views to imagination. I think it's sort of one of the greatest feats of imagination that we have arrived at collaboratively the scientific understanding we have of our origins, however incomplete it may still be. That there's nothing, you know, once you really meditate on that naturalistic scientific story about our origins, there's really nothing more, you know, awe inspiring or incredible to me than this idea that there was a physical universe matter moving around various ways And somehow some of it eventually gained consciousness became aware not just of the environment and things around it, but that it itself existed in this world.

And then both developed the means for how we might come to understand what we're doing here, how we got to be here and that we've already made so much progress in understanding how this all came to be. And so when I meditate on that I feel a real sense of awe about that. And that it's easy I think sometimes to lose track of.

And so, I guess, you know, my hesitation in terms of pursuing a more theological approach is partly grounded in the thought that it's really one of our highest goods, and most significant accomplishments that we've arrived at this conception of how we came to be and how the universe works and how the universe and universe itself came to exist. Without relying on an idea of an intelligent designer and that it would be a kind of

betrayal of that highest that we have of our own imaginations to go with what might seem at first the more obvious alternative that we came to be in roughly the universe came to be in roughly the way that we came to be from our own parents so so I do kind of favor the story, the naturalistic story we get from from science as a kind of vindication and a celebration of our own, of our imagination and what it means to be human. Thanks for sharing that Peter, you wrote this book called imagining it as our explaining imagination, which I really enjoyed looking through a bit.

I hope we get a chance to talk about the different types of imagination are because there's quite a few types right, and then also a chance to talk about what might be actually uniquely human because it seems like in some ways imagination can be shared by other animals but in some ways there's some aspects of it that we really only observed in other humans right. Yeah, I would agree. In fact I'd say that there's something very distinctive about many types of human imagination I liked how you discussed fiction.

Fiction isn't a lie. It's something it's like an alternate world that we create and we enter and very actively participate in when we watch a movie or, or read a book, even fan fiction is this very real sense of trying to kind of consider this very obviously false counterfactual world in a way to really make sense of it and make it real and there's something valuable about that there's that you talk about the idea of fictional truths and I think that actually makes sense too. So I think that that is really something those are questions I really think about a lot.

I mean I'm a biologist and I deal with how the human body works and I study evolution and all these things. And one of those questions that comes up is are we really different from other animals and a lot of ways we're very very continuous with other animals but in some ways we're very different and people point to language at times but I do think that actually imagination might be one other and I think that if we can parse it out maybe to talk about what is it that's that's strange about the human condition right. I think as I think about that too I think imagination is really useful so for some of the really pressing realities that we face right now.

One of the thoughts that kept on coming to my mind as I was really thinking about this was Martin Luther King and his I have a dream speech. And I think that's a social imagination he had about how the world could look that wasn't actually realized right. He looked at the world that he had, which when you think about the boldness of a type of imagination it's not like there was great evidence that a better world was possible.

And I think that's a real point of view maybe maybe that was all that was possible right. But there's something in that imagination of a better world that actually gave us hope to actually pursue something and actually kind of achieve something better. I think that's actually really powerful about how imagination can actually be how we construct better

worlds to think about it.

And I think when I think about our current moment I think most people recognize at least most students I deal with. And I hear than me realize that the world that we have right now is not the best world possible. So what would be a better world I think we have to imagine that.

And I think imagination is really important in how we map out and think about what could be a better way of interacting with one another. And the final thought I had is you know one way I've been thinking through that is stuff that came out of my book. And I'm really intentional on how you fiction in that book.

And I think that's the thing that I think about is the genealogical Adam Eve I look at you talked about kind of this naturalistic view of how everything got to be the way it is and you said that you found a lot of beauty in there. And I agree I actually see a great deal of beauty in it too. There's other account of origins, which I'm not sure how familiar with it but yeah I'm sure you've heard a little bit about it this idea of human origins from Adam and Eve right.

And what I see is you know this has been a place there's been a lot of conflict for a really long time but is this really, really necessary and so I did the very philosopher sort of move. I considered like a the possibility of a scenario that may or may not be true that shows how both things can be true at the same time right. What's that.

And then you have a combination you have there yeah is it possible people say it's not possible to combine these two but you said they've overlooked this possibility for combining them yeah. So then maybe you still think one is false so like a person who I mean so on one hand I'm turning to the Christian and thinks evolution is false right. And I'm saying hey you think evolution is false fine I'm not going to argue about that but kind of enter the science fiction world revolution is true.

And I kind of work out that science fiction in that world. How do we think about scripture and is this the possible world or that could be the case. I just want to button here and interject a question for you to discuss a bit that is springboarding off of something you said earlier you know you said that the human species.

There's some continuity with other species. And so I just want to pose the question as both of you consider from your perspectives what it means to be human. What do you think.

Or should I say is the human species. Supreme on this planet we seem to be the only ones who have this ability to have these complex thoughts this imagination that you're describing. So does that justify a sense of human supremacy does it justify a sense of ownership over the planet if we could discuss that.

Oh I don't like the terms of primacy and ownership but I'm. Well I guess. Well how do you answer that Peter I kind of gave my initial take on that.

Yeah well so. Right so I would think on the one hand. We do have some exceptional abilities for imagination.

That aren't I don't think that are are shared that aren't shared with other animals and things. And one of them is the ability to. I'm connecting to what Josh is saying ability to hope you know imagine hope requires imagination by framing away things are aren't now but maybe they could be.

And but in any case does this make us. So on one hand it's a superior cognitive ability. Does it make a superior flat out to another species or thing I would hesitate I would say no in a sense that.

