Decisions, Decisions

In this chapter, we want to delve deeper into the basic facts and influences on our thinking, and at the same time increase the size of the playing field by introducing another definition. We have to understand what clouds, controls, influences, and enhances our thinking. Logic gives us the basis for proving or disproving truths. We can see how faulty logic or hubris can influence the ongoing argument but what are some of the basic truths from which our system will ultimately operate? That is, what might we consider our rational foundational truths whenever we approach a subject. In what can only be called audacious, let me state that in theology we call this idea "God" but in philosophical terms this basic founding principle is often called the *Prime Cause* or the *Prime Mover* or the *First Principle(s)*, that is, the one thing which gets the whole ball rolling. This overlaps but should not be confused with Aristotle's idea of 'first principles' (lower case), which are basic ideas without being *the* basic idea.

For now, remember that this is often a premise or thesis which should at a minimum meet the two rules we mentioned earlier from Herr Leibniz:

- ***Identity of Indiscernibles*** (reduction renders the two things indiscernible from one another)
- ***Sufficient Reason*** (no logical argument exists against it at this time)

So when we begin to look at this Prime Mover idea, we are trying to come up with the primal cause of all things, the agreed upon singularity or truth from which we can begin to establish other truths.

Time To Focus

Usually, when we examine something, we are fixed within a space and time frame. That is, we reason it out, not from its very foundational cause, but usually within the time and space frame in which it happened/happens/will happen (*I wonder what I will have for lunch*). We do this not from its very source, that is, its primary cause or as we might say, the '*PRIME' Prime Mover*, position (*I only have peanut butter and jelly, so I cannot have a steak*).

This is mostly because we are trying to solve or understand the problem right before us. Our needs are very immediate, or seem limited to the immediate. How though, do we know we are even on the right path when we begin our investigation? I am not so much worried about why I am hungry, only what in this moment will remove the feeling of hunger.

For us, in order to fully explore our own thinking, we need to establish base camp truths from which we can feel confident in our exploration up the Everest of Truth. To put it simply (and trust me on this one) at this time, this primary cause is our Prime Mover (the connection between cause and movement will be discussed later).

In our discovery we want to avoid the chicken-and-the-egg problem, or the always-half-way-there problem of never knowing where to start (or to stop). So we can reason that there must be a place where truth starts. We will 'postulate' (assume or take something for granted based on sufficient reasoning, i.e. our two principles above) a beginning.

Cause and *Effect* are two portions of the argument. Most often we observe an effect and we postulate or premise a cause. A ball rolls by on a billiards table, followed by the cue ball. What

caused it? Was there a cause? What cause operated on which ball? On both? We know from experience of the rules of pool that it usually means that someone with a cue stick hit the cue ball into the other ball causing both to roll past our field of vision, but is that true? If we did not see the initial cause it is mere speculation on our part as to what that cause was. Perhaps someone just grabbed one of the balls and rolled it into the other; perhaps the white ball was hit by the other and not the other way around, etc., etc.

Yet, even though we observe effects and causes after the fact, we naturally apply cause and effect as a normal mental operating environment. For that reason, we will begin to take on two of the more common postulates. Hmmm. Sounds suspiciously like a segue.

But First, A Detour: *A Priori* and *A Posteriori*

Ha! Not so fast! Of course, as you may increasingly be beginning to understand, you just cannot begin there. There are always more terms which must be utilized so that we can say that we are all on the same page. Two concepts we need to explore now are the idea of *a priori* (from before) and *a posteriori* (from afterwards) which I have already bantered about in less formal terms.

A priori: This is kind of what we are thinking of when we talk about deductive reasoning; it is sequential as in one thing depends on the thing before it. In this thinking, we take the things from *before* (our premises) and come to a conclusion. A priori, it can be postulated, is done mainly without or at least does not depend upon experiential knowledge or more precisely perhaps, independent of experience. What we are really talking about is working from the obvious (2+2=4).

A posteriori: This is what we think of when we doing more analytic reasoning; we take the things from *after* (our experiences, the *effects,* etc.) and come to a conclusion. Posteriori is really based on experience, sometimes the unquantifiable (men grow beards).

Ultimately, and for our needs (as there are/will be other uses of these terms and the fact that I forgot what I was about to write), these are the terms for understanding how we might arrive at a premise. Some things just *are*, independent of our thoughts and experience and other things *are* because experience (or experimentation) has shown it to be so.

Another way to look at these might be by using the terms themselves. Prior means *before* so think of *a priori* as 'before the conclusion', that is, we are moving toward an unknown conclusion through deductive argument. Posterior means (well aside from that) *after*, so we can see *a posteriori* as moving back from the conclusion. *A priori*: think science experiment; *a posteriori*: think crime investigation.

