# BRING BACK METAPHYSICS Or: THE ART OF THE UNKNOWABLE By Colin Tudge

#### The "ultimate questions"

Metaphysics asks what many have called "the ultimate questions" – 'which sounds pretty impressive, and is. But although these metaphysical questions are clearly so important and ever-present, and indeed are at the root and at the heart of all *bona fide* religions, metaphysics as an independent discipline has largely gone missing. And this, according at least to Sayed Hossein Nasr, Prof of Islamic studies at the George Washington University, is a prime cause of all the world's ills. For it means that we -- and especially the world's political and intellectual leaders – no longer formally address these "ultimate questions" even though they seem to be the most important of all. A key task, then, for all humankind, is to restore metaphysics to the centre stage.

So what are these "ultimate questions"?

I suggest there are four:

- 1: What is the Universe really like?
- 2: How do we know what's true?
- **3: What is goodness?**
- 4: How come?

Science seeks answers to question 1; various branches of "conventional"; philosophy seek to throw light on 2 and 3; and 4 these past few thousand years has been addressed primarily by theologians. But metaphysics in each case has special contributions to make and overall it enables us to unify the otherwise disparate lines of thought. Thus:

#### 1: What is the Universe really like?

In all contexts, the biggest idea of an unequivocally metaphysical nature is that of *transcendence*. It is the idea above all that makes sense of all the others.

Overall, humanity's attempts to get to grips with the Universe and its manifestations, including Life and Mind, fall into two main schools. The hard-nosed, ultra-rational ("buttoned-down", "hard-boiled", "stripped-down", "no-nonsense") school insists that science alone can tell us all there is to know. In the end, say the hard-noses, everything can be explained by the laws of physics. If only we knew enough physics we would, in effect, be omniscient. This idea – that science can tell us everything worth knowing – is commonly called *scientism*. Arch exponent in recent decades is an Oxford professor of chemistry Peter Atkins who told us in *Nature's Imagination* (OUP 1995) that:

"There is no reason to suppose that science cannot deal with every aspect of existence ... The only grounds for supposing that reductionism will fail are pessimism on the part of scientists and fear in the minds of the religious".

Although science of the kind that scientists recognize as science does sometimes aspire to deal with aspects of life and the universe that don't seem simply to be of a material kind (as in psychology and some aspects of sociology), there can be no doubt that *bona fide* science deals most successfully with the material universe: with things that you could stub your toe on, and more generally with phenomena that can be repeatedly and reliably observed, and can be quantified and hence subjected to the rigours of mathematical analysis, and to experiment under controlled conditions. Physics has long been treated as the gold standard while biologists are sometimes said to suffer from physics envy. Even psychologists of the more scientific bent like to root their ideas in neurophysiology, as if what we think and feel is just the noise of neurones firing.

Accordingly, the hard-nosed adherents of scientism ("scientism-ists"?) tend also to be *materialists*: and since they reject all appeals to what cannot be quantified and mathematicised, including the idea of God, they are, perforce, *atheists*. Indeed, Atkins's fellow Oxford incumbent Richard Dawkins compares God with fairies at the bottom of the garden – a pleasing but childish fantasy at best; a comfort blanket. The Universe is wonderful enough without dragging God (or fairies) into it, says Dawkins – a thought echoed, somewhat less bluntly, by Britain's favourite physicist Brian Cox. At best, the hard-noses concede, such musing is harmless enough, and indeed pleasurable, and encourages social coherence, and all the rest. At its worst such fanciful flights all too often lead us into all kinds of dangerous waters, and to all kinds of excess.

In sharp contrast, what for short-hand purposes I will call the "transcendental" school suggests (and sometimes insists) that there is more going on in the Universe that really matters than meets the eye – or, more to the point, that there is more going on than science is equipped to get to grips with, or can ever hope to get to grips with. (To be sure, others have used the term "transcendental" to

mean somewhat different things, but this is what I mean by it here.) As discussed below, people with transcendent leanings do not necessarily subscribe to any particular religion but they often do; and many take the particular idea of God (or the gods) very seriously, and live their lives around their belief.

The discourse between the hard-nosed and the transcendental worldviews has often become acrimonious and sometimes – often! – has led to pogroms and genocide. The hard-nosed of the most extreme kind declare that the transcendentals are primitives, retrograde, holding up our otherwise inexorable progress towards the sunlit uplands of Enlightenment and technological ease, and so are enemies of humankind and should be done away with. The transcendentals suggest that the hard-nosed at least are philistine and at worst are blasphemers who are placing all our souls in jeopardy and so should be done away with for all our sakes. Many a declared or suspected atheist has met a sticky end. (Of course, too, different groups of people who are equally hard-nosed may go to war with each other, as the Nazis and the Stalinists did in World War II; and the fights between different religions and denominations can be among the fiercest of all, with both sides (or all sides) claiming to have righteousness, or indeed God, on their side. No sane person likes war and most people are sane but wars are the norm nonetheless. Why it should be so is one of life's great unsolved puzzles).