A tree is better at being a tree than than I am you know. And I would say that you know having an imagination is part of being human I'm being better being human than than a tree is. And maybe I'm particularly taken with some of our human traits and abilities more so than I am with the trees even though you know photosynthesis is remarkable and so on.

And I don't know if I'm just sort of rooting for the whole team when I say that you know consciousness and imagination is more if I were to say it's more significant than, than say photosynthesis. You know hedge on that a little bit and just say that is flat is very significant and important. You know in its own right whether or not we want to say it makes us flat out.

It gives us a different status. So it's a little more complicated let me let Josh in as I have more to say about that the connections that in sort of moral standing we have and the moral consideration we deserve as a function of having the ability to imagine. Josh talk for a minute on that he wants to.

Yes I was reacting a little bit to the Supreme and ownership components just because something is the best by some dimension doesn't mean that they're best by all dimensions that kind of gets to some of the stuff that Peter was saying. And ownership implies we can do whatever we want with it maybe that's not what you meant. I think a better way to put it is that there is something very peculiar about about humans we're not we're very similar to other animals but there's also something very peculiar about us and I, and I think that that's a an objective statement I think of aliens from another planet came here they would be wondering about why humans were different to they wouldn't be wondering how the oak tree is different from the cypress tree they'd be wondering about, you know, what's going on with humans for a whole host of reasons.

I also do think that some of the things that make us different put entailments on us. So

for example while I don't think because we have only human minds we own everything I think that does certainly make us more responsible for what's around us. And to use the, you know, use the Christian terminology is that we have we're supposed to have a good dominion or we're supposed to we're supposed to steward it.

And I think that that's something you can make a very purely secular humanist secularist case for that too that because we have consciousness that by itself is what entails certain moral responsibilities as well. I would agree with this ability to step out as I was talking about it to step out of the cycle just, you know, responding to a stimulus or going according to some sort of, you know, instinctual program is the thought that we don't have to do that that we can in some sense consider other ways of doing things and then do them is important to to think about why we might have a moral duty to begin with. I think the ability to have imagination also creates new possibilities for suffering that you might not have if you lack it so the ability to look far into the future and into the past.

And to extend your concern, you know, far beyond or, you know, to other people, including family members, not just them but other members of community seeing the similarities between yourselves and others and other functions, other, even other kinds of living beings that we can do, creates all kinds of possibilities for for for suffering that you might not have if you are another kind of species as well. Yeah, I agree with you it's it's like a different. I think we have we're on a different awareness, I would say, of any other animal and I think that other animals probably know a lot more than we give them credit, especially the great apes and those are pretty similar to us.

But I think I think everyone really has to concede that there is still a pretty large gap between us. Us and them, even though like our genetics is so similar I mean we're basically, you know, just genetically modified apes really. Yeah, there's there's still a gap in our ability to conceive of the world and each other and I think that gap is not, it's not subjective I think it's subjective and it's pretty it's pretty substantial too.

Well it seems to reveal itself to me, you know, really vividly and things like, you know, scientific advances, political organization, and the arts, perhaps like these are different, you know, places where it's hard to do. And that's where it's hard to see others, as you totally correct like it's fundamentals or similar is maybe the other animals still like how far off, you know, they are from arriving at physics or, you know, they to open or you know so. That's, you know, so if I, you know, want to raise my sort of, you know, atheist perspective on this, that's my thought is like wow that's, that's really special about us, you know, and wherever that leads is where we should go and what we should honor about us.

So that's kind of the, you know, with a motivating factor is so mine, you know, sometimes eighties atheism's put forward as a view like well it's too bad, you know, that the theological story doesn't seem to be true that would have been really nice but we

can't really believe in it because we wanted to be reasonable, and I don't really, you know I'm not drawn to atheism from that perspective so much as I am from the other perspective of like hey, this is a kind of way of celebrating what we are. I guess the part where I just wonder that Peter is like, like I get where you're coming from I can kind of see where you're coming from I just don't know how, and I get so much that I actually and identify with it I kind of agree with you I see it the same way I don't know how being a Christian really negates that I guess. Well let me let me ask you a question about that because I'm curious because you have this interesting combination of like a real passion for science, but then also real interested in seeing how it fits together with a religious conception.

What how do you think about you know, like the issue of like gods intentions in creating the story of evolution so this is probably in your book or maybe you think that like, why would, you know, and there could be different possibilities, what are some of the ones you might think there are like what would God have put these clues out there in the world for us to sort of really have to do a painstaking and difficult, but you know process, you know discover and piece together, as opposed to just you know, giving us the answers or putting it in the Bible and the thing about how do you think about that. Well there's a lot of questions there I mean like why didn't you put it in the Bible and then I think there's a lot of stuff that is in the Bible I mean we don't have the formula for the COVID vaccine, the Bible either right I think part of it isn't that they're, I think part of it is that the Bible is telling us a story that's important, but it's not everything that's happening. And I'm okay with that that makes sense if you really bizarre forgot to have been kind of secretly leaving like scientific clues in an ancient document for us to figure out that doesn't really make much sense.

So what can be more important than this I mean it has to do stuff for the has to do the relationships I mean you're an academic I'm a scientist but still, I mean I love science to be clear it's become my, you know my life and I love it the same token like it kind of pales in comparison to my children and my wife right, you know those relationships end up being far more important right and then if we really understand, you know, scripture in that way is not so much about God trying to tell us the nuts and bolts about the world works as important as that is more about how to come into relationship with that that makes a lot more sense to me. And I think that's a good perspective of the question and altitude is like why would God have just, I mean it spent all this time and effort making you know making doing things by evolution we could have just popped us into existence maybe like some younger and then maybe he could have but I think it does say something about who he is that is actually once again really rooted in like old ways of thinking about the Christian faith. I think one thing that we learned is that creation isn't actually for us it's it was really God did maybe more like an artist and engineer like you know I'm not really aligned with the ID movement.

