EPISODE 71

GOD AS DEFAULT SETTING

Hi there. Welcome to the middle of the end of all this. And I really don't get to say 'penultimate' all that much. But my name is Michael Folz. And this is Episode number 71 of my podcast Dial It Back Or Die. The penultimate one. This is the final time when I will be hacking my way through the tall grass of ideas which will be especially hard for any proper postmodern person to understand or accept, let alone initiate or implement.

Now last episode I attacked the whole issue of sexuality, which, you'll recall, was the third of the four parameters which I said would need to be adopted if we were to have any hope of re-creating a society with actual working social norms which would lead to a greater social harmony. And, given our postmodern zeitgeist, I fully agree that this parameter would not only seem to be beyond Utopian, but would actually strike many people as just downright weird.

So how can I top that? Well, how about the fourth parameter? The one about making belief in a higher power the default setting. Now at first glance, such a parameter would seem to go directly against what I have been saying both about using science and also the maximization of social harmony as the two determinants which should point the way forward. Isn't a belief in a 'higher power' anti-science? And isn't it common wisdom that forcing religious beliefs upon people, and/or allowing a multitude of religious beliefs to flourish, isn't that a sure fire recipe for destroying social harmony? Besides which, didn't I say at the outset that I wasn't going to require a belief in God at the end of all this?

Okay, let's deal with the last point first. Because even the Koran says that there should be no compulsion involved in religious belief. And so, no, I'm not requiring you to believe in God. I'm not even asking you to. All that I am saying is that in order for a future society to hold together, a belief in a higher power should be the default setting. And, just as when you get a new computer there are various default settings which you can then change in order to suit your particular requirements or wishes, so, too, should anyone in my future society be entirely free to change their individual setting to

‘agnostic’ or ‘atheist’. I mean, if even the Koran says that there should be no compulsion, I’m certainly not going to argue with the concept.

But, you may say, isn’t that already the case? After all, for all the faults that have been laid out about Liberal Democracy, in theory at least it most definitely is not like Marxism, which did wage an all out war on religious belief. And whether or not one agrees that Liberal Democracy is an entirely different animal than the ad hoc representative democracy which the Founding Fathers created, they most definitely did establish a strong freedom of religious belief. And, so far at least, people are still perfectly free to go to whatever church, synagogue, temple, or even Druid Wiccan meeting that they wish to.

Well… yes. And no. And to help explain the ‘no’ part, let’s go back to one of the basic findings which the field of behavioral economics has established.

As you’ll recall from previous episodes, behavioral economics is a field which came into its own in the 1980’s. And to a large extent it just replicated much of what Social Psychology had figured out over twenty years earlier. But it was still somewhat radical, because it took place among economists, and it effectively totally contradicted many of the most central foundational assumptions about Economics. In essence, it offered overwhelming experimental proof that not only do most people in most situations not act as self interested self maximizers, but, more importantly, in many if not most situations most people don’t even make decisions based on rationality.

In other words, a large part of our thinking apparatus relies heavily on emotional responses. Thus if you tell someone that the chances of surviving an operation are 90% they tend to want to go for it. But if you tell them that the chances of dying are 10%, they tend to want to pass.

And then there are what are called anchoring effects. If, for instance, you have someone write down the last two digits of their social security number, which can be anything from 00 to 99, and then ask them an entirely unrelated question, such as how many African countries there are in the United Nations, those who wrote down a higher social security number will then guess a higher number of countries.

And I could go on and on with other examples. But what behavioral economists have concluded as a result of all this is that if you want to effect a positive social change, then it matters a great deal how you frame questions. And a result of this line of thinking has been the idea of the ‘nudge’. And that means that you should definitely give people a choice in the matter. And they

should still be perfectly free to say ‘no’. But you pose the choice in such a way that it is far easier for a lazy mind (and we all have lazy minds in much, or most, of what we do) to just go with the flow.

Now of course that immediately raises the issue: How does one decide what a ‘positive social change’ is? Wouldn’t that plausibly be a function of one’s underlying ideology and its consequent foundational assumptions? Yes, it well could be. So that ‘nudging’ is a very powerful behavioral tool, and in the wrong hands could be very dangerous.

But I think that most of us, whatever our political beliefs, would agree that having more people willing to donate organs would be a positive social good. And so would getting more people to save more for their retirement. So let’s just use these two examples.