In the present world the hard-noses are winning. Whatever may go on in the heads and hearts of people at large the overall tenor of the world, led or imposed by the most powerful political, commercial, and indeed intellectual leaders, is more and more "secular". Well, I am educated in science too – though in biology rather than physics. I feel and always felt that science is wondrous – partly because it is showing us in epiphany after epiphany that life and the universe are even more wondrous than those of a pre-scientific age could have realized (which is roughly what Dawkins and Cox say too). Science is wondrous too because it *can* show us such things -- for why should the human brain, which evidently evolved on the plains of Africa and helped our ancestors to find food and avoid hyaenas and socialise, also enable us to probe and to some extent explain the most intricate workings of the whole universe, and lyricize for good measure? Surely – as Dawkins says – the idea of transcendence is at least superfluous? Aren't life and the universe wonderful enough without invoking God, or some equivalent fancy?

At this point, some hard noses like to drag in Occam's Razor. William of Occam, aka Ockham, was a 14<sup>th</sup> century English friar who famously advised, "*Non sunt multiplicanda entia praetor necessitate*" which means "Entities are not to be multiplied beyond necessity" which roughly means that explanations should in general be as simple as possible. But it does not mean that the simplest explanations you can think of are necessarily the best. As Einstein said, "Everything should be made as simple as possible, but no simpler". Ie: the fact that we can provide a reasonable explanation of life and the universe without

invoking transcendental forces does not mean that there are no such forces. The fact that life and the universe can be explained fairly plausibly solely by reference to the known laws of physics does not of itself mean that the life and the laws of physics is all there is – that there is *nothing but* the known laws of physics. That idea is known as "nothing buttery". Occam merely tells us that we need good reason to reach beyond the laws of physics (which, as a man of God, he clearly did). The real issue is not whether the idea of transcendence is or is not surplus to requirements, or that it has often been deployed for nefarious purposes, but whether it is *true*. Is there any *reason* to suppose that science *cannot* tell us all there is to know? Is there any *reason* to invoke additional influences at work, beyond the laws of physics?

Well actually yes – there are good reasons for thinking both these things.

#### Logical Positivism and the limits of science

First, although some scientists and philosophers have indeed maintained over these past few hundred years that science can tell us all there is to know, and that its methods when carried out conscientiously cannot lead us astray, other philosophers have given us very good reasons to doubt if this is really so.

For there is, so the hard-noses have assured us, no *evidence* for any tendencies or forces at work in the Universe beyond those that physics has identified, or will surely identify soon. In particular there is no evidence to support ideas of a teleological kind – the idea that the evolution has direction: that it is orientated towards some goal. Still less can we suppose that the universe has *purpose*. As Dawkins mournfully or perhaps gleefully informs us:

"The universe we observe has precisely the qualities we should expect if, at bottom, [it has] no purpose, no design, no evil, no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference"

Well, that's one way of looking at it – but it's by no means the only way. In general, those who claim there is "no evidence" for anything more than physics don't know what evidence really is. At least in a court of law, evidence does not mean "proof". If it did there would be no need for lawyers. Evidence is merely an observation that is seen to be compatible with a particular hypothesis (eg with the hypothesis that the child holding the catapult and looking guilty actually fired the stone that broke the greenhouse window). And is there nothing about the Universe to suggest that it has direction and purpose, indicating some underlying design and intelligence? Indeed there is so much that most people including most intellectuals at least until the time of Charles Darwin took it for granted that this must be the case. All those intellectuals may indeed have been mistaken but no-one could say that there was no *evidence* to support their ideas. There was and is at least as much evidence to support the ideas of purpose and underlying

intelligence as there is to dismiss it. The fact that – up to a point! -- we can explain the way the universe behaves without reference to any underlying intelligence is not in itself reason for insisting that there isn't any. And on a point of detail: noone is quite sure whether Darwin himself would have agreed with Dawkins's bleak assessment of the universe. He expressed scepticism in some of his correspondence but he certainly does not come across as an atheist in most of his writing. As the biochemist/philosopher of science John Hedley Brooke has commented (though I paraphrase):

"Darwin was an atheist on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and devout in the rest of the week".

The hard-nosed school received a considerable boost around the time of World War I with the rise, in Vienna, of the *logical positivists*. The logical positivists argued that no idea is worth taking seriously unless it can be *verified*. And in reality, they said, the only ideas that *can* be verified – shown beyond all doubt to be true – are those of science: ideas based on reliable observation and experiment and the most rigorous mathematical analysis. Maths, after all, is applied logic and cannot possibly be wrong. At least, mathematicians lay out their thinking for all to see ("show your working", as they say in exams) so if they do make mistakes (or cheat) they are bound to be found out sooner or later. Many intellectuals of all kinds were convinced by the apparent rigour of these arguments. Logical positivism was, it seemed, a breath of fresh air; a new broom applied to the Augaean stable of past muddle-headedness.

But the euphoria did not last long. Hard on the heels of the logical positivists came the Austrian-Hungarian American mathematical genius Kurt Godel who pointed out that all mathematical statements that are not mere tautologies (meaning they are true by definition) are bound to contain elements that are not themselves verifiable. That is, maths itself is not as rock-solid as has generally been supposed, at least since the time of Pythagoras. Like all human attempts to understand, it has a subjective element.