I think they tend to kind of, I mean honestly their picture of God just seems a little bit

small for me. When I get when I see evolution is like this grandeur and beauty of that actually is like an artist kind of varying making variations on themes and seeing and giving an autonomy to creation. And it creates things on its own and by itself at times and just there's join it and like we're kind of like we actually are kind of like the after that we're at the very end.

And we're kind of very, we're kind of to the side, because like God doesn't really need us. So from your perspective, it's led the creation is less about us. It's not human it's not so much human centric.

It's like there is this creation. We're part of the story but the focus in creating everything wasn't to create something. What you have the whole thing about humans being in God's image.

Yeah, it was just teaching that God isn't contingent right this is like philosophy or saying this you might even know what this means better than I do. But creation is contingent that God could have done it whatever the heck the way he wanted to. It's not like I mean the only way we know this is actually where even science arises is this idea that creations contingent it doesn't like flow out of some necessary logical truths.

It is rather could have been made however, God wanted to so we actually have to go study it to figure out what the heck it is. Now that's like one of the core I mean there's a couple core theological concepts that are, you know, behind the scientific revolution that's one of them. And so this idea of contingency of creation which means that like if we take that seriously means that God didn't actually have to create us he didn't really need us.

And when we kind of see like a universe is this grand and large and, and you know, a story of life that's not that long. I mean it just makes very clear that the God didn't need to make us so he did. So I think on the atheist point of view I think that's one of the puzzles too because like yeah okay so you believe, and it might be true even okay that the human mind can be explained by an entirely naturalistic process but you also have to agree that there's nothing intrinsic about the world that demands that it produced something like humans.

I mean we could have gone just reproduced us. I agree. I have something to be a bit stunned by I mean I think that we're not paying attention if we're not a bit stunned by the fact that we're here.

Yes, oh yeah I agree it is a stunning thing. And you know sometimes I get frustrated people say like so you think you know there's no God, and it's just this and that's it. I'm like, well, yes but do you have any idea how incredible it is that we even came to exist and that like this table I know like everything is incredible it's so unlikely that any of this would have happened that you know and that we're here and not just here and we can

realize that we're here and then reflect on here and try to figure some things out and try to structure a world where we do some good.

You know, yes, that is part of it and I fully agree about the absurd contingency of it but you know I try to, well I do I do see that is like, wow well we got a you know it's amazing and it's incredible that we're able to make something of this. So it also comes with a lot of responsibility to not waste waste this opportunity. So here Peter here's my question for you okay so I've turned to like the younger creationists and I told I've asked them to kind of do something pretty crazy kind of imagine that maybe you're correct or like we're correct on how I own quite a bit right and enter that science fiction world.

And so here's a question like do you have the imagination to kind of reciprocate that to and kind of wonder about the possibility about whether or not there could be more Sure you mean to think like okay well imagine that you know there. The logical story there is a God and how would you really deal in that regard. Yeah.

Yeah, I am sure I think about that I mean, and I do you know I weigh that you know I so I've said you know that I, you know, here's a question I post to myself. If you could press a button right now, and either the the biblical stories true or the story of science tells it is true, and some to you to pick which one is true which one what button would you push. So, I think I would push the science button.

Okay, so I'm giving up on on eternal life. Possibly. Well I've got some sort of unused use we don't need to get into about about a possibility of continuing your existence, even if you're a physical being maybe not forever but past your biological death maybe possible but anyway.

But, but you know things to think about when I really start to imagine the theological story I worry about certain things like what would it really be like to exist forever. Why am I sure that that's something I even understand or am the place to say that I would desire, you know, I'm not sure you know if I think carefully about that like that that would be a good thing for me. I think I want to live a complete human life definitely very much.

I don't know that in order to do that I need to live forever. And what about you know that you know it's the suffering that occurs and the terrible tragedies that occur with that sort of help to set those things right. And it's like well, what it would it really make it better if, if, okay well a God exists and it's part of that God's plan that these things happen with that really resolve it for me.

I'm not sure that that would also so I see so I do meditate on that think about that at times and, and then I, you know I'm not, you know I'm not saying I couldn't be swayed at this time or the other but I do think that you know, if I right now if I had to press the button I'm going to go with the story that as I put it tries to celebrate you know, human imagination. Why not press both buttons like it's not any other or. Well in my story it is.

Okay. But that's the share what if they were a third button. So you're kind of talking about it's a trade off I either have this or I have this.

Yeah but if you can't have both. And then that's it's yeah both like that's like a very hard situation and you know, I, it's kind of a hard counter-patula for me to think about, because having gone through a lot of sense of conflict and kind of coming to seeing how they don't conflict is kind of hard to undo that. Yeah, so let me push you not put but just rephrase the question.

All right, all right, the question you said it would be when I said like why did God you know play these clues as it were in the world and maybe you kind of answered this but you said well it would have been odd for him to put weird clues in the Bible about this and then you said that's a very interesting story that's kind of odd. But my first thought about that was like why isn't why isn't it similarly odd that he put those little clues in the world itself. Because that's also his sort of creation.