Now currently, as it usually happens, when you get your driver’s license you have an opportunity to opt in if you want to be an organ donor. Likewise the company which you work for usually gives you an option to choose to have said company every month deduct from your pay a certain amount and put it in an IRA, or something similar. What researchers have found out, however, is if you make the exact same offers, but frame them in such a way that you have to opt out if you don’t want to be a donor, or opt out if you don’t want that monthly deduction, then the percentage of people taking up the deal changes dramatically. And then the social good, and presumably the social harmony, rises dramatically.

Okay, I’m pretty sure that you’re with me with these two examples. But religious beliefs? Again: Isn’t religion, especially differing ones, an endless source of conflict? So how could that be a social good?

Well, I would respond that your belief that religious beliefs necessarily lead to conflict is primarily a function of ideology, and has little or nothing to do with the actual evidence. Because the actual evidence from sociological analysis consistently shows that people who believe in religion are not only happier and healthier, but also live longer and more peacefully than do people who are non-believers. Further, outside of barely subsistence societies, every civilization which has ever existed has had a set of religious beliefs. As it turns out, much like social norms, holding common religious beliefs is one of the strongest natural constituents of the social glue that binds us together.

In fact, the recently excavated archaeological temple site of Gobekli Tepe, in Eastern Turkey, which is over ten thousand years old, gives strong support to the idea that it was religious belief and ritual, far more than the development of agriculture or anything else, which is how humans first started exhibiting hypersocial—that is highly coordinated cooperative—behavior. And that this, along with

other evidence, has led many anthropologists to conclude, as much as they might hate it ideologically, that, for whatever reason, mankind must have a natural need for religious belief.

So that should answer your 'social harmony' objections. But you still might have a basic philosophical one. Namely: Isn't adopting a 'null' default position on religious belief the more rational, and 'fairer' approach? After all, isn't adopting a behavior even as innocuous as requiring a moment of reflection or meditation in, say, a school setting inherently offensive to those who don't believe in reflection or meditation? What about the social pressure?

Well, how about if I don't feel like standing up when the national anthem is played at a ball game? What about the social pressure there? The plain fact is that any behavior which the majority does, such as, say, approving of gay marriage, is going to cause discomfort to those who, for religious or other reasons, don't approve of it. Whatever default setting one chooses for anything is going to discomfort some people. And there's just no way around it. Which is why, in any future society which works, we will have to strongly and evenhandedly reinforce toleration (again, not necessarily validation) for those who go against the norm for reasons of conscience.

Anyway, the deeper issue here is that whatever default setting that you set for any belief or behavior, is, in a strictly logical or philosophical sense, arbitrary. After all, your belief that a 'null' religious value is more natural or more correct is directly a result of the philosophical noodlings of John Locke and David Hume. Who may have been, respectively, decent political theorists or historians. But who are regarded in the field of philosophy as not very deep or incisive.

In other words, as noted any number of times throughout this podcast, an assumption is an assumption is an assumption. And, without any other compelling evidence, one foundational assumption is no more valid or invalid than any other.

In fact, if you want to stick to pure logic and rationality as regards religious belief, it would be good to keep in mind what is known as Pascal's wager.

Now Blaise Pascal was a brilliant French 17th Century mathematician and philosopher. And, in its simplest form, he started his 'wager' by noting that there either is a God (ie Meaning to the Universe) or there isn't. So that it follows that if there isn't Meaning, but you have faith that there is, then there's no downside. Because, sure, when you die it will turn out that you were wrong. But since there never was any meaning, then it really doesn't matter that you thought that there was. But if there is Meaning, and you deny it, then when you die, and it turns out that there was, say, an afterlife after all, now you're probably in big trouble. Ergo, opt for Faith.

And if you object that such an approach is completely ignoring the ‘truth of the matter’, it’s really not. Because if there is no Meaning, then there’s also no ‘truth of the matter’.

And then there’s what could be called the ‘democracy argument’. Because even at this late stage of our postmodern era, when Europe is mostly non-believer, and the United States for the past decade or so is rapidly getting there, still the vast majority of Asians, Africans, and Latin Americans do believe in some form of God. What’s more, formerly Communist Russia has seen a big resurgence in religious belief. And even present day Communist China is witnessing something similar.

So that, once you understand that, logically speaking, both points of view are equivalent, then if you really do believe in the democratic process, it would now be difficult to deny that the majority should rule as to what the default setting as to belief in a higher power should be.