Then from the 1930s onwards came the Austrian-British philosopher (Sir) Karl Popper. He pointed out that no idea about the workings of the real world can be shown to *unequivocally* true – meaning that no idea of an empirical nature can be verified to the point of being proven beyond possible doubt. For example, he said (it's not a great example but it will do) we can never prove that all swans are white, were we to suggest such a thing, because a swan might turn up that isn't. We can't count all the swans in the world or be sure that we have done so, and we certainly don't know what the future may bring. But the all-swans-are-white hypothesis can theoretically be *disproved* – as indeed it is by the black swans that live in Australia. Scientists should not set out to prove their ideas, said Popper, but to disprove them. Thus the corpus of *bona fide* science is composed not of ideas that have been proved but of ideas that have survived the best attempts to disprove them. Ideas that cannot be *disproved* by observation and experiment cannot properly be said to be *bona fide* science at all.

All is not quite so simple, for as other philosophers have pointed out, it isn't always easy to decide what counts as disproof and what does not. Nonetheless, what emerges from all the to-and-fro discussion is that science cannot simply be seen as the sum of verified ideas, which the logical positivists took it to be. Popper's idea may be open to criticism (as he himself insisted: *all* ideas must be subject to criticism) his core idea – that science is the sum of ideas that have (so far) withstood the best attempts to knock them off their perch – surely is closer to reality. The "facts" and theories of science are not rock solid, "set in stone", a ziggurat of truth for all time. All its ideas are partial and provisional. The corpus of science is indeed wondrous but it is not the perfect portrait of the universe that it is often imagined to be. It is like a vast impressionist painting worked on by a thousand hands, which morphs before our eyes.

Clearly, most human thinking including most or all of theology cannot be definitively disproved and so lie outside the scientific canon. But ideas don't cease to be worth pondering, or valid, just because they do not meet the Popper criterion of disprovability. Popper himself had a great deal to say about democracy, which is not a matter of science (although science can say interesting things about it).

But to my mind, the comment that really sums things up comes from the great 20<sup>th</sup> century biologist (Sir) Peter Medawar. He borrowed a comment from Otto von Bismarck -- that "Politics is the art of the possible"; and in like vein, said Medawar, "*science is the art of the soluble*". Scientists tackle only those questions they think they can answer (with the tools, ideas, time, and resources that are available). No more, no less. It is and must be a pragmatic pursuit. The sum of all the questions that scientists think they can solve falls far short of omniscience, of the kind that the zealots of scientism seem to think we will achieve.

Finally, I like the ideas of the American philosopher Thomas Kuhn. Scientists at any one time, he said, tend to share a particular worldview – what Kuhn called a "paradigm": the metaphorical, all-encompassing impressionist painting that (almost) everyone works on at any one time. But as the scientists discover more and more details, and elaborate their interpretations, anomalies creep in. Then the original paradigm starts to fall apart. Eventually it is beyond rescue. There's nothing for it but to scrap the canvass and start again with a new one. That is what Kuhn famously called a *paradigm shift*. It is easy to list at least 20 paradigm shifts over the past few thousand years\*\* that resonate through all aspects of modern life and thought. Kuhn's view of science is a reminder that science in the end, like all our interpretations of the world, is a *narrative*; a story that we tell ourselves. What we call "truth" is a story which, at any one time, we happen to find convincing.

\*\* I say "few thousand years" rather than the usual 400 or so so as to acknowledge the ancients and the Mediaeval Muslim and Christian thinkers who provided the essential concepts that the moderns built upon.

Right now, in all regions of science, we seem to be in the midst or on the point of some extremely interesting, all-embracing paradigm shifts (for the shifting never stops). Prominent and perhaps chief among them is the idea of *universal consciousness*. This idea has been around in one form or another for thousands of years – in a sense it at the root of all religions – but science in the past 120 years or so has enriched the thesis no end. Indeed, the idea of the universal consciousness may provide the most fruitful meeting ground of all for science and religion. Surely the two great "magisteria" need not be doomed forever to glare at each other from their respective promontories across the void, as is often suggested must be their fate.

#### Universal Consciousness

This idea says, in its simplest form, that consciousness or indeed intelligence or indeed mind do not originate within our own brains as seems to be the case, or within the brains of other clever beasts like wolves and chimps and elephants (and squirrels and pigs and crows), but is *a quality of the universe*. It is out there, part of the fabric of the universe, just as is true of electromagnetism or gravity. We, and other clever beasts, do not therefore *create* consciousness, or intelligence. We *partake* of the consciousness that is already out there, just as we partake of light, thanks to our eyes and visual cortex. However: whereas we are mere receivers of light (and also interpret what we see) we are both receivers and transmitters of consciousness. We receive the signals; process them according to our own abilities and inclinations; and then pass them on. Thus, humanity and other clever creatures are constantly enhancing the mix.

This is a nice, poetic idea I reckon – but not merely poetic. Pioneer research in quantum phenomena in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century beginning with Max Planck (1848-1947) then Niels Bohr then Erwin Schrodinger and Werner Heisenberg and many others suggested – some would say demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt – that the course of quantum experiments is critically influenced by the minds of the experimenters. In short we are *participants* in the phenomena we contrive to demonstrate. We are indeed helping to shape the universe. As Max Planck himself declared:

"I regard consciousness as fundamental. I regard matter as derivative from consciousness".

Or in the words of the English physicist Sir James Jeans (1877-1946):

"The Universe begins to look more like a great thought than like a great machine"

And this from the Irish physicist John Stewart Bell (1928-1990), creator of the paradigm-shifting Bell's theorem:

"As regards mind, I am fully convinced it has a central place in the ultimate nature of reality".