And could have not put those little clues there could have been I think evolution is true though so I mean, I mean, I'm going to lose are there because evolution I mean it's not. Okay yeah so it goes back to your answer about why the story of evolution is true at all and to it being part of this sort of thing. One thing if I tell you a story like if I tell you how I came to be in Southern California born from to Indian immigrants I didn't mention evolution at all.

That's just that's not the story I'm telling I'm telling a different story right. So if you'll look at, you know genetics and all that then I'm going to, because it is that's the story that genetics tells us a story that biology is telling so I just wouldn't expect that every story I tell to be in every place I hear a story right. So it goes back to the question and I guess of why, why bother to create in a way that gives rise to this long history of evolution.

I gave you one of the point you did kind of speak to that about something about the group. Another way I've been thinking about it though too is I think when I look at how the world is and kind of the type of character God I see in the Bible I think one possibilities I think that maybe he actually wanted to create a world where it's possible to be a gratified atheist. Like he doesn't actually didn't want to create a world where, you know, where there are only a way to be in relationship with them was the choosing between like this horrible incoherent world that make no sense versus like being in a relationship he actually wanted to create a world was like some relative autonomy to people who actually didn't want to be in a relationship and go forward like that the certain type of grace associated with like a common grace.

Okay. So I don't get like a look I mean there's different ways to conceive of the Christian God I got that I mean and some of them. I don't think are correct like there's this idea of them being like a highly controlling person who's trying to like force everyone to do something.

But frankly I just don't think that becomes very coherent with history or with what the Bible's saying and is I think what I see in the see Jesus as a person is just profoundly good he's making himself known and wants to be in declaring God wants to be in relationship with us. But he doesn't force it. You know it's there for us.

If we want it but it isn't force it and consistent with that like he's created a world that doesn't require his like detailed intervention and every single second he's created a world that that we can make sense of it. And so without having to constantly refer back to his action and all that because it's I mean it's like a relative autonomy it's like a type of common grace. So you can be a gratified atheist.

If you wanted to say yeah I've never heard that perspective on that. The understanding parent wants to give the teens the space to be themselves. You know yeah I get that that seems consistent with it.

I'd like to interject here if I may and help us to turn a little bit of a corner. This has been great I'm enjoying listening to this exchange. I'd like to propose a different topic to turn into for a few moments.

And that's this notion of morality or obligation. It's come up a little bit already in your discussion. But from each of your perspectives to what extent can we speak coherently about a human being.

Having obligations to his fellow human. I'll leave it at that it's a bit vague. I think you were kind of hitting on this before I mean I think one key aspect of the human mind is that we have this ability to consider counterfactuals kind of step out of kind of like the immediate cause all loop.

And I think that's kind of think about larger relationships I mean one way to I think it's pretty striking is that we might be unique in being the only animals on earth that have a concept of grandfathers I mean it seems that killer whales and elephants have a concept of grandmothers because they're in these long multi generational maternal units. And then fathers don't recognize their grandkids because they go away and then almost every other animal animal, they'll recognize their parents, or they won't, but they won't recognize their grandparents and the grandparents won't recognize their grandkids. But we have this ability not just to recognize our grandparents but then the kind of start talking about great grandparents great great parents and to think about our children great grandchildren great grandchildren and great grandchildren, and before the come that long chain of ancestry right and be able to look at a world that has always been unjust and be upset about it and want a world that's just.

We have, I mean that that's a bizarre thing to I mean the world has never been just yet where we rage against the injustice of the world and we want to just world even though we've never seen a just world. And then there's a sort of thing where we can also just we

can also imagine ourselves in someone else's situation and see an empathize and a different sort of way that I think I think that awareness I think comes with entailments and responsibilities. Yeah, well I agree with.

Yeah, a lot of those connections you're drawing there between, you know, essentially between imagination and having those moral obligations. I'm chatting briefly with Connor before I think you kind of linked this question a little bit too like, especially from like an atheistic perspective in what sense do we have legitimate obligations. And just to speak that a little bit.

You know it's this funny thing about that is yeah I also my parents were not religious so I was never raised with religion. But I always felt very strong moral obligations right from day one of all different kinds, you know, so then to someone to come like well to say like well how could there be, you know, obligations if there's not a God and to me is like well what do you mean how do you think that there's obviously the obligations all over the place. So what do you mean.

So I do think you know someone could try to say well I'm going to give you the argument for why there can't be obligations if there's no God, in which case I'd say well that's going to be a tough argument to give me certain people, people do sometimes try to give it. And then you know, I think that's something that's going to be a tough argument to have with them or something incredibly unfair is happening to someone and you can easily reverse that that we have it, you know, prima facie we have early strong obligation to help. I think we do have these obligations I think, you know, as Joshua's saying, a lot of the reason we have them traces to our cognitive abilities to to not be caught in a cycle of cause and effect to consider, you know, things from other people's perspective to put yourself in someone else's shoes.

And that doesn't mean it's always easy to know what the right thing is in any given case it's often very difficult to determine that. And philosophers, you know, like to debate and argue about what's the basis of right and wrong you know is it all about increasing happiness decreasing unhappiness is it something about acting in accordance with rules that you could allow everyone else to act in accordance with debate those debates go on. But that can all go on while we all are accepting, you know, until someone gives us really great reason to think otherwise that there are these obligations in the world.

Yeah, I think I don't disagree with you I think, I think all of us know that there are moral obligations, at least I really hope that we all do and I think most people do I mean unless they're kind of in a very anti social sort of place but I guess the question that comes up is how much of this is, is like, like a fundamental reality what's good and what's not good versus just a contingent pack of how we happen to develop. I think, thanks where it comes down to right. So we tend to think that altruism is good with maybe some qualifications right is that is that just a contingency of how we arose.