Anyway, all of this leads us to the issue of whether there is, regardless of whether or not religious belief comes naturally to humans, any scientific evidence which would lead one to believe in a higher power. After all, it also came naturally to humans to believe that the Sun revolved around the Earth. And, as mentioned earlier, I keep saying that I’m trusting for Science to lead the way forward. And, once again, doesn’t Science say that religious belief is so much hooey?

All right, since this is indeed a very important question to resolve, it is going to take a little while to do it. So let’s begin.

First off, I have already pointed out several times in this podcast that the fact that, to a large extent, for at least the last century you’ve have to be an atheist to be accepted into the Science Club as a member in good standing, that has much more to do with history and ideology than it has to do with actual science.

After all—just to remind you—before the Age of Enlightenment the common conclusion among scientists and the intelligentsia was that the new insights and findings of the 17th Century, particularly in Physics, actually were stunning proof of the Hand of God. Even today physicists marvel that there are clear and precise mathematical laws of Physics which apply throughout the entire Universe, since there is no obvious reason to believe in such a state of affairs beforehand. Galileo, for all of his (actually self generated) problems with the Catholic Church, remained a firm believer until his dying day. And he voluntarily urged his daughters to become nuns. Isaac Newton, considered to be quite possibly the smartest person ever, spent more of his time contemplating theological questions than he

did inventing calculus or figuring out the properties of gravity and of optics. And never forget that the entire scientific process was first established by Franciscan monks in the 13th Century.

So that it was actually David Hume and his doctrine of philosophical skepticism that is responsible for equating the terms 'science' and 'modern' with 'ultimate meaninglessness'. (And this is indeed ironic. Since scientific skepticism firmly believes that the truth is out there. It just calls for both clear and overwhelming evidence, plus foolproof rationality. Whereas Hume's philosophical skepticism starts from an assumption of existentialism, and then posits that we can never ultimately trust either evidence or rationality. So that it actually denies the assumptions underlying the scientific process.)

And you might like to know that even today, when the masses of everyday scientists (as opposed to certain high profile big names) are surveyed, a clear majority thinks that there is indeed Meaning—ie a Design—that underlies reality.

Meaning. Design. Which, when you think about it, is actually, once you strip away the image of some old guy sitting on a throne somewhere, what God is. And I agree that for many of us the term 'God' does have too many anthropomorphic, not to mention, negative connotations. So that for the rest of this discussion, be aware that when I refer to 'God', or even a 'higher power', it is just as real for you to substitute the idea of 'meaning'. In fact, when I say that the default setting should be belief in a higher power, I am also saying that the default setting should be that the Universe has meaning and that Life has meaning.

So let's now reframe the original question: Does Science, either through evidence or reason, in any way support the idea that the Universe (or Life) does indeed have meaning?

And perhaps an even better approach would be turn the question around and ask, Can Science in any way honestly take the atheistic approach and definitively say that it has any evidence or reason to reject the idea that the Universe (or Life) has any intrinsic meaning?

And perhaps the best way to answer *that* is to consider an analogy to the sport of cricket.

Now most of us who are only somewhat familiar with cricket would probably snigger, and suggest that it is ridiculous to even consider cricket to be a sport. After all, a traditional cricket match will last days. People just stand around in starchy white uniforms. Cricket 'bats' are so wide that it would seem almost impossible to swing and miss. Runners lazily move back and forth between two

bases. Fielding is humdrum. Compared to most sports which I am aware of, even tennis or golf, there is little to no excitement or real competition. Worst, the scoring seems almost laughably random. Innings can go by without a single score. And then all of a sudden one batsman will score 150 runs.

All in all, to most casual observers, the whole thing appears to be utterly meaningless.

But that in no way means that I can make a definitive statement that cricket is meaningless. Because, first, I'm not even sure what everyone is trying to accomplish when they play cricket. Even more important, I really don't know the basic rules of the game. And I certainly have never tracked down the official rule book, so that I have no idea if an internal logic actually exists. In short, without knowing everything there is to know about cricket, I am in no position to make a definitive statement that there is or there is not meaning to it.

Finally, the plain fact is that there are well over a billion people in the world who are really, really into cricket. And in my relative ignorance I would be beyond foolhardy and beyond arrogant to conclude that each and every one of them must be utter, ignorant fools. Maybe they are. But, since I do not really understand the game, I am in no position to pass judgment.

So, with that example in mind, let's now turn to how much present day science really knows about how the Universe operates.