Many others have said much the same. I don't feel it is too fanciful to relate all this to the ever-mysterious opening verse of the Gospel according to St John:

"In the beginning was the Word and the Word ... was God".

Why not for "God" read "universal mind"?

The hard-nosed might object, and indeed do object, that the idea of universal mind cannot be tested critically because the only way to show beyond reasonable doubt whether something exists or not, or has an effect or not, is to see what things are like when we know that the thing in question is definitely *not* there; whether it makes any difference. So it's obvious that vitamin C is vital because human beings fall apart, almost literally, if we're deprived of it. But if mind is truly universal – part of the fabric of the universe – then it is impossible to create conditions in which it is absent. So the idea that there is such a thing as universal intelligence, and that it makes a big difference to the way the universe works, seems in the end, in practice, to be untestable. We may be given hints of universal consciousness but we cannot demonstrate that we really need to invoke such a thing as with can with vitamin C. So the idea fails the Popper test.

But is this the end of the story? What really matters in the end is whether an idea is *important*; whether it is *plausible*; and whether it has *explanatory power*. The idea of universal intelligence meets all three requirements with flying colours. It is hugely important (if it is true it changes everything); it is supported by some excellent physics; and it has the potential not simply to explain the physical universe but to bring together the two rival magisteria of science and religion. What more do we want?

Samuel Taylor Coleridge surely had such thoughts in mind, or at least at the back of his mind, when he wrote *The Aeolian Harp* in 1795:

"And what if all of animated nature

Be but organic Harps diversely fram'd,

That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps

Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,

At once the soul of each, and God of all?"

All this moves us on to the second great question of metaphysics:

### 2: How do we know what's true?

We don't, is the short answer. Karl Popper provided what seem like solid reasons for classing ideas as science or not science, which is a good start. But he also warned that the ideas of *bona fide* science, though "robust" in the sense that they resist the best attempts to disprove them, are nonetheless partial (we cannot know in advance all the things that ought to be taken into account) and provisional (waiting to be knocked off their perch). Confucius and Socrates both went one step further: suggesting that the truly wise person is one who realizes he or she knows nothing. At least: we may be absolutely certain of something or other but we can never be certain that our certainty is justified. As Oliver Cromwell famously said to the Scottish parliamentarians (though the Quakers may have said it first), "Consider it possible that you may be mistaken" – or at least consider that you are not in possession of all the relevant facts, and indeed never can be. Thus as Popper said in "The Beginnings of Rationalism" in 1958:

"... our attempts to see and to find the truth are not final, but open to improvement; that our knowledge, our doctrine, is conjectural; that it consists of guesses, of hypotheses rather than of final and certain truths ..."

In the end all that we claim to know is a matter of *belief* – and why do we believe some things and not others?

Scientists of the hard-nosed kind – and indeed all hard-noses in all disciplines – claim above all to be *rational*, and to base their ideas on *evidence*. This sounds very responsible and rigorous but in truth it is rooted in the old-fashioned notion of *induction*, as espoused by Francis Bacon at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The idea is that if you accumulate enough *facts*, then the theories that explain those facts will somehow or other become obvious. But as David Hume pointed out in the 18<sup>th</sup> century there is no reason at all to assume that accumulations of facts will spontaneously give rise to plausible explanations and as Popper pointed out very clearly in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that is not in reality how we acquire insight at all. In reality we start with guesses and then with greater or lesser rigour put those guesses to the test.

In reality, the same set of "facts" can lead different people – including scientists -- to all kinds of different conclusions. Most strikingly, perhaps, the most widely accepted "standard model" of cosmology tells us that the universe began about 13-and-a-bit billion years ago with the Big Bang. A lot of data – "evidence" – points us in that direction. But a lot of physicists of equal standing simply don't

believe this. Some still favour some version of Fred Hoyle's original "Steady State" theory: the universe continually being created. Others favour a cycle of expansion and contraction. What intrigues me is *why* they favour alternatives. All have access to the same "evidence" but as one dissident said on BBC television recently (I can't remember who) "the Big Bang just doesn't feel right!"

And that's it in a nutshell. The "facts" alert us to problems and we arrive by guesswork and refutation at an explanation but whether or not we *believe* that explanation depends not on the data (the evidence) but on *intuition*: a feeling in the bones; and this is just as true of scientists – or at least of those scientists who are not simply box-tickers, going with the flow – as of everyone else. Indeed, I'm inclined to suggest, those who claim to base their ideas purely on evidence, and those who reject an idea because they claim there is not enough evidence, don't generally know what evidence is. Come to that, a fact is not a fact until we attach some hypothesis to it, to give it context and *meaning*. As Einstein commented (quoted by Anne Rooney in *Einstein in his own words*, Arcturus Publishing, 2006):

"The supreme task of the physicist is to arrive at those universal elementary laws from which the cosmos can be built up by pure deduction. *There is no logical path to these laws; only intuition, resting on sympathetic understanding of experience, can reach them.*"

All this is my excuse for my repeated phrase, "I like the idea that ...", which some may find very irritating. You don't have to be very hard-nosed to see that the fact that I like an idea doesn't make it true or particularly worthwhile. Indeed it does not. I mean only that a particular idea "rings true"; or that I feel it in my bones that it is true. But the point is that this applies to all ideas – including those held by the very best scientists. Of course, the bones can be informed by "sympathetic understanding of experience" but in the end it is not a "logical path" that leads you, or me, or indeed Einstein, to favour one idea rather than another. It's our bones. On rational grounds I am happy in matters of physics to trust Einstein's bones rather than my own (for he really was extraordinarily clever and scholarly) so I try to understand relativity rather than rejecting it out of hand, which my own uninformed bones would be inclined to do. And this is the true role of rationality: not to provide us with new ideas and insights but to help us to judge ideas, according to our own or other people's intuitions.

