

FREE-MAN'S PERSPECTIVE

How Life, Liberty & Sanity Can Win

Issue #31

January 2013

The Foundations of Natural Religion



In this issue:

The First Condition	2
Proof & Probability	4
Universal Conditions	7
Suggested Practices	9
Final Thoughts	9

Don't worry, there won't be an offering, or anything like it.

Referring to man's natural state has been crucial to liberty and development over the past few centuries. One aspect of the original, primal state that has been overlooked, however, is natural religion. This field of inquiry lies almost untouched before us, and I think it is important to examine it.

I do, however, want to give you one of my conclusions before we get started:

A natural religion would be far more positive than any religion you know. It would see man (in essence, if not always in practice), as a glorious being.

Almost none of us have experience with positive religions; we are more likely to have experience with religions that consider us degenerate beings. Many of us have heard such things for so long that considering a positive religion seems very strange. Nonetheless, more or less all the positive ideas of natural religion exist in the core documents of Judaism and Christianity.

Actually, the natural religion we will uncover seems fully compatible with the basic tenets of Judaism and Christianity. I suspect that this is also true for Buddhism and Confucianism, but I don't understand those traditions deeply enough to be certain.

But even if nothing we cover will be opposed to your own religious opinions, I'll ask you to place them aside for the moment. Thinking clearly about natural religion requires us to look at the subject afresh. So, please set aside all of your previous religious thoughts. You can certainly pick them back up later.

Remember that we are not searching for a an ideal religion here; we are searching for a *first condition* for religion. So, as we look back to primal times and imagine man's first spiritual impulses, let's not bring our modern teachings with us.

THE FIRST CONDITION

In FMP #8 we examined how Francis Bacon turned science around by starting with small, verifiable facts and building upward, rather than imagining a grand conclusion and working downward from it. Men and women in a truly primal state wouldn't need a Bacon to get their minds off of grand patterns and back to the real world, since they wouldn't have any grand pattern to begin with.

In their primal, natural state, men did not have a set of myths that explained everything. There was no creation story and no set of attributes to place on anything above himself. A natural man would have no deities at all and no beliefs at all. He would find himself in a generally supportive world, and would have to find explanations for this world (if he so wished) by himself.

So, what I am calling natural religion would be a starting point, and *not* a set of beliefs designed to answer every hard question, confirm the bereaved, comfort the troubled and so on. Natural religion has *no explanation of everything*. It has no grand pattern, no final judgement and no prophets.

A natural religion would begin by affirming the most basic ideas and only then building upward. So, let's get started:

THE PRELIMINARIES

For natural religion to be worth our time at all, there are two requirements:

1. *There must be some reason to think that there is a being (or beings) higher than ourselves.*
2. *There must be some reason to think that we can somehow reach toward this being (or beings).*

If we didn't have reasons to believe these two things, we could not honestly proceed.

SO, IS THERE A CREATOR?

Since the men first looked at the world around them and the stars above, a simple question has haunted them:

Why is there something, rather than nothing?

The question can be ignored, or it can be explained away with myths and theories, but still it stands.

For example, many modern people, when faced with this question will answer that "all matter came out

of the Big Bang.” This answer (really just a memorized slogan) sidesteps the question by moving it one step backward.

Where did the stuff that made the Big Bang come from?

Matter does create itself out of nothing; we have more than enough scientific knowledge to be sure of this. So, why should there be anything at all?

“I don't know” is a perfectly fine answer, by the way; an honest answer. But if we do say “I don't know,” the sheer magnitude of the question demands that we examine further. The origin of everything is no trivial issue. It's a question that *should* pull at us.

Let's look briefly at some further aspects of this grand question:

Nothing From Nothing

As mentioned above, it is perfectly clear that the things which appear were not *made* by things which appear. Nothing comes from nothing, and stones do not simply appear in mid-air.

Nothing we see could have created what we see. Yet it is here. So, the logical conclusion is that it was made by something that does *not* appear. There's really no honest alternative.

Order & Entropy

Another amazing fact, beyond the existence of anything, is that the universe works at all. A single atom is almost unimaginable as random occurrence. The existence of a stupendous number of atoms being found – *in identical form* – everywhere in nature, including places billions of trillions of miles distant from us, is mind boggling and far, *far* beyond improbable.

Adding to this insane improbability are all the other hyper-complex features of the natural world, culminating in thriving life. To think that all of this was an accident is absurd.

But there is a counter-argument to this thought, which is that all of the disordered things in the universe obliterated each other over billions of years, and now only those things which are ordered remain.

The problem with this idea is that it runs counter to all our observations of the universe. The base condition of the universe is entropy. Every non-living thing we can see tends toward disorganization, not the reverse. Only living things reverