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Because God Is Real

Sixteen Questions, One Answer

How to
“be ready to give a reason
for the hope that is in you”

— 1 Peter 3:15

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II

Why do I exist?

1. *What is that question doing here, in this book? “Why do I exist?”—what a strange question! Not the kind of thing I expected to find in a catechism textbook about the Catholic religion. It sounds very abstract and vague and speculative.*

If that’s what you thought when you read the title of this chapter, I have to tell you that you were mistaken, in three ways.

First of all, it is not a strange question at all, but a very natural question. Everyone asks it, consciously or unconsciously, though not necessarily in those words.

Second, it is a religious question. It is a question to which all religions claim to have an answer.

Finally, it is not abstract but as concrete and particular as you are. It’s about your life.

2. *Why is my existence in question?*

Because you didn’t *have* to exist. If one little thing had happened differently to any of your ancestors, you would not exist. For instance, if your great-grandfather hadn’t been surprised by the sound of a squirrel dropping a nut on a dry leaf in the park where he was sitting on a bench a hundred years ago, he wouldn’t have turned his head around to see what the noise was, and he wouldn’t have noticed the pretty girl on the bench

over there, walked over and struck up a conversation with her, got to know her, and eventually married her—and you are part of the rest of that story.

So is it just luck that you exist? Just chance? Did you just happen, or are you designed? Are you an accident, or are you wanted? Are you just lost on a stage without any lines to speak, just making it all up as you go along, or are you part of a play, a plot, a plan, with an Author's mind behind it?

You can't get the answer to that question just from your feelings, because your feelings change from year to year, day to day, even minute to minute. Everyone at times feels lost and meaningless, and everyone at other times feels part of a meaningful story.

It makes all the difference in the world how you answer that question. It amounts to asking whether your life has real meaning or not.

We deeply want our lives to have a real meaning. But where does this real meaning come from? Why is there a real answer to the question "Why do I exist?"

Because God is real, that's why. Because you were willed into existence by an all-knowing, all-loving, and all-powerful God. *That's* why your life has meaning and purpose.

3. *How can we know the true answer to this question about the meaning of our life? What must we know, to know who we are?*

The secret of your identity is in the mind of your Creator and Designer. Therefore, to find the meaning of your life, you must know God. To find out who Macbeth is, you must ask Shakespeare. To find out who Gollum is, you must ask Tolkien. To find out who you are, you must ask God.

How do we know God? Through Christ. "No one has seen or ever seen God; the only Son . . . has made him known" (Jn 1:18).

To know yourself adequately, you must know God. And to know God adequately, you must know Christ. Therefore, to know yourself adequately, you must know Christ. Christ reveals not just who God is but also who we are.

4. *When we ask why we exist, what do we seek?*

We seek our origin, our nature, and our destiny. There are actually three parts to this question: "Where did I come from?" and "What am I?" and "Where am I going?"

There are two radically different possible answers to this three-part question: the no-God answer and the God-answer. We exist either because of mere chance and accident or because of divine design; we exist either because of blind matter below us or because of conscious divine spirit above us.

The three questions (of origin, nature, and destiny) are closely connected. If our *origin* is only material, if we came only from mindless matter blindly bumping into more mindless matter and not from the Mind of God designing and creating our matter, then our *nature* is also only matter: we are only apes with bigger brains but no souls. If our parents were only big apes, we are only big apes. And then our *destiny*, our end, is only the destiny of all matter and animal life: death and decay. Period. End of story. That is the logical consequence of believing that there is no God. Death wins in the end.

But if our origin is from above, from God—if we are designed and created by an intelligent Spirit—then our nature can be also spiritual, made in the image of the God who is spirit. God may have used evolution to make our bodies out

of previously existing animal species, but souls cannot evolve. God must create each soul afresh.

If that is true—if we exist because of God, if we are real because God is real—then the practical consequences are tremendously important. For then each one of us has intrinsic dignity. That means that we are not mere objects to be used by other objects. We are God's kids!

And then our destiny (the third connected question) is also spiritual: to live forever with God in Heaven. God is our first beginning and our last end, our ultimate origin and our ultimate destiny.