Now, to me at least, it is somewhat amazing that the Greeks (and some other ancient peoples) discovered as much as they did about math and, through careful observation, basic science. After all, ostensibly human brains evolved so as to catalog all of their social contacts and to discover and remember clever new proto-technologies. Certainly not to figure out the hypotenuses of right triangles. So why would our brains have even had the capacity or wiring so as to figure out mathematical, or even logical, truths?

(Even stranger, so far as we know we are the first creatures in the Universe in the past 13.7 billion years to be conscious of these truths. So what's that all about? Talk about a tree falling in the forest and nobody hearing it…)

But back to history. Because the science, especially Physics, which was discovered in the 17rh Century made Greek and ancient knowledge look trivial in comparison. For instance, did you know that before Newton no one had ever even speculated that the laws, such as gravity, which governed the Cosmos might be the same as those here on Earth? Indeed, no one had a clue as to the size or distance of the Moon, the Sun, or the stars. They did know the size and approximate weight of the Earth. But

that made it all the more unbelievable that such a massive object could be constantly spinning at a thousand miles an hour. Which is what was required if the Earth did indeed revolve around the Sun.

And then by the end of the 19th Century there was the magic of electricity and electromagnetic energy. And I use the word 'magic' because, even though Maxwell had formulated all of the basic laws of electromagnetism, and even though Edison, Tesla, and others had figured out ways to use electricity to make all kinds of inventions, no one yet had the foggiest idea of why electricity worked. The electron wasn't discovered until 1897, and it wasn't until a few years after that that atoms themselves were proven to exist.

In short order Einstein developed the Theory of Relativity, and around the same time the even stranger existence of quantum mechanics was established. And the quantum world is so weird that, although today we do have a good grasp of electricity, and even of Relativity, and even though we have developed so much technology which relies on the reality of quantum mechanics, there isn't a single quantum physicist who isn't flabbergasted by most of the properties of the quantum world.

For instance, quantum particles don't even exist until you look at them. Otherwise they are just probabilities. (Again: Did any quantum particles ever exist until we conscious beings came along and actually started looking at them?) And, speaking of probabilities, one of the central features of the quantum world is that, not only are particles constantly being created and disappearing, but if two particles are 'twinned' you can move one of them to the other side of the Universe. And if you affect one, the other one is also then immediately affected.

In short, as with electricity 130 years ago, we are using something when we don't have the first idea of what's really going on. Even worse, there's a difference in that now what we do know about it doesn't make the slightest amount of sense.

What's more, there's plenty in the more mundane sciences which is constantly being proven wrong. For instance, up until 1970 virtually every geologist in the United States openly mocked anyone who believed that continents could move around. Until around 1990 virtually every nutritionist believed that the best diet maximized carbohydrates.

But let's stick with Physics. And in this field, for the past century or so, the hits have kept coming. From the 1940's through the 1960's an entire zoo of subatomic particles was discovered. Then it was discovered that Black Holes were really real. Around the same time it was firmly established that Dark Matter existed. And then in the 1990's Dark Energy (which, by the way, is in no

way analogous to Dark Matter) was discovered out of the blue. And the thing about Dark Energy and Dark Matter is that no one has the slightest idea of what they are. But we do know absolutely that they make up some 96% of the stuff in the entire Universe.

So what I'm trying to get at here is that, yes, we are finding out more and more science, sometimes at a seemingly exponential rate. But the more we find out, the more totally mystifying questions that there are. And perhaps the best example of this is the conflict between Relativity and Quantum Mechanics. Now keep in mind that both Relativity and Quantum Mechanics have been proven beyond the shadow of a doubt. The problem, however, is that in some very fundamental ways they contradict each other. For instance, if you try applying Relativity at the quantum level, it results in infinite gravity. And if you expand Quantum Mechanics to the scale of the Universe it creates so much energy that the Universe immediately collapses into itself to produce a humongous black hole.

What's more the famous Large Hadron Collider in Switzerland has already produced energies last seen in the first ten-trillionth of a second of the Big Bang. So that it certainly seems that engineering an even larger collider isn't going to solve the problem. Which means that, if you're trying to come up with a Theory of Everything, in many ways we're basically back to Square One.

And besides that, and the Dark Energy/Dark Matter mystery, there are (at this point) many other seemingly unsolvable questions. Why does time only go in one direction? Why didn't matter and anti-matter cancel themselves out in the Big Bang? What the hell is gravity, anyway?

All of which means that, right here and now, for all intents and purposes Science really doesn't know what's really going on. For all that we really know, at the back of everything there really could be some old guy sitting on a throne somewhere.

