

My Philosophy

JOHN D. BOENKE

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John D. Boenke was born in 1926 at Rossford, Ohio and grew up during the Great Depression. He served in the U. S. Army in 1946 - 47 in the Medical Corps. In 1951 he received a degree of Bachelor of Science in Physics from the University of Michigan. After college, Mr. Boenke worked in research and engineering for the General Electric Company. Later he was the Manager of an engineering test laboratory for Lau Blower Company, then Chief Engineer for Halsey Taylor Water Cooler Corp. and Senior Design Engineer for The Werner Ladder Company. Before retiring in 1989, Mr. Boenke also owned and operated a small motel in Ashtabula, Ohio.

Since retiring, Mr. Boenke has been interested in reading and studying in the areas of Cosmology, Theoretical Physics and Philosophy. In addition, he has an interest in the origins of religions. He has privately published several short stories and some poetry.

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to those
Brave Persons willing
to waste their good time
In reading these ideas which
I consider important

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INTRODUCTION

I think we all struggle to some degree in deciding what life is all about, but some of us struggle more than others. Most people seem able to accept whatever comes their way and adapt to it, however that does not include me. I have questioned a lot in my lifetime, but I have not challenged the answers very often, although I have mulled them over and kept them in mind to compare them to my experience of reality. In many cases they did not appear correct and I puzzled over them trying to make sense of them. Ideas which did not fit a coherent outlook I downgraded, and I was then less concerned about their validity and their impact on me.

We all grow and change as we mature. Our early years are concerned with absorbing the culture around us and conforming to it. This is an inborn survival technique which tends to make us the same as the others in the culture and therefore acceptable to them. I began with traditional Christian indoctrination, Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and witches at Halloween. But this all fell apart rather early when I saw ads in the paper for Christmas presents and signs in the stores for Easter egg candies. Those things did not agree with the stories I heard, since these stories implied Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny were supposedly responsible for those things, but evidently they were not. I did wonder why people were trying to mislead me. After I learned about the make believe nature of Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, it made me suspicious about the rest of the stories I heard. It was difficult at other times not to think I was in a fantasy world and that someday everyone would admit, "How it seems is not the way it is." That day never arrived and I grew up into a real world, which I then had to accept.

Because of this early experience, I developed a great interest in science, since this pursuit seemed to give the most correct answers to basic questions. As the saying goes then, "The rest is history". This book presents my view of the world and the great questions of life. It gives my personal ideas of what life is and is not, and it is the most accurate vision of what is going on as far as I am concerned.

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DEVELOPMENT

I say in the introduction that we all change as we mature. Let me enlarge on that. Actually, I think we continue to change during all of our life. We change from one day to another. Who I am today is different than who I was yesterday. This probably happens to everyone, as it is the process of life. When we are born our brains are already rapidly developing because there is much to be learned and experienced. What to do with these new sensations of sight and sound, how to control these arms and legs that just seem to flop around, how to get attention and enough food, and where the heck am I, what is going on, and who are these big people who are always picking me up?

While we are getting all that under control we also start to absorb influences from our environment which is unavoidable. Our situation is imposed on us, and because we are infants, it is completely beyond our control. From day one we begin to be affected by the type of culture in which we find ourselves. The characteristics we acquire by imitation of our cultural influences are called memes, and they can similarly affect who we are as much as our genes do. We are a product of our parent's genes, but we are also a product of our cultural memes. Everything that happens to us influences us to some degree. It is my opinion that some things affect us more than others because they involve more of our senses and may feel more pleasant or more traumatic.

During our early years we develop a basic way of looking at the world and construct our particular way of dealing with it. We become encultured by our family and surroundings. The pre-adult years are then the learning years where much basic information is acquired and many basic skills are developed. We merge into adulthood at our own rate, and become independent and responsible adults to varying degrees.

As adults it seems to me we have two choices. We can accept all our previous life and act in the manners it has taught us without questioning the validity of the foundation, or we can exercise our intelligence and learning capacity to re-examine life and our relationship with it to decide for ourselves what life is all about and how we should deal with it. I believe the latter is the defining quality of true adulthood.