And so if we encountered clings one day that just had a completely different sense of right and wrong. And I think that there isn't actually a fundamental right or wrong is just like that there, there just have a different nature so are we kind of falling for the naturalistic fallacy. I think that's where the issue comes from and I think, well we can all still kind of have these pro social ideas of ethics and morality.

I think this puzzle was question over it about, is that actually granted and something more fundamental than just our nature. I mean do you see that that question there. Yeah.

I think, you know, it is a difficult question, you know what makes something good or bad. And so I always brush up a little against the little bit of philosophy of religion and my intro classes as a way of moving on discussing different ethical theories, and a way to try to motivate people who are coming from religious religious background to be interested in the question is of like what's the basis of good and bad is to rehearse one of Plato's arguments and the youth of Thrasymachus and are you familiar with this. So, I think it goes something like this he's played Socrates is debating somebody who's religious, you know, about the question that debating is this certain acts are deemed are good acts to do right and then in the question he poses is are those acts good because God commands you to do them, or does God command you to do them because those are the good things.

So it's kind of where's the dependency relationship with was the act not good or bad until God commanded it or was it already good and then that's why God commanded it. The way that it was played a once a push it is to say, look, no one wants to say that God just arbitrarily picks things to say do this do this and now that happens to be good. Part of like believing in the goodness of God is that God would only command you to do things that were good before you commanded them right and he did he commands them because they're good and so if you're willing to accept that much, then all parties need an account of what it is to make things good Why did God command those things what is it about them there that made them good enough to be the sort of things that a good God would command.

So it's just to say that yeah I think it's a deep puzzle, but one that we have to confront at least possibly have to confront, you know, whether whether we are, you know, religious or not. I agree with you I mean I think that in a way you know one of the grand questions is what does it mean to be human right so we're going to be sitting here talking for days if they let us they won't. But we could, right.

We're going to go up for dinner later we'll probably talk about. But there's this other grand question of like what is the good right that's another one of those grand questions that we could do the same on. That's a sub question of the first one I don't know, but, but that is like a big challenge to figure that out.

I think that that even that telling is a little bit simplistic though because if we do think that there is a God that's actually not just about a good and evil but actually being in a relationship with us there can be things that are good because he says it like in the same way how, you know, my wife, my wife, ask me to bring her flowers for her birthday. I mean flowers are not evil they're not bad but there's something that's particularly good about them because she asked for them. Right.

And in that relational context there's something particular good about a husband giving her wife flowers because she likes that type of flower and ask for it. That would not be true if she had not asked for it and asked me for chocolates and I decided not to give her chocolates and give her flowers instead that would actually be bad. And so I do think that there can be an relationship or things that are that there's a goodness and things that arises out of being asked for them, or asked to do them that extends beyond and turns like nature of those things does that make it some sense.

Yeah, that's, yeah, I could see the example yeah you know how far we could extend that you know there's the questions you know like, well I don't think it's a computer. So I don't think it's true that that murder is wrong because God nearly because God asked us not to do it doesn't matter how happy it would make your wife, you know, you knock me out. But I get it.

I'm not giving a complete account just a counter example I guess yeah I like it yeah I like it as a possible way of reframing the question I see that I could see how there's this relationship a special relationship out of which these religious these religious versus non religious ways of thinking I think the fundamental issue isn't actually it's not it's not going to be coherence primarily because ultimately we don't think God we can fully understand and even as an atheist you don't think you can understand all the universe right that can't be the primary thing I think really comes from the epistemology how would we know one way or the other I think that's actually the core question. How would we know how would we know what in particular sorry. How do we know whether or not there is a God or whether or not natural world is all there is.

Those are sorts of questions about how we would know I mean it's not so much the metaphysics of it or the coherence even and that is a, you know, the floss from my pushback I just say that we just don't know enough to judge coherence very well between these different things. And that's the main reason why I think they're both sufficiently coherent that you can't judge on the remaining piece of co of incoherence just because it's there's just too much we don't understand. I think it really comes out to like epistemological question instead of like how can we know.

Okay so the main things that philosophers say in this regard, is in terms of like going, you know moving for the question well we can't we can't know for sure to why do you at what reason do you have to actually actively doubt this approach. Is the, you know, the

problem of evil. Just the problem of you know, apparent excess of undeserved suffering in the world.

And this being at odds, you know, and so with with the idea that there's a good intention behind the creation of the world. And you know they're definitely their responses to this. You know, we're appealing to the need for people to have free will and self determination and so on.

The where things seem to ground out and get a little difficult for me is, okay, you know, I could see how there would need to be a bit some suffering. But on the scale that we've seen historically right isn't that a big gratuitous. You know, this shouldn't you know like he wouldn't you shouldn't you kind of come in and put the brakes a little bit you know in the middle of the Holocaust.

What are you talking about I'll interrupt here because I want to bring it back around to what it means to be human. I think we need to bring you both on another day to talk about the problem of people. What a lovely thing to discuss.

But I do want to change it changing up a bit to move into our last subject before we move on to the Q and R. And so for people who are tuning in and watching if you have questions, be sure to send those in will be starting some Q and R here shortly. But a third subject I love to hear you both comment on Josh maybe we can start with you with this is in our day with technology just seems to be advancing at such a rapid rate, you know, over the last few centuries and even the last few decades. What is technology doing if anything to the human experience it, are we sort of participating in the next stage of our own evolution, if you will, but you know what what what is technology doing to what it means to be human, or what might it do.