	RELIGIOUS VIEW OF MAN	NONRELIGIOUS VIEW OF MAN
ORIGIN:	God	mere matter
NATURE:	image of God, children of God	mere animal
DESTINY:	eternal life with God	mere death

5. *What do we mean when we say that God is our origin?*

We mean that He created us out of nothing. Genesis 2:7 tells us that He formed our bodies out of “dust from the ground” (possibly a symbolic image for previously existing matter), but He created our souls directly, out of nothing material.

The truth that we were created has enormous practical consequences for our lives. Because God is our Creator, we owe *everything* to Him, because we owe Him our very existence. Just as we owe Him thanks for the whole universe outside of us because we did not make it but it is a gift from Him, so we owe Him thanks for our very selves, body and soul, because we did not make that either. Our very existence is His gift.

We have rights over against each other, but not over against God. For God is not one finite part of the universe, as we are. He is outside the universe. (That does not mean He is in some space outside the universe but that He is more than the universe, He is transcendent to the universe.) God is not our equal. Our relation to God is not like the relation between Mark Antony and Brutus, two equal characters in the same Shakespearean play, *Julius Caesar*. Neither is it like the relation between Shakespeare and his wife, two equal persons in Elizabethan England. It is like the relation between Brutus and Shakespeare. It is the relation between a creature and his creator.

That is why we have rights over against each other but not over against God. Brutus has rights over against Mark Antony but not over against Shakespeare. Shakespeare's wife has rights over against Shakespeare but not over against God. God is not your equal. God is your God.

6. *What do we mean when we say God is our end or destiny? That sounds very vague and airy and abstract. Can you make it more concrete and down-to-earth and easier to understand?*

Yes.

Our end is happiness. When anything attains its end or destiny or purpose, it is happy. Fish are happy swimming, not running. Birds are happy flying, not swimming. Lions are happy running free, not in a cage. If we find out what our destiny and purpose are, we find out how to be happy. It's like people who are lost finding their way home (like E.T.). They're happier at home because that's where their destiny is, that's where they belong.

God designed us to be happy—truly, deeply, permanently happy. He designed us to be partially happy with the good things He created for us in this world, and totally happy only in Heaven with the infinite good, the only infinite good that exists, Himself. That is why, as Saint Augustine said, “Our hearts are restless until they rest in You”: because “You have made us for Yourself.” Your heart is like an infinitely large hole, and only God is big enough to fill it.

7. *How can God fill our hearts? When we say our destiny is union with God, what does that mean? How can we be united with God?*

It means two things: to be *like* God more and more in this world, and to be *with* God forever in Heaven.

To be *like* God means above all to love, because “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8). That’s why loving makes us more deeply happy than anything else ever does and why refusing to love, being selfish, makes us deeply unhappy and lonely.

To be *with* God means what the saints call “spiritual marriage”: to be in a close, personal, intimate love-relationship with God; to know Him even better than human friends or lovers can ever know each other. That is how Jesus defines the life of Heaven: “This is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God” (Jn 17:3). Not just to know *of* Him or to know *about* Him, but to know *Him*.

8. *So the meaning of life is . . . to be a saint?*

Exactly! But being a saint does not necessarily mean being someone unusual and famous, like Saint Francis of Assisi or

Mother Teresa. It means simply loving God with your whole heart and loving your neighbor as you love yourself (Mt 19:19).

This is *every* person’s destiny. Most of us have a long, long way to go to reach it. But God cares about every one of His children, even the ones who are the slowest to learn to walk down the road of love, the only road that leads to Heaven. God cares about the smallest steps we take on this road, the tiniest choices to love. He is our Father, after all; that’s why He is “easy to please and hard to satisfy”, as C. S. Lewis’ friend George MacDonald put it. God is pleased with the first little baby steps we take on this royal road of love, but He will not be satisfied until we are mature and whole and reach the end of the road.

That’s one reason why the process of learning to love completely will be completed after death in Purgatory for most of us: because we’re not finished yet. Although Baptism and faith have made us “justified” (or “saved”, or “in a state of grace”), so that we can go to Heaven, we still need to do good works, the works of love, throughout our lives in order to grow into saints, in order to be “sanctified”.

Meanwhile, life is a road to that end. Here is what life looks like from the perspective of that end, that destiny:

It is a serious thing to live in a world of possible gods and goddesses, to realize that the dullest person you meet may one day be something which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship; or else a horror and a corruption which you meet now only in a nightmare. All day long we are helping each other to one or the other of these two destinations. There are no ordinary people. You have never met a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations, these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we work with, play with, marry, snub,

or exploit: immortal horrors or everlasting splendors (C. S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory”).