Sooooo, when we look at an idea, we have to evaluate its *a priori* or *a posteriori* nature. There is no value judgment per se, as to which is more better. What judgment we have to exercise is whether the argument has merit, as we have discussed before.

Thought Exercise: *The statements "The Earth revolves around the Sun" and "The Sun revolves around the Earth" can both be considered 'true'. How? What kind of thinking (a priori or a posteriori) is involved in each statement?*

In the end, all that out-of-the-way ruminating will help us to look at two of the possible *Prime Movers*.

Postulating 'God' as the *Prime Mover*

The really great thing about God is that you can throw Him in at the end of any argument when you reach the boundary of truths reachable within that system (kind of like that old joke of adding *in my bed* to the end of any fortune cookie fortune, or the student answering "Jesus" to every question).

There is the argument (St. Anselm's of the 11th century) that states that God is *that thing which we can conceive of which nothing greater can be conceived*…that is, try to think about the greatest thing you can think of in the universe and whatever that is, for which you can think of nothing greater (simply because it is the greatest), well, that is God. This is not a definition of God, nor is the word 'God' the definition for this thing, but it is the word that we use for such a concept.

This begs the question then, because we have conceived it, does that make it so? Is there such a being, just because we can conceive it (think unicorns)? So we have a *definition* of what could be construed as God, but no *proof*. Now we begin to argue about the conception versus the objection or 'thought' versus 'reality'. Very soon after that our heads explode.

Blaise Pascal (17[th]century), known to many due to the computer language named for him, posited a square of oppositions or truth table if you will where he basically used the following four 'truths':

1. God exists
2. God does not exist
3. I believe in God
4. I don't believe in God

and sub to these:

a) Heaven and Hell exist
b) Heaven and Hell do not exist

From these four 'premises' of sorts he (basically) worked out that:

A. If God exists and I believe in him (and heaven exists) then 'whoo hoo'! ☺
B. If God exists, and I don't believe in him (and hell exists) then 'oops', ☹.
C. If God does not exist and I don't believe in him, nothing happens, ☺.
D. If God does not exist and I believe in him then nothing happens, ☺.

List 1: Pascal's Proof For God

So one has to ask oneself what is the worst outcome if I do believe and what is the worst outcome if I do not believe. Pascal would say 'two out of three ain't bad', so you might as well believe.

The 'strength' of this God as PM is that the design of the universe is logically and soundly based in an immutable *external*. There ultimately is no randomness or sense of deterministic Fate.

The 'weakness' of God as PM is the 'improvability' of God.

Postulating Physics as the *Prime Mover*

The really great thing about Physics is that you can throw in speculations based on experiential observation and call it plausible when you reach the boundary of truths reachable within that system.

Modern thought (~17th century and on) often relegates the God PM to the outer fringe, having kicked off the whole business but now absent or dismisses the idea as unobservable and therefore not valid as a premise or truth. This comes from the argument that any 'proof' (think not only 'provable' but also the 'mathematical proof') of God is no proof at all. Rationalism and Empiricism view the world as knowable within itself and apart from any mystical or external cause. This post-medieval thinking champions the sensible/rational human being as origin of knowledge over an external all-powerful entity.

Throughout philosophical history, there are many advocates of the 'no god' school, like Epicurus (3rd century BC) who saw the only viable world as the here and now and Nietzsche (1844-1900) whose point was less that there was no God but more that if there was we had long since supplanted him/her/it. His famous quote of "God is dead." is actually larger: *"God is dead, and we have killed him. Now who will clean up the blood"* (or something in German to that effect).[1] Nietzsche really pushed into the psychological realm looking more to the achievements of man through science, obviously exclusive of any repressive religious or godly influence. We can look at Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980) and even Carl Sagan (1934-1996) and a host of others, arising from the intellectual revolution which questioned the nature and source of intelligence. For this group, the universe seems like an unlikely but well-tuned machine which runs by immutable rules.

The 'strength' of this PM is that it relies on the observable world and does not rely on any extra-human miracles or mystical universals to explain any phenomena.

The 'weakness' of Physics as PM is the *a posteriori* nature of the scientific method (as per our billiards example earlier).

Final Answer?

Actually, neither mover precludes the other. If we postulate God, God could control all of the forces within Himself or could have created them, to act independently of Him yet completely within the confines of His created forces; if physics, by the earlier statements, their independence from anything could be complete, but they may have been designed by their creator to be in and of themselves. Nothing solved, eh?

Making the Decision

So what we are really exploring is the beginnings of philosophy. What are the questions which spur philosophical endeavors? Who am I? Where did I come from? Why am I here? What is the meaning of life? What does all this have to do with the price of tea in China?

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[1] *"Where has God gone?" he cried. "I shall tell you. We have killed him - you and I. We are his murderers…Do we not hear anything yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we not smell anything yet of God's decomposition? Gods too decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, murderers of all murderers, console ourselves? That which was the holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet possessed has bled to death under our knives. Who will wipe this blood off us? With what water could we purify ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we need to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we not ourselves become gods simply to be worthy of it?" (The Gay Science)* To be exact.