But whereas I prefer Einstein's bones to mine in matters of physics, I favour my own bones over Dawkins' in matters of theology and of what is properly called spirituality (of which more later). Unfortunately, however, our present, post-Enlightenment age is hard-nosed to the nth degree, and many people including or especially students and especially students of science are bullied out of their intuitions and spiritual leanings by the hard-nosed self-proclaimed rationalists, who cannot see that rationalism taken alone has serious limitations. A pity. There is ground-work to be done -- not to promulgate particular religious doctrines but to re-establish the idea that the thoughts and ideas that in the end are the most important of all cannot be arrived at merely by logic and calculation. The bones must be listened to, though also educated. Intuitions must both be acknowledged and cultivated.

However, we need to ask:

#### Where do our intuitions come from?

If, in the end, all our beliefs – all that we live our lives by – are rooted in a feeling in the bones, then it surely matters (doesn't it?) where those feelings come from. But the answer of course – as is always the truest answer to all life's biggest questions – is that nobody knows.

It seems to me, though, that there is a spectrum of intuition. At one end lies animal instinct. At the other end is what is properly called spirituality, and mystical insight, and the sense of revelation.

"Animal instinct" should be interpreted broadly – because our own selves, all the micro-structures and the metabolic pathways that feed into our senses and brains began to evolve long before our ancestors qualified as animals. We have pathways in common with microbes and those pathways surely influence the way we look at and understand the world. Thus the biological idea of evolution feeds into the metaphysical idea of oneness, of which more later. Many people object to the idea of evolutionary psychology that our thoughts and behaviour are to a significant extent shaped by our genes. Such a thought, they say, is "determinist". It seems to abnegate the notion of free will, which is a key to our humanness.

But to say that our genes affect our lives is a truism, not to be denied; and to say that our genomes are evolved is to say that they have been selected and shaped over 3.8 billion years or so by the pressures and opportunities offered by the universe at large. Each of us is a response to the problems that the universe confronts us with. All living creatures are in perpetual dialogue with the universe at large. I find that thought very pleasing. As for the charge of determinism: there is no simple cause and effect in nature. "Non-linearity" applies at every level. To say that our genes affect the way we are – including our psychology – is merely to say that they lay out some of the ground. We have toast for breakfast rather than acacia leaves because we are human beings rather than giraffes. We are obliged to play a basically human game because we are basically human but that absolutely does not mean that everything we do is predetermined. Tennis players are obliged to play by the rules of tennis on courts of fixed dimensions but within those broad parameters they can and do play an infinite number of games. So we should not be afraid to acknowledge the thoughts and feelings, predilections,

phobias, and prejudices that we are born with, and indeed it can be very helpful to do so. But all may be changed in the light of experience -- and by human will.

Our thoughts and feelings too have surely been shaped by the kind of processes that Karl Jung drew attention to: the accumulated wisdom that he called the collective unconscious.

The idea of the *universal* consciousness goes one step further than Jung's collective unconscious (as least as I understand it). For Jung talks exclusively about humans. The idea of the universal consciousness is closer to animism: the idea that *all* things contain the seeds of consciousness to some extent; that those seeds at least begin to germinate in living creatures; and come fully into bloom in human beings – although there is no reason to assume that we are the last word, at least in theory. More astute creatures than us might or might not exist. But we can certainly envisage that they *could* exist – the universe is capable of producing them.

Of particular interest here is the idea that so far I have left hanging: that of *spirituality*. People of the hard-nosed kind often claim to be spiritually inclined – they don't want to be seen as complete philistines – but are wont to suggest that spirituality is simply a matter of heightened emotion: a physiological, hormonal response to some stimulus that we happen to find pleasing. Dawkins, for example, lays some claim to spirituality because he is moved by the music of Schubert. But there surely is more to spirituality than this. Spirituality should, I suggest, be taken to imply the sense of transcendence; what the late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher and theologian Rudolf Otto called a sense of the *numinous* – of "divine presence"; and the sense of the numinous is achieved, in effect, by by-passing ultra-rational, cerebral intellect and tuning in directly to the universal consciousness. Many people – most? – experience such a feeling from time to time, as Wordsworth described in *The Prelude*:

"A meditation rose in me that night Upon the lonely mountain when the scene Had passed away, and it appeared to me The perfect image of a mighty mind, Of one that feeds upon infinity, That is exalted by an under-presence, The sense of God, or whatsoe'er is dim Or vast in its own being ..." The *mystic* may then be seen as one who is tuned in routinely to the universal consciousness. For William Blake the state that most of us would call mystical was more real than the sense impressions of the day-to-day. As he wrote in *A Vision of the Last Judgement* in 1810:

" 'What', it will be questioned, 'when the sun rises, do you not see a round disc of fire somewhat like a guinea?' 'O no, no, I see an innumerable company of the heavenly host crying, "Holy. Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty"."