9. *Why doesn't everybody believe that this is our purpose and destiny?*

Because some people think there *is* no real purpose or destiny to human life! They believe that only the things *we* make, like cars and watches, have design and purpose in them. We know what the purposes of these objects are because we designed them. (For instance, we know that the purpose of a car is transportation, and the purpose of a watch is to tell time.) But the things in nature, like trees and stars, were not designed by any human beings, so we do not know their purposes as we know the purposes of the things we design. So some people believe that there *are* no real purposes in the things in nature, but only in humanly designed artificial objects.

But one of the things in nature is human beings. They are not artificial objects! They are not artifacts like cars or watches. We did not design human nature; we only carry it on, by reproduction.

So the people who deny that human life has any real purpose argue this way:

If only artifacts have purposes, while things in nature do not;
And if we are things in nature rather than artifacts;
Then we have no real purpose.

So the answer to the question “What is the purpose of my existence?” is that there *is* no real purpose; we can imagine or make up any subjective purposes we want, but there is no objectively real purpose to human life. Life is purposeless,

pointless, meaningless, in vain. “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity” (Eccl 1:2).

This is the worst philosophy in the world. For it denies us the things we need most: meaning and purpose; a reason to live, learn, grow, and endure.

Meaninglessness is unendurable. Even pain isn't as bad as meaninglessness. We can accept pains if they are meaningful: for instance, the pains of childbirth, or the pains of sacrificing for someone you love, or even the pains of martyrdom for a good cause. But we cannot accept meaninglessness. Even pleasures are not worthwhile if they are meaningless. (That's why a billionaire can choose to commit suicide.) And even pains are worthwhile if they are meaningful. (That's why a woman wants to give birth to a baby.)

The idea that objective things have no purpose is really atheism. For if God is real and if He created and designed everything, then *everything* has a purpose.

We can see some of the purposes of the things in nature. For instance, we can see that one of the purposes of stars is to enable us to think. For (a) if we did not breathe and bring oxygen to our brains, we could not think; and (b) if there were no green plants, we could not breathe, since their photosynthesis replaces carbon dioxide with oxygen; and (c) if there were no sun, there could be no green plants, for green plants need sunlight and heat; and (d) if there were no stars, there would be no sun, for the sun is a star. Therefore, if there were no stars, we could not think.

But many of the things in nature have designs and purposes that are not clear to us. They do not seem to be useful for us. (For instance, we wonder why God made so many mosquitoes.) So it takes a little faith, a little trust, to *believe* that everything has a purpose and that “all things work together for good to

those who love God, who are called according to His purpose” (Rom 8:28), even though we do not *see* this. This is especially true of things that make us suffer. We do not always see how suffering has a good purpose.

But if the Creator is all-wise, all-good, and all-powerful, then the quotation above from Romans 8:28 must be true. If He is all-good, He wants what is best. If He is all-powerful, He is able to bring about what is best, in the end. And if He is all-wise, He knows what is best.

And since we are *not* all-wise, we do not know what is best in the long run. That is why we have to trust Him with all those mosquitoes and even with much worse things, like cancers. He knows how to bring greater goods out of great evils. That is what He did two thousand years ago on the Cross of Calvary when He brought about the greatest good for us, the greatest gift we have ever been given—salvation from sin and the ability to enter Heaven—through the greatest evil that ever happened, the torture and murder of Jesus Christ, the only perfect man who ever lived, the man who was God Himself.

10. *We Christians believe this. Many people don't. Can we give them any reason to believe our religion's answer to the question "Why do I exist"?*

The best reason we can give them is ourselves: our love and our joy. You can't argue with the happiness of a saint.

The greatest love, and the greatest joy, is mutual: it comes from both loving and being loved. The next-greatest joy comes from loving, even without being loved back. Even this second-best joy of loving without being loved back is greater and deeper than the third joy, the joy of being loved without loving. That is why saints are so happy: they are never in the

third level of joy but always in the second or the first. (In fact, since they know God always loves them, you could say they are always in the first.)

That's why the prayer attributed to Saint Francis says

Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy. O divine Master, may I always seek *not so much to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.* Amen.