So that, just as with my ignorance of cricket, Science is in no position to say whether there is Meaning to the Universe or not. In other words, at our present stage of knowledge, Science cannot logically hold an atheist attitude.

Okay. But wouldn't the logical position then be the agnostic one? That one can't honestly say that there is Meaning or there isn't?

Well, to a certain degree, yes. Especially if you are an honest agnostic, and is open to the idea that there might well be Meaning. And/or if you are not just being mentally lazy, and just trying to dodge the question.

But then there are two other aspects to the situation. First, continuing on from the 17th Century, Science has consistently found order in the Cosmos. Even Chaos Theory in math actually says that

behind seemingly chaotic events there is an underlying order. And Quantum theory does say that the basic building blocks of reality are probabilistic and not really real. But 'probabilistic' is not the same thing as 'random'. All of which strongly implies that when we find out all that there is to find out, we will find Meaning.

And then there is the fine tuning problem that I went over in Episode 35. Actually, however, it turns out that there are several fine tuning problems. The first is that no one knows why any of the 25 or so basic 'settings', which determine the existence of protons, electrons and the like, are set at the values that they are. But if any of those values varied by a tiny fraction, then either atoms or stars couldn't form, or the Universe would have immediately clumped together in an enormous mass. Another fine tuning problem is that the cosmological constant, which is the best explanation for Dark Energy, has to be on the order of 10^{-122}, which is beyond absurdly small. (Remember that there are only 10^{89} atoms in the entire Universe.) And to change that constant even slightly would mean that the Universe couldn't exist. Then there is the 'flatness' of the Universe. The odds of it being that way are pretty infinitesimal. Finally there is the 'original stuff' problem. If the rate of expansion one second after the Big Bang had been smaller by even one part in a hundred thousand million million, then the Universe would have immediately collapsed upon itself.

Now obviously the atheists in the Science Club don't like the clear inference that some Plan must be going on for all of these incredibly finely tuned balances to be happening. So they usually categorically dismiss this inference by huffing that such an idea is non-falsifiable, and therefore non-scientific. But at the same time all sorts of theoretical energy is spent on the only plausible alternative: The idea of an infinite number of Multiverses, a theory which on its face is even more non-falsifiable. Yet they fudge that by speculating that at some point maybe the theory *could be* falsifiable.

Well, following that chain of non-logic, couldn't you then also argue that at some point a theory of Intelligent Design could also be falsifiable? I leave that to you to ponder.

But wait, there's more. Because, beyond Physics, there is also Biology. For, as you'll remember from Episode 36, there's an excellent chance that intelligent, conscious, complex creatures such as us are also stupendously improbable, and maybe even unique, in this galaxy of 200 billion stars.

(And, by the way, you've no doubt been recently inundated with stories in the news about there being billions of habitable planets out there. Well, don't believe it. Because as Episode 36 went to

great pains to point out, being at a distance from a star where water would be liquid is only one of many, many, many parameters which are required to simultaneously happen in order for microbial life to exist, let alone the complex cells which would then give rise to multi-cellular animals such as us.)

Which means that, whether it is a ‘random’ occurrence or not, the mere fact that we might be virtually unique in the Universe immediately implies that there are strong philosophical reasons why we should do our utmost to keep all of this going. After all, if there is Meaning to it, then we are incredibly special in this otherwise cold, unfeeling, unconscious Universe. And I for one wouldn’t want my desire for a belief in Atheism to interfere with a realization of that possibility. Call it a truly Cosmic version of Pascal’s wager.

Anyway, considering all of that, when you combine the implications of Science with the clear anthropological and sociological reality that humans are happier and healthier when they think that there is Meaning, and, yes, a Higher Power, then it would certainly seem to be a slam dunk that this should be the default setting for a future society that works.

Again, though, none of this means that you personally are required to be a believer in anything. If your conscience sincerely can’t accept that the Universe has Meaning, let alone that there is a personal God who is looking after you, by no means should you.

It’s just that, if you are also sincerely trying to take an impersonal look at it all, it should be clear that, whatever you might think, it is far better, there is much greater social harmony, if the larger society has the default setting of a belief in a Higher Power, in a Meaning to the Universe. After all, most humans aren’t set up for deep theological or philosophical thought. And if one default setting comforts people, and the other setting disturbs them and/or saps their motivation, it should be obvious which one we should choose.

Anyway, for the penultimate time that’s about it for this episode. And for the penultimate time I would like to thank you once again for once again so far having listened.