A REASONABLE GOD

If there were a god, I think it would be a reasonable god. Consider for a moment all that we are learning about ourselves, our World and the Universe. The discoveries of science show the Universe and our World to be coherent and reasonable in the sense that their structure is logical, and the system is controlled by definable and reliable rules which we are continually uncovering. From what we have learned about our well functioning Universe, if it were constructed by a super intelligence, it would have to be a reasonable, rational intelligence since it is a reasonable, rational universe. Being omniscient, all factors would be considered, and all difficulties would be dealt with at the beginning.

This proposed representation of a reasonable god is in contradistinction to the usual demanding and all powerful god force which is described as the founder of many religions. I consider this different idea of a reasonable, rational, intelligent god to be more plausible than the traditional anthropomorphized character which exhibits many if not all of the less than perfect human characteristics and frailties. The traditional god was created in Man's flawed image. This reasonable god view is an expanded concept and a more complete representation of a highly intelligent ruling deity.

Additionally, if any super intelligence were able to create a universe or multiple universes, I cannot conceive that it would purposely make its creation into a desolate, uninteresting and unrewarding structure as its end result. By the very nature of being a reasonable god, any task it undertakes would result in being a reflection of the god's basic nature and be a reasonable structure. Any structure or system a god created would result in an expression of the god's characteristics, and the structure or system would thus be reasonable also. I believe that a universe resulting from such a god's mind would be beautiful in the sense that it would be intricate, complex and work in interesting modes of operation.

It would be illogical to construct anything with non functioning parts which would result in chaos rather than a reasonable, smoothly running universe. Any conflicts in the system would be avoided and they would be ruled out in the basic plans of the edifice. Claiming that a god is the builder of the universe in the first place is an assumption that carries with the assumption that the god has the characteristics of a builder rather than the characteristics of a destroyer. As a creator, it would be reasonable to

expect it to create an elegant structure and not just manufacture junk.

If such a reasonable god did construct the universe, it should not concern us too much if we cannot live up to the presumed expectations of the god. It knows our problems and can accept our failures. It is up to us individually to live morally decent lives and to follow a code of ethics based on two basic ideas.

Those two ideas are first, that all people are to be treated equally; and second, that individuals are to treat others the way they wish to be treated themselves. It is incumbent on us to work assiduously in striving for high goals in life, but we need not be devastated by defeat.

The Deists would then argue that such a god described above would not interfere in the every day affairs of the creation. This is an acceptable idea. If we say a god is perfect, the creation would also be perfect and not require any attention. The god would simply observe and not need to make changes in the universe, or it could just turn away and leave the universe to evolve by itself. This would result in there being no evidence of a god existing in the universe.

Consider now the other possibility which is the concept that there is no god. Then the Naturally Occurring Physical Universe which we are discovering in great detail has worked because systems that do work continue to function and to expand, whereas systems which do not work are self destructive and disappear.

The end result of this process is the Naturally Occurring Physical Universe, with which we are familiar and which turns out to be the same sort of place as the god planned universe would have been. There is no difference. In either case it is a Universe having an organization of matter and forces that interact rationally and by consistent rules whether we understand all of the rationale and all of the rules or not. The functioning of these systems advance because they follow the process of evolution, which basically says, "If it works, use it."

So it matters not and is of little consequence whether there is a reasonable god or there is no god because the end result

is the same. The process of evolution is at work in a natural physical universe regardless of which scenario is true.

Evolution is the process which eventually comes into play in the life and death of universes and all of their components, making evolution a basic fact relating to our existence in this World. Evolution functions very well as is demonstrated by our presence here and by the extensive evolution of the heavens around us. The universe consists of billions of galaxies containing billions of celestial objects such as our Sun, White Dwarf stars, Neutron stars, Super Nova, Black Holes, etc. These entities form inside galaxies which probably start out as immense gas clouds and which will probably become massive black holes as they collapse over billions of years.

By the process of evolution, which is the change allowed by the passage of time and the changes in the succession of generations, one celled animals over billennia of years and many generations have become intelligent primates. These Humans are intelligent enough to seize control of their environment and use it as they please.