Perhaps too this is what Australian aboriginals mean by the dreamtime – which again is more real for them than what most of us take to be reality. Are Blake and the indigenous Australians deluded or are the rest of us blind? We should not take the answer for granted. Should we?

Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge are of course key figures in what is known as "Romanticism", which is commonly seen as a reaction to the ultra-rationalism of the Enlightenment; and although some recognized "Romantics" were avowed atheists, like Lord Byron, I reckon that a true Romantic must be inspired by what is properly called spirituality and that spirituality in general is very much in the realms of metaphysics, and indeed is at the heart of all bona fide religions (those that are not mere cults). Thus as Coleridge commented in a lecture in 1812:

"I have heard it said that an undevout astronomer is mad. In the strict sense of the word, every being capable of understanding must be mad, who remains, as it were, fixed in the ground in which he treads – who, gifted with the divine faculties of indefinite hope and fear, born with them, yet settles his faith upon that, in which neither hope nor fear has any proper field for display. Much more truly, however, might it be said that, an undevout poet is mad: in the strict sense of the word, an undevout poet is an impossibility ..."

But let us move on to question 3:

#### 3: What is goodness?

Moral philosophy raises at least four *kinds* of questions. The first – practical – asks what it is good to do in any particular situation. Such questions are the usual fare of ethics committees. The second asks what kind of attitudes lie behind good actions – as in compassion, humility, and proper respect amounting to reverence for the natural world. The third asks the question that goes beyond mere practicality and rules and asks – "What exactly do we mean by *good*?". This question is very much in the realm of metaphysics. Fourthly we need to ask, "Where do our ideas on what is good come from? Why should we take our findings seriously?" Here indeed is the essence of metaphysics: ask questions until they become unanswerable, and then do the best we can.

We looked at questions 1 and 2 earlier. What of 3 and 4?

We can start with David Hume – a prime example of what Popper calls a "critical rationalist": a person who prefers to think rationally but as a rational thinker recognizes the limits of rationality (as the hard-noses do not). And, he said, we cannot get to the bottom of morality by rational thinking alone. Morality in the end must be a matter of feelings – of emotional response.

In practice moral thinkers these past few thousand years have pursued three main lines (a summary I owe to the Oxford-based philosopher and theologian Timothy Bartell). They are:

Utilitarian Deontological Virtue ethics

*Utilitarians,* or *consequentialists,* judge the moral value of any one thought or action by its outcome. In general, said the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham at the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a good action is one that achieved "the greatest happiness of the greatest number". This seems reasonable (and is very much in line with Enlightenment thinking) but has obvious and serious limitations. It surely depends to a large extent by who is made happy and by what. Nazis are made happy by killing people. That surely cannot be good.

*Deontology* is a matter of authority. But whether or not the outcome is good depends on the authority. Many concerned individuals strive to live according the word --- the authority -- of Christ and those who do are commonly judged to be good. But if the authority is a Nazi or some all-consuming corporate then obedience is surely misguided. The real question is why we consider some authorities to be good and some decidedly less so.

*Virtue ethics* really takes its lead from Aristotle, who simply asked what it is about a good person that prompts us to decide that they are indeed good: to which he answered, somewhat tautologically, that people who are generally deemed to be good are possessed of particular *virtues*.

In truth, all three approaches have some merit, and the moral code of any one society at any one time generally partakes of all three. But the idea that seems to come closest to the essence of goodness is the one that perhaps seems the most vague: virtue ethics.

So what are these virtues? Different people have stressed different qualities including justice and courage and honesty and a whole lot more but three in particular echo through the cogitations of all societies, and are at the core of all the great religions. They are:

#### Compassion

#### Humility

#### An attitude of reverence towards the natural world

*Compassion* is the chief of all virtues in all the great religions. The Dalai Lama tells us as a general moral guide: "Always ask yourself, what is the most *compassionate* thing to do". Every chapter in the Qur'an bar one begins with an appeal to "The compassionate one". Christians prefer the word "love", as in modern translations of Corinthians 13:13: "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love". (The King James translation, dating from the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, speaks of "faith, hope, and charity"). The word "kindness" is clearly in the same ballpark. Compassion implies not simply that you "understand" why other people or sentient creatures are suffering or unhappy as politicians often assure us that they do, but also that you give a damn, which does not always seem to be the case with politicians. Truly to feel compassion you need to feel *empathy*: vicariously but truly to *feel* another's pain. As the Dutch primatologist Frans de Waal records in *The Age of Empathy*, there is growing evidence that other animals of the intelligent kind do have feelings of empathy. Again it seems that our deepest moral sentiments have deep biological roots.

<u>Humility</u> in essence means we do not assume that we are superior to anyone else, or have special rights or privileges, or indeed may eventually become omnipotent, or harbour any other such conceit. The need for humility applies at the personal level – why should any of us presume to feel superior to others? – and at the racial level (racism) and at the species level. Human beings have tended to take it for granted that we are superior to all other life forms – an idea alas reinforced by the Judaeo-Christian notion that we are made in God's image, with the implication that other creatures aren't.

Science *ought* to engender humility. After all, its ideas are always conjectural and always incomplete and provisional and the more we know the more we realise we don't know, and how far beyond our understanding the universe really is. Indeed, some of the greatest scientists have been and are among the most humble of people but some alas are among the most arrogant. Some even claim that science and the "high" technologies to which science gives rise are giving us god-like powers, and powerful governments and corporates act as if this is indeed the case. Such presumptuousness is what the old Greeks called *hubris*, which they saw as the greatest sin and folly of all and the present state of the world suggests that in this they were surely right.

<u>Reverence for Nature</u> is essential if we are indeed to halt the present mass extinction – together with the science of ecology and good practice. Such a sense

is encouraged by the traditional belief that the natural world is the work of God and is therefore *sacred*, and to treat it with disdain is blasphemy. The loss of the sense of the sacred is perhaps the most damaging feature of ultra-materialism.

The sense of the sacred is in turn reinforced by the metaphysical concept of **Oneness**. Here, the metaphysical concept of the **Dharma** is most appropriate. Different traditions attach different meanings to the word Dharma but in the Buddhist version it is taken to mean universal harmony – which assumes of course that the universe *is*, in essence, harmonious. A great deal of modern science encourages that belief. It was Tennyson who spoke of "nature red in tooth and claw" which many alas have taken as a general statement of fact, but it really isn't. Nature overall is more cooperative than it is competitive. If it were not, organisms and ecosystems would be impossible. Indeed there could be no life. Strife, though, unfortunately is more conspicuous – and we tend to ignore the norm. As the psychologists say, we become "habituated" to the day-to-day.

The concepts of oneness and of Dharma are very obviously metaphysical in nature. Indeed, *all* moral concepts are metaphysical in nature. What we call morality is a compendium of very big ideas by which we live our lives and must be taken very seriously -- none more so -- yet they cannot be tested with the rigour that is demanded of ideas in science.

So to the fourth of our four "ultimate questions":

## 4: How come?

Some modern physicists pursue the idea that the universe is composed ultimately of "superstrings", conceived metaphorically as vibrating loops of goodness knows what which account for the entire menagerie of the fundamental particles that are said to provide the material of the universe -- and also account for all the laws and forces that impose order on the whole. Thus, some physicists hope, when suitably mathematicised and tested, superstring theory will provide us with a "Grand Unified Theory" that will account for everything.

But if and when this great day dawns we would still be left asking, "How come there are these things called superstrings, that apparently underpin all the behaviour and qualities of the observable universe?" And answer would come there none. The ultimate question is a matter of metaphysics in the end unanswerable.

Which leaves us with the question:

### So what is metaphysics?

Metaphysics contributes a shortlist of crucial ideas to our attempts to understand the universe, and come to terms with it, and learn to live harmoniously within it and with other people; and these crucial ideas are not supplied and cannot be supplied simply by science or by conventional philosophy.

Just to summarise, it seems to me that the most fundamental of metaphysical ideas -- key contributions to human understanding that cannot adequately be discussed under any other heading – are those of:

#### Transcendence

#### Oneness

--- and in particular the idea of the Dharma

#### The importance of Intuition

But ultimately, the idea of

#### Mystery

Thus, as the much overlooked English philosopher R G Collingwood argued in *An Essay in Metaphysics* (1940), all our ideas are founded in presuppositions and those presuppositions in the end are rooted in "absolute presuppositions" and so on and so on until in the end we find ourselves up against "absolute presuppositions"; things that we must assume are the case but which we cannot ultimately show beyond all doubt really are the case. Thus a pathologist might show convincingly enough that a particular germ causes a particular disease – except that ultimately he or she cannot prove beyond all possible doubt that there really is such a thing as cause and effect. We all know the adage, "Correlation is not cause" but in practice, as David Hume pointed out, the fact that B fairly consistently follows A gives us our main or only reason for assuming that A is the cause of B. What else have we got to go on?

Anyway, Collingwood concluded from similar musing that metaphysics in the end might reasonably be defined as "the sum of all absolute presuppositions": the sum of all those essential concepts that are needed to underpin all our other ideas but which, in the end, cannot be shown to be true. Or as I like to put the matter – following in the footsteps of Bismarck and Medawar:

#### "Metaphysics is the art of the unknowable"

This leads us on to the fourth great contribution of metaphysics – the acceptance that in the end, all is mystery. Life and the universe are beyond our ken. This may seem a lame and depressing way to summarize N thousand years of human contemplation – but as Einstein no less said in *Living Philosophies* (1931):

# "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science".

Einstein was a seriously good metaphysician. But still, we may ask:

#### So what? Where do we go from here?

First, it seems to me that metaphysics is of such importance – it does indeed address "the ultimate questions" and lies at the root of all other lines of inquiry including science and moral philosophy – that it ought be centre-stage: a core subject in *all* formal courses of education. That it has been so conspicuously sidelined is surely one of the great follies of our age, just as Professor Nasr suggests.