The first thing we must remember at this point is that the search is for *understanding*, not just *knowledge*. Knowledge without understanding enhances our view of the world but really does not lead us to critical thinking about that knowledge and how it should be applied. Still without knowledge, in all of its forms, our wisdom would be lacking.

What means of argument can help us come up with the Prime Mover? There is no limit to the number that have been attempted, but we have to do some leg work. Anselm uses a *reductio ad absurdum* (reduced to the absurd) argument which means he switches the argument around (takes its opposite) until he reaches an absurd conclusion, thereby 'proving' because the opposite is ridiculous or self-contradictory (per the Square of Opposition – remember that?). Think of it like the conclusion "water is wet"; how does one prove this? Well let's take the opposite: water is not wet, therefore it is dry, but dry is the absence of water so how could water not be wet? Or something to that effect.

Others, would argue *epistemologically*, from the point of "*what can we know?*" This tact relies heavily upon our senses and our perceptions, which may or may not be faulty and therefore to what level can we depend upon them? However we approach the problem, the quandary of beginnings is one of the toughest in all of philosophy.

Putting It Together

When we begin to ask the *cause and effect* questions and we discuss such notions as 'god' or 'physics', what kind of knowledge are we discussing? Many might pooh-pooh one or the other because of what they consider through *a posteriori* knowledge (science *or* faith), but are there any *a priori* arguments which might overcome these conjectures?

Think back to the billiard ball example. Understanding the prime mover is important for answering some of the questions, but not necessary for all the questions which might arise from the situation. For instance we know, *a posteriori*, that an *object will remain at rest until acted upon by a greater force* and that *for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction*. Ergo, some of the events taking place on the table are explained or have their arguments taken care of by the fundamental forces at work, that is, we do not have to argue them within the framework of the event because there is a larger framework. Still we may be able to backtrack, using them in seeking out the prime mover. Then again they may lead us down a winding and rocky path to nowhere.

So, two things: we do not always need to know the prime mover or first cause to discuss something and we may not be able to determine the prime mover from our discussions. In theology, we are fortunate to have decided upon God but we must always keep in mind in our discussions that many to whom we are speaking or wish to reach with the rich message of the Gospel are not so inclined.
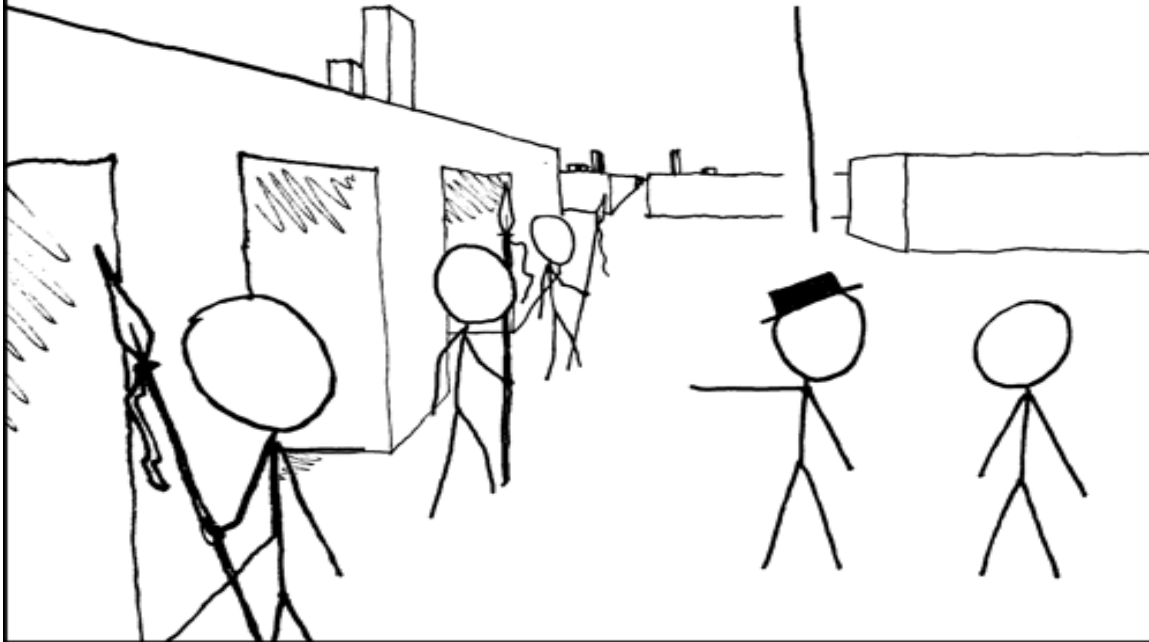
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