Evolution on Earth has been a potent force in creating great numbers of intricate structures. A particular result is the complex advanced animal forms of which we claim to be the most highly developed, since we have the faculty of an excellent elaborate intelligence. This marvelous animal has taken over the Earth. We are rapidly consuming the planet's resources for the exclusive use of ourselves. In essence, we have usurped for ourselves the role of the absent god in our World. We have done this because we have the ability and intelligence to control much of our environment, including the flora and the fauna by subjugating, manipulating, reforming and changing it to suit our needs and our purposes much as a god is purported to do.

As a consequence, for us to behave as a reasonable god or simply to be reasonable humans, we need to protect the only environment which will sustain our life. If we do not do so, we will become extinct as has happened to other animals before us, and that result for us would be unreasonable.

Reasonable gods do not overpopulate their world nor do they use more of that world than is necessary for a sustainable life. Reasonable gods take care of the environment and do not waste the irreplaceable constituents. Reasonable gods allow

others all the rights they might claim for themselves and they are cooperative in living with others and with their world. With an Earth populated by humans like that there would be no need for a Heaven. Reasonable gods are the only kind of gods which will survive for the longest time.

GOOD AND EVIL

In the primordial universe there were no such qualities as good or evil. The physical world does not make those distinctions. When living beings came along and life began feeding on other life there were those living entities which advanced at the expense of others. This may have been the first evidence of good and evil, but the problems were not addressed then as those involved did not have the talent to recognize it, or to describe it, or to rail at the world about it. Moreover, the process worked well in evolving higher and higher forms of life. If it had been stopped then, we would not have be here now.

With the evolution of more advanced beings, that is, beings which could conceptualize their actions in the physical world,

they were able to recognize that there were inequitable events and the labels of good and evil were applied to them. Emerging religions picked up on the idea and made it part of their assumption of power. In the process they not only defined good and evil, but subsequently, they attached rewards and punishments to those qualities for the purpose of extending the control of their religion on the population and forcing the populace to do good as defined by the religion. Good and evil seem to refer mostly to how animals, especially Human animals, relate to each other. Good and evil are characteristics created by humans to help define their world.

In learning to live together constructively, most early groups and religions realized that “getting along with each other” was basic to advancing the welfare of the group as a whole. This was expressed as part of their code of behavior in some form of “Treat others the way you wish to be treated.” This idea was evidently applied selectively depending on who was in power, and it probably still is today an imperfect guide, but the basic concept is appealing and survives as a common idea in the general population.

Whether something is good or evil depends somewhat on who is affected by it. Is killing a person evil? Is killing a brutal, vicious killer evil? Is besting others in a competition good? Is taking from the rich and giving to the poor good? Is taking from the poor and giving to the rich evil? This is the playground of the Philosophers. Philosophy, of course, is the art of asking questions all morning, then canceling the afternoon answer session. That may be a little too mean, but I do think we spend too much time talking about problems and too little time doing something about them. Good and evil may be somewhat elusive qualities, but like some other activities, we know them when we see them.

Perhaps another way of saying “good and evil” is to say “fair and unfair.” It makes sense that anyone born into this world ought to have access equal as anyone else for enjoying it in all the many ways sentient beings can enjoy their surroundings. For one to have more that they can use and others to have less than they need is basically unfair (evil). Those that have more usually claim they have worked harder and smarter to amass what they have and therefore deserve it. This is only partially true as there are also the factors such as having a more healthy and stimulating childhood, better training, greater opportunity in the community, better luck, preferential treatment and the choice of pursuing greater acquisitions. I believe all these factors have to

be weighted in when considering how much of the wealthy persons wealth is justifiably deserved and how much should be shared with the less fortunate and the general population.

I believe someone once said, “Blessed are the poor as they are always with us.” Probably good and evil may be considered in the same manner. As long as human minds operate they way they do, good and evil will be with us.

FREE WILL

A subject which has amused Philosophers for a very long time is that of Human Free Will. The great minds were perplexed and fascinated by the idea of an omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient god who was aware of all that was going to happen. If it is a given that god is in charge of everything, how can we as individuals have Free Will? We are only doing god's will whatever we do. Our actions and our destiny have already been determined. Why should we bother thinking or trying to decide a course of action or plan our lives? But we all have the experience of Free Will, and how can it be both ways? Volumes have been written on the subject.