Secondly, the recognition that science in the end is rooted in uncertainty – underpinned, as all the biggest ideas are, by precepts that cannot be shown beyond doubt to be true – suggests that it should be taught quite differently. At least, the content must not be compromised. Relativity, quantum mechanics, molecular biology, all should be explored to the nth degree. But science should not be taught, as now, primarily as a practical pursuit, as a way of increasing our power over nature and over other societies, and as a way of growing rich – with the underlying conceit that one day we will be omniscient and omnipotent, able to do anything we want and free to make our own rules. J S Bach in the 18<sup>th</sup> century said that "The aim and final end of all music should be none other than the glory of God and the refreshment of the soul" – and the great pioneer scientists of the 17<sup>th</sup> century from Galileo to John Ray said much the same about their science. This idea, I suggest, albeit perhaps expressed somewhat differently, should still define our endeavours.

Thirdly, we surely need to re-think religion. All *bona fide* religions contrive to provide us with a complete narrative: a deep-rooted explanation of why the world is like it is, and how we should live within it. All perforce therefore have a core of metaphysics and of moral philosophy. Different religions all look somewhat different, with different practices and rituals, ceremonies and manners; and in all cases the metaphysical and moral core is entwined with history, biography, and esoteric theology which tend to become the main obsession of the aficionados. Thus Christians have spent a lot of time arguing whether Christ was himself divine, or was human but divinely inspired, or was simply a genius.

Despite the differences, though, and the fights (and pogroms and genocide) the metaphysical and moral core of all bona fide religions – including those of the global kind and many or most of the traditional, "indigenous" kind embraced by particular cultures like the Maori or the Hopi – is the same, or at least very similar. Or at least, they all partake albeit to a greater or lesser extent of the very big ideas,

metaphysical in general and moral in particular as listed above, with all their variants.

Sceptics or indeed cynics like Richard Dawkins like to emphasise the differences between the great religions, concluding triumphantly, "They can't all be right!" Zealots within any one religion proclaim that they alone are party to the truth and all who differ are blasphemers who should be done away with, as indeed they have often tried to do.

Yet the similarities between the different faiths seem far more striking than the differences – once we take the trouble to look beneath the surface. Many have recognized this of course. Some advocate Interfaith which indeed is a fine and salutary movement – although those who practice it tend all often simply to agree to be nice to people of other faiths, while remaining immovably within their own. Other, at the other extreme, advocate syncretism: out and out merger of different religions to the point where each loses its special character. I feel a middle path is called for. I reckon we should seek as far as possible to build a new narrative around the metaphysical and moral precepts that all bona fide religions have in common - not just the global religions but the "indigenous" ones too: Maori, Hopi, many from Africa, and so on. This in essence is a syncretic approach. But there is no reason why a person who takes this syncretism seriously should not also hang on to the tradition they were brought up with – Christian, Muslim, Sikh, whatever. Rudyard Kipling's line comes to mind – "And what can they know of England who only England know?" In similar vein, it is eminently possible for a person to be a good European and still to be a good Englishman or woman, or French or German – or indeed to be *better* English people *because* they are also good Europeans.

#### Fourthly, and finally, I do like the idea of *The Perennial Wisdom*.

The Perennial Wisdom as I see things is the sum and the amalgam of all the best ideas and insights that humanity has come up with since our ancestors first began philosophising – though we cannot know in detail what our ancestors thought until they learnt to write their ideas down, beginning in ancient China, India, and Mesopotamia. The best ideas and insights, I suggest, come from all sources: science, the arts, philosophy, metaphysics (as outlined above), theology and perhaps greatest of all, though much overlooked and underrated, from humanity at large: traditional customs and crafts and what is peremptorily called "folk wisdom".

To be sure, in one form or another the idea of the Perennial Wisdom has been around essentially forever and has often been abused. Thus zealots from all religions have always claimed and still do that that their own particular religion – or their own particular version of their own religion – already embodies the Perennial Wisdom and that everything else is noises off or downright malicious. But that idea is most unwise; the very antithesis of wisdom. I see the Perennial Wisdom in the same light as Thomas Kuhn envisaged science: not as a ziggurat of irrefutable truth but as a vast impressionist painting that *all* of us can and should never stop working on. Indeed the Perennial Wisdom as I see it is like a living organism, albeit an immortal one, forever evolving but also forever refined and improved.

#### Coda: The College for Real Farming and Food Culture

The goal for all humankind, I have suggested elsewhere many a time and oft, should be to make the world a better place. More specifically, we need –

# "To create convivial societies with personal fulfilment within a flourishing biosphere"

To this end, as I have tried to outline in *The Great Re-Think* (Pari Publishing 2021), we need to relate the very big ideas (of science, metaphysics, and the rest) to everyday life, with politics, the economy, and the law providing the formal structure within which society must operate. "Everyday life" is compounded of many different pursuits and all them matter but the one that matters most in the end, the *sine qua non*, are those of food and agriculture. Specifically, we need "Enlightened Agriculture" aka "Real Farming", informally but adequately defined as --

#### "Agriculture that is specifically designed to provide everyone, everywhere, with food of the highest quality, nutritionally and gastronomically, without cruelty, without injustice, and without wrecking the natural world"

And this, unlikely as it might seem, should be eminently possible – and would be if we had the right infrastructure (an appropriate economy etc) and the right mindset (including the idea of the Perennial Wisdom, as outlined here). Our College is intended to identify, to help develop, and to promulgate the necessary ideas.

If anyone would care to discuss all these notions further please get in touch by email at <u>colin@colintudge.co.uk</u>