So technology has always been a part of what it means to be human in an important ways I mean, there. I'm like debating whether I would want to go into like a short review of history but I'll restrain myself but, but you know that's like one of that's also one of the very distinctive things about being human is that we can actually adapt ourselves to any climate. You know we can, we can build tools to accomplish anything that really animal animal has to just rely on their innate abilities and strengths to do that we build machines to do things.

And it's been going on that way for a very, very long time, I mean even just makes it things like being able to make clothing is such a big deal in terms of how it impacts where we can where our ancestors lived and how quickly we became a global species. So something is a little bit different about it right now, like if we think about like you know I'm a little bit past 40 so if you think about kind of my generation like my generation we did not grow up with with hulu in Netflix I mean it was actually just a TV right and then there was dial up so we're called the dial up generation sometimes now which is a lot better than something that's not quite Generation X but whatever or. And

then you know now today we have like, we have like the internet on our phones and you know the way our kids are my my kid is like used to like watching movies on iPad.

And I think what's happened is there's definitely just a much higher increase of rate of change on the on the technological side, and it's far more invasive in the sense that it actually sits like in our homes in a much more direct way and are just our day to day experience and how we're doing it directly to the point where I think it's becoming harder and harder to imagine how people lived, you know 50 years ago, and I think that's just going to be increasingly so and I think the changes are happening a lot faster than we have the ability right now to adapt to And you can see that like a lot of social media debates about you know this Facebook good or bad, and is you know we all got kicked off of Facebook for a day and wasn't a better day or not who knows because we're all on Twitter. So then like you know is that is that like a really better type of humanity what it's kind of hard to imagine going back at this point. I think we're the point where like the world is really changing a lot but we don't really necessarily yet have a way to adapt to it as a society quickly enough.

Yeah. So I agree I agree with a little bit of that anxiety at the end, kind of wondering where are things heading. So the rise of social media has on one hand it seems like it's facilitated quick development and change a certain social norms like if you think of how long before this like the movement to sort of normalize and allow you know, legalize marriage and things like that except for crept along through the 20th century and early 20 and then and now very quickly changing norms around being transgender and gender norms I think that happened like at a very fast rate I think people who used to be in smaller more marginalized communities can quickly come together and get a stronger voice and exert social influence.

And so that could lead to, you know, a great thing since society, but we've also seen, you know how easy it is for people to dig in further into their own particular world and interests and, and, and, and develop sort of, and shield themselves off from the community and some of them and, and, and it's divided families and things in many cases where the kind of polarization that can be encouraged by, by social media so there's, there's those two things going on that are great and but also worry some and you know as far as like what it means to be human developing this is interesting I mean you know, I guess part of what it means to be human is what it means to be in a human society and so society changes what it means to be human will change as well. And there's also, but you know there's also more individual questions about augmenting our abilities with the artificial intelligence and things like that. It's, I'm not sure I'm not sure where that's going to lead honestly I do think we'll see before too long.

But I think there's a lot of additional intelligence that that can rival anything humans can do and maybe can be more imaginative than humans in a way we could maybe we would see more as using it as a tool to increase our imaginations. But there will be some

difficult questions to face up to about what is it then that makes us special or especially deserving of moral consideration. If creating things that have these similar capacities for imagination.

One of the continual things that we have to work through too is how, you know, this has been a big topic in philosophy to to what extent can and does particular technologies dehumanize us to. And really squelch, you know, some of the more important parts of what it means to be human right. Right.

So, today, somehow our humanity is not encouraged by everyone sort of sitting and looking down and scrolling through and you know, and, and so it does seem to be. So yeah, so it's interesting like what, what are these parts of humanity that are that are in threat. Well, I'd say in the social media world, one of the core questions is how do we deal with people across differences without demonizing them.

I mean, like, I think like the trend in like, you know, virtual communities where you can kind of do high degrees of selection for people you agree with is you have a small group of people you really agree with, I can very clearly, and I'm controversially define their enemies that they're going to demonize this. Yeah. And then when you do that then it's, I think it really dehumanizes not only the person you're demonizing it also really dehumanizes you.

I mean, I think, I think the way society works is that we're an uncommon society, whether we like it or not. And frankly, we don't always like the people that we're stuck with. But part of what it means to serve the common common good is to find ways to bridge across those differences to find places a common ground where you can really serve people you disagree with to find things that find ways how we can be better together.

And even when, you know, virtual communities to birth that I think that's that's that's one of the ways how dehumanizes us. Yeah. Well, it's very easy not to take full measure the human being behind any particular statement or image or idea when they're just, you know, popping up on your phone, some character.

And so yeah, there is there is an issue of how we're going to overcome or confront the sort of natural capacity of social media and things to divide. People are put them to be interested, you know, that's the Facebook content that got the most clicks is sort of something make people angry or upset and you know if I and so that's the stuff that is going to, you know, pit you against someone else as opposed to revealing what everyone shares together, you know, despite their differences. And this seems like it's going to be an ongoing tension and struggle and how those, how those are regulated monitor, you know, the, the, you know, that the need for free speech and expression and getting together in groups against the, you know, pitted against the sort of corrosive polarization that's been going on.

Everybody knows about it, you know, and I don't think anyone yet has the key to dissolving it. Hey, but hey, I think conversations like this are one of the right spots too so this is only possible because of the modern Internet age to like there's tons of people across across the area kind of sitting and listening, even though we're in the middle of a pandemic and people disagree with each other and important things and there's still something valuable, but I mean honestly I enjoy the conversations most of the people I disagree with. That's where you find out the most interesting things and where you might actually have things exposed to you and learn something right.