In modern times, Science has exposed how physical and chemical actions are all dependent on the conditions which exist at the moment. In the purely physical world, except on the quantum level, events do follow naturally from what has gone before. They are simply following the laws of physics. In the purely physical actions, there is no memory of the past. Everything takes place in the present with the conditions which exist at that time. There is likewise no knowledge or understanding of the future. The future is whatever happens. This is the deterministic world that guides all of the natural world we know. Everything happens in the present which leads to the unavoidable future situations, and the results follow as natural consequences of the conditions of the moment.

The constraint on our actions is stated thusly. "If we live in a completely deterministic world where all events proceed inexorably from previous events, then anything we do will necessarily follow from what has happened to us prior to the event." Yet we all know and experience the sensation of having freedom of choice, and not being coerced in our making any decision we choose to make except by our own mental processes. In fact, we are held responsible for our actions in law and in the minds of our culture.

As I understand from reading the book, *Freedom Evolves* (Penguin Books 2004) by Daniel Dennett, our thought processes are spread out over time and space in the brain. They are not instantaneous and they arise in the conscious area with the other actions following. What I gather from reading Dennett's arguments is that Free Will is a more complex process than simple deterministic reactions. Rather than happening all at once as other physical processes from one situation to the next, the mental activity of the brain has a time-of-processing component and "the present" is not an instantaneous, isolated

event.

The exercise of freewill is spread out over time and not all parts of the action take place at once or at the same place in the brain. Even though it is an extremely short period of time, we are aware of the action process and a thinking process accompanies it in the same time period. Our awareness surveys the action and anticipates its result even as it is happening. It a real sense, we are observing the action and also monitoring it to be sure it goes in the right direction.

This means to me that a new factor is thrown into the game. If you stop to think about it, the situation is vastly different. We are complex biological structures and we use these intricate brains which are amazing gadgets that have the quality of consciousness.

What is consciousness? Starting at the early onset of life, beginning with the first amoeba to the slightly more complex multi-cellular creatures, their ability to sense and react to food or noxious substances in their watery universe was conducive to survival. The first creatures reacting to their environment was a certain form of consciousness, although quite primitive. This ability grew in many ways as animals evolved, leading not only to all the tactile senses we have, but to sight, sound, odor and taste senses in the higher animals. The sum total of all our senses acting and our brain searching and comparing the past and the future with the present is consciousness. Consciousness is the continuous stimulation of our brain by our senses and is nothing mysterious, since it is a natural product of the evolution of our nervous system.

Think of all that consciousness implies. We are able to hear and understand words which represent ideas beyond physical actions. We are able to formulate and convey complex ideas, and we have a much more voluminous and richer store of information, memories and understanding. Our brains function to review and process this information at all times. This is not a simple procedure. The difference is that we have a nervous system which is monitoring and in communication with all parts of our body. This is a complex, but natural situation in which our brains are functioning all the time. Even when we are asleep, our automatic living processes continue and some part of our senses are aware of our surroundings.

We can use these extensive brain processes to modify what our future reactions will be. We do this all the time. At each step that we decide to do anything, because of our awareness of the past and our ability to assume what the future might be, our actions are no longer just automatic physical functions. We have the mental ability of recalling previous situations and making comparisons with any related memories to evaluate the result. Usually, there is no longer just one outcome for any situation but many possible outcomes, because all of our memory and all we may assume of the future can be called into play whenever we proceed with a life action. There are multiplicities of memory streams in the brain. We are influenced by all of them in the present to some extent. Our memories can be influenced by how we are feeling or by the surroundings or how recent the memory is. Also, forgetfulness can enter into the process, and with whom we are dealing can influence us. These very complex streams of thought are with us all our waking hours.

Memory, awareness and the ability to imagine the future are the three factors which carry us far beyond simple deterministic actions. They are the basic reasons we have Free Will. In determinism the past is whatever it happens to be; the present turns the past into the future by immutable laws; and the future is whatever results from the action. The three factors of memory, awareness, and projection of the future, working in the small finite time period of the present create an entirely new and different situation. The procedure is not cut and dried. There is room for a great deal of variability due to the input we can make to the situation. The same mind that can understand the basic qualities of the current situation can predict possible outcomes, so we can evaluate whether one reaction is more pleasing or more advantageous for us than another, and then initiate it.

Perhaps the basic problem with the Free Will controversy is that we are asking the wrong question. Free Will might not be a dichotomy. It may be incorrect to ask, "Do we have free will, or do we not have it?" The correct question may be, "How much Free Will do we have?" Let us analyze that approach for the moment.

Consider that the complexity of a situation may influence the process. At the mini-miniscule level of quantum mechanics basic particles react only in a probabilistic manner resulting in the individual reactions being not exactly predictable. On the other hand at the usual everyday level of physics with which we are most familiar, simple physical actions are very predicable

as we can define the initial conditions and know the forces at work. When the situation becomes more complex and is influenced by many factors, some of which we may not even be aware, and most of which are variable in nature, the outcomes may be variable and cannot be predicted.

Free Will is not all just one process or another. There is a lot of middle ground. We generate a large number of habits which make everyday activities much simpler and which then require much less conscious attention. We also are open to making mistakes. We can accidentally push the wrong button, or turn the wrong way, or day dream and react in uncharacteristic manners. These things invariably can affect the future.

Accidents may be considered to be deterministic. However, we have the ability to recognize a mistake and go back and correct it in many instances. How often have you said “Oops” and gone back and repeated your work to make it come into line with what you wanted in the first place? This ability is the rational component of our human mental make up, and it gives us control over the simpler deterministic actions. This quality of being variable in nature is the result of the interactions of our memories, our present feelings and our learned biases, all of which are a result of our individual life experiences and psyches.

The Philosophers over the ages have made persuasive arguments against the possibility of Free Will, and there has been much serious thought on both sides of the issue, but ultimately it is up to each of us to decide for ourselves how we feel about the question.

In my view, the fact that there are many possible outcomes or ways of viewing most situations coupled with the ideas that we can understand and select among the numerous outcomes based on what is most advantageous for us, and that the same facts may result in different determinations by a variety of people, convinces me that Free Will is operating. If others still wish to believe that all actions are determined rather than being free, that choice is in itself either an expression of inescapable determination or an exercise in Free Will. Whether we believe the old philosophers or the new arguments, both positions can claim some logical justification.

The question, “How much Free Will do we have?” will probably never be answered. We could say that Free Will is the process of determining our actions by using a multitude of factors in our brains. Many of these factors cannot be exactly predicted, and all of them are determined by complex processes which are unique to our memories and our particular nervous systems. But that will still not satisfy everyone, and we will individually hold to our own ideas. Personally, I am not willing to concede that our intellectual fate is an inescapable condition. However great or small it is, we do have some Free Will.

LIFE

Philosophers are persons who spend their time and effort wondering about why we are here, and they come up with a variety of answers or no answers. The Religious defend their particular answers with great passion, and no one really knows anything positively, except that when we have examined our situation honestly and in great enough detail, we realize we are in a real world, and it is to our advantage to make the best we can of it.

Life is a rich but perplexing experience. We are endowed with many senses which we use in contacting the physical world. We see, hear, taste, smell and have all the tactile senses of heat-cold, touch, pain, position, force, balance, etc. Everything we know about the real world comes to us through our senses. These inputs are then stored and processed by our brain in marvelous and complex ways to give us feelings, emotions, awareness of ourselves and consciousness of our environment.

Happily, our senses give us access to much more than that which we need to survive. Seeing and hearing particularly do so by providing us with experiences and stimulations, which interacting with the other senses, result in greater feelings of pleasure and excitement we call emotions. We have the rich rewards of intellectual stimulation, interaction with other humans, music, painting, sculpture and the other creative arts. We also have emotional experiences both sensual and intellectual, and particularly we have the immense rewards of being aware of our surroundings and of being able to learn and understand the processes going on around us. There are also the undeniable pleasures of growing plants and creating useful structures.

How we spend our life depends on our attitude and circumstances. If we need to spend all our time and effort in the area of simple survival, there is not much opportunity to enjoy the various pleasures the Earth offers. However most of us have some free time to explore the natural world. Whether we do this and to what extent we pursue it, our actions are our individual choices. Many persons spend their entire life in the various Arts to the exclusion of the wonders of the Sciences which others follow passionately. Other large groups pursue the sports world or outdoor activities. We each may do what we wish, but to do nothing wastes an unimaginably rare situation of awareness, and we rob ourselves if we do not follow some interest in the natural world. This is our one opportunity in literally billions of years.