Yeah, I think that's right I think and that's why I was like you know I should do this forum, you know, it's not the kind of thing I normally do it's not you know I don't, you know, normally, you know, I go to lots of academic conferences but there's usually people who are narrowly focused on my topics and who probably have a similar sort of many of them have a similar sort of overall metaphysical view of things so it's really it is important to do something different and talk to people you wouldn't ordinarily talk to especially about important things like this so we have two people who have written in people you wouldn't ordinarily talk to. So I can turn to them. How's that first segue? I'm not entirely sure who this one's directed to so I'm just going to read it as I've received it and then let either of you comment as you'd like so so the first question is the world is clearly contingent and fine tuned in quotes but one could simply reduce these two propositions to statistical odds that is we want a cosmic lottery.

Would that not take out some of the mysticism and remove it from the non random natural selection theory. So I guess the idea is here. Can't we just say that we won the cosmic lottery and be done with it.

I think that that really misunderstands quite a bit so first of all I think that the fine tuning argument. There's a lot of people who debate it back and forth but the basic idea just to lay it out is that that there's several physical constants that have very high sensitivity it needs to be tweaked them just a little bit that you would get a universe that wasn't hospitable to life. And so the idea is that there had to be something that and then maybe there's an intelligent designer that set that and maybe that's true I don't know.

The other possibility is that maybe there's some underlying relationship between those that really constrains them to be those numbers. And so it's not really as lucky as you might take it. That's one possibility.

The other possibility is that this is the one set that we know about but there's a whole bunch of other sets of constants that would actually produce a world with people like that. And then also people looked at it from the point of view of like maybe there's actually many different trials of the universe, like in a multiverse, you know, through cosmic inflation things like that so then it's just selection it's like a weekend topic principle on the fact that I mean we're here to observe these numbers to therefore their

numbers that to be consistent with our existence. Like I think all that's true but ultimately I think the issue is that we don't really have all the information to really judge odds on it.

So I think it's more undefined than unlikely or likely. So I don't think it really solves that problem. The other thing, the better way to think about it is this is that there's probably four key things in our origins that even if you can explain them from an entirely materialistic point of view.

It still begs the question because you can imagine like an alternate world, you can imagine an alternate world where these things weren't true. One is why is there something rather than nothing you can imagine a universe where there's nothing rather than something yet that's a contingency in our world that we have something rather nothing. Another thing is why is there life instead of only non life.

I mean it's very easy. I mean frankly, every look with their telescope seems to be a place without life. So why is it that there's any life at all.

There's nothing that demands that life be produced so why is it that we see that. And the next one is consciousness. Why is it not just plant life.

And like, you know, brain dead, you know, heart of graves going around doing things. Why is it that we see consciousness. And finally the human mind.

Why do we have something if you human mind like all four of those are pretty grand contingencies. You can sort of explain it by the week we can't affect the principal in the sense of saying well we're here to observe it. Therefore we need a world that's consistent with them.

But that still seems to really miss the profound surprise we should be feeling at that. I don't think it's possible to really judge odds on it we don't have enough information to judge odds judge odds, but it should be very surprising. I mean that's not something.

And this is the world that just didn't have to be this way. So now the philosopher can clean up what I said and get more. Now I'm following along pretty well there.

You know, the fine tuning argument to me, the different what you could. Sometimes I wonder about that argument and following way. Just saying like well look, what you could say it's really unlikely that humans existed.

Is that the question or is it really unlikely that something extraordinary would happen. And those are different questions. And I think there are many different ways the universe could have been extraordinary and amazing that where we didn't exist.

So, you know, or where there was no life. So now it may be hard to imagine what those

things are for us, but of course our view of what it is for something to be really extraordinary and incredible is a little bit biased right now we're like, something that includes us. But, you know, so on one hand, yeah, I think, you know, if you really rolled the cosmic dice suppose that even makes sense.

Yeah, you might not get us and it is it and you can think of it as a human's winning a cosmic lottery of sorts. I don't think there are unlikely hood though is an argument that there was designed behind it I think there are many other things that really did I universe could have gone all kinds of amazing different ways. And this is one of them.

It involves us. It had to go some way. I think it's just the problem though because like, if it's finding an argument aside why is it that we exist is still a fundamental question that I don't think we have a good answer for me why is there something rather than nothing or why we exist why is it that the Peter Hassan like, like why do why does the human consciousness exist right, I mean we know that it does like we perceive it we know it exists but why does it exist I don't think that there's a good account of that.

Of consciousness of why consciousness exists or why why the human mind exists like why do we exist like you know we think therefore we are but why do we even exist. I could keep following up or did you want to get to the other question Connor and I mean I think it's kind of turning the fine tuning argument on its head right so look I'm actually granting that there that the weekend topic principle does somewhat resolve fine tuning to some extent though I am content to let philosophers really debate this. Just to make sure that we have time to get through a few.

So we've got another person who has written and this is specifically for Peter. So Peter, a form of imagination previously mentioned was empathy what might be the strongest atheistic explanation for the development of empathy, especially if acting on empathy would ultimately be very costly or self sacrificial. That's a great question.

So, yeah so there are various explanations you can give like well look it's ultimately beneficial to us to help others and live in a society where we support each other that increased increased our survival and so on and compared to animals that didn't collaborate and being able to have empathy for someone else. You know increases the likelihood that you will help them and collaborate with them. And so, and that's overall good for the survival of you and your community.

So you can give an explanation like that that I think makes good amount of sense. I think the one thing to keep in mind, though, is that even if you accept sort of the picture we get from that from the theory of evolution and without a God involved. So, the tires, it doesn't mean that every trait we have was arrived at through sort of natural selection a lot of what we have is kind of the result of random mutation.

Hopefully if it didn't get in the way of our survival so mutations that kind of really keep

us from surviving are not going to you know get passed along that well, but other stuff comes along and maybe at one of those things might be a tendency to help other people, even when it doesn't be as long as it's not so strong that it leads to you know the the death of your your own death or your failure to pass on your genes and so on, then it'll continue along as part of what humans are, and potentially like a really great part of what they are. So you know, you can accept it, it's just a general point about you know the traits of human beings. Yes, there's often an evolutionary story tracing to competition to the survival that fit us for why it happened but that doesn't, it doesn't mean that every single trait we have a rose just for that reason.

And so it's quite possible to empathy and some forms of altruism are just traits we happen to have and good traits, even if they don't always improve our own survival. We've got one final question for both of you. Are there certain ways of using imagination that might serve to make us better humans, whatever that might mean individually or collectively.

My Josh go with that first. Yeah. Yeah, to kind of build off the empathy thing I think that I think intentionally imagining like the people really trying to build empathy through imagination I think is one of the one of the most important ways we can really start to pursue this.

I really think through the people you disagree with most understand their point of view, and where they're coming from and to really for a moment kind of let leave aside the way you think about things to really understand where they're coming from. I think so much good comes from that. Jerry coin is an atheist biologist who doesn't like Christians very much I've had a couple run ins with him.

But one of the interesting things about it is there was actually article written about me that quoted someone else in a way that was a little bit negative about atheists it wasn't quote by me it wasn't a quote by the end I had nothing to do with it but he was really upset about this. And I want to and I remember kind of like interacting with about asking well what is actually the problem here and then I understood actually the point was going on. He's just very sensitive to how Christians demonize atheists.

And, and frankly, as I've seen it, I actually agree with them Christian shouldn't talk about it is that way that I mean they're there people that are loved by God and image of God we don't talk about. And I just shouldn't talk about atheists the way we do I mean there are a neighbor to and I remember just realizing that and realizing oh you know if I was an atheist I would feel exactly how Jerry is I might even react just as strongly negatively as he is. And, and that was important, I think, to actually take the time to sit down understand and pause and see where he's coming from.

The other place where I think imagining is really important is I think again about you know Martin Luther King and I have a dream. You know we have a broken world. And

maybe this is the best world that that we can see we can empirically measure maybe.

Maybe not. But how are you going to get a better world it's going to be when we realize it's broken and try and imagine something better like what could be better than this and to really think through that. And look in deep way so that maybe we can actually start to build it.

Yeah. Yeah, I agree with those thoughts. You know, one interesting thing to note about empathy and particularly going you know back to that.

I was rightly noted like the kind of empathy that imagination really enables is empathizing with someone who you weren't immediately already like, or you don't see yourself as like that's the important, a morally important kind of empathy. Because there's been lots of you know psychological studies done on empathy and how it motivates moral behavior and people are much likely to help someone if they're already told that well you to answer to a personality question you're very similarly, or you have very similar likes in magazines and other things like that. And if they're told that they are much more likely to help that person.

Well okay great empathy motivates behavior but you can also see is extremely biased and so when we're talking about the need for empathy, you know more broadly. We're interested in the kind of empathy that like requires a real feat of imagination to get outside of your own sort of way of approaching things to then see how someone else might see things and then empathize, which can be an uncomfortable thing to do. You know like it's unpleasant like anytime you've been in an argument with someone close to you right you sure they're wrong sure they're wrong until that moment.

When you're like wait a minute. They're actually rights, you know, and what what's happened in that switch. You've come you've come you're like oh kicking and screaming maybe but you've kind of come around.

You've allowed yourself to see things as they're seeing them. And that takes the real act of imagination that doesn't feel great at the first but you know it brings about a lot of good. You know I agree, you know with with with the need for that and to encourage that ability and I think it's very difficult to encourage that ability, you know, one way to do it is not to say you people don't know how to imaginatively empathize.

So be more like us and start being imaginative with your empathy, you know, like what now we're just back and you know where we were so you know it's a delicate thing right that's almost like a spirit you know a teaching you would you would want from your your pastor your spiritual advisor you know how can I develop that ability to empathize beyond my own perspective. And someone needs to have a good capacity to inculcate that as someone else. Just a delicate thing.

Well the way Jesus talked about it as he said that you know even the heathen. You know, you know, you know, you're not really a part of the other families but you're supposed to love your enemies. So it's like a really simple statement right.

Right. Just idea like it's not actually about you know how loving are you the people are close to you it's actually, you know, how willing are you to love the people that you hate. And like how willing are you to try to understand them and that's that's a hard, that's our teaching but I would also say that as we kind of enter into that we do actually in that type of imagination I'd say we find something very real we encounter something real about the best parts of what it means to be human right.

Oh, I agree. Yeah. I think that's right.

I think that's, you know, it's it takes so much going beyond anything that feels immediate or easy or, you know, instinctual even there is a kind of push. And, and, and that. We need to try to encourage that our children, you know, and make them here just part is and it's difficult to be faced to encourage that and then sort of a partisan polarized atmosphere but you know you have to think about that.

You know, very carefully, you know, and talking to your kids about things that are, you know, current events and things like, it's very difficult to not already teach. This is the one way to look at things and to shut down a child's ability to empathize with someone who's quite different. But, yeah, I think that's at least something that we need to keep in mind in the forefront of our minds like when, when is it more appropriate to try to remain balanced in this increasingly polarized society.

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