AFTER LIFE

Let us not be ridiculous, we are very complex animals, but we are still animals. We are part of a universe which evolved elaborate plant and animal life over many millennia. These life forms successfully survived through countless hostile environments, and they have firmly established themselves as creatures of an immense and complicated physical world.

As such, we are forced to abide by the rules under which that universe works. One immutable law of the physical world is that individual living things die so that there will be room for fresh, more adapted new additions to the species, but by individuals dying, the species will not overpopulate a finite environment. That environment might not then be destroyed by overuse which would wipe out the species. This results in the species surviving but individuals dying.

Death is a final event. Just observe any dead animal. It does not do living things any more; its eyes do not see, nor its ears hear, it does not breathe, eat or do any of the activities recognized and described as being “alive”. It does not move and it eventually decomposes allowing all the elements of which it was made to disperse back into the great mass of material which is the World.

As an outlook on the future, this may sound very dismal, but consider the situation in another manner. All the material of which we are composed has been here as long as the universe, close to fourteen billion years, and it will still be here in some

form or other after we die. Furthermore it will remain in existence as long as the rest of the universe remains whatever period of time that may be, but it is estimated in the hundreds of billions of years.

In a sense we will be here because the materials which composed our bodies will be here, but we will not be “aware.” However I consider that with great relief, knowing that I will not have to experience billions of years of nothing. Compare that time span to waiting in the doctor’s office for several hours. I think eternity might get very boring after the first millennia or so, no matter what you would be doing.

I can understand the compulsion to believe in an afterlife, since all we have ever experienced is life. We learn about what happened before we were here, and we feel a continuity with history. It is particularly difficult to recognize that our awareness will come to an end, and most people are not willing to acknowledge that eventuality. We must admit we were not aware before our process of gestation and being born so the return to unawareness when we die should not be such a surprise. Ask yourself this question, “Why are we aware?” The answer of course is, “We are aware because we have a functioning, living brain which has the quality of awareness.” When that living brain no longer exists or functions how can we still be aware?

Reason and rationality tell us we cannot be aware after death, and we should accept the inevitability of the facts. This should be no more difficult than imagining an afterlife of Judgment, Acceptance or Rejection, Hell, Heaven, and Eternity combined with eternal awareness and all that implies. Remember, we know the span of existence of the Earth is finite, and it will eventually be part of the Sun and even part of the black hole that occurs at the center of our Galaxy. I do not think it would be advisable to be aware at that point in time.

I describe all that we are, our physical appearance, our manner of behaving, the way we influence others, and all our human attributes as our Psyche. This Psyche is not ethereal, it is ephemeral and is just how others experience us. Being part of the real world, a Psyche does not have any mystical, non-physical component. When I die my Psyche is also gone, and all that remains is the memory of me in the minds of those who knew me and who are still alive, but that memory is part of their Psyche.

I am content to experience and enjoy life as much as is possible for me while I am here, but I know when I am gone I will no longer have to deal with life. I will simply not exist as a separate entity.

PHILOSOPHICAL COMMENT

“If god is an omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient god who is aware of all the world, why is there evil in the world.” This is one of the basic philosophical arguments against the existence of god which is generally called, “The Problem of Evil.” Consider how long we have been here, and how many religious people have been praying for peace in the world, and how many wars have gone on and are going on, and how many people have died trying to win them or stop them, and how obviously unsuccessful they have been, and one wonders, “Where is this god which is so benevolent? Is it not listening, or is it just not there?”

It seems to me that in our present state of development we can go beyond even the problem of evil idea with the philosophical rule known as Occam’s Razor. This rule says essentially that in any logical situation, the simplest explanation is likely to be the correct one. The scientific establishment through its work and investigations has discovered much of the origin of the universe, and the processes involved. Moreover, they are revealing more of the inner workings and the content of it every day. What they are learning shows there is no complicated, ethereal, mystical god needed to accomplish the creation of the universe and it would follow then by Occam’s Razor rule that the god idea is superfluous and confuses the issue, so the simplest explanation is that what we have is only a naturally occurring universe which was not created by a god nor is it now controlled by a god. It is up to human intellect to make it a livable place. Are we up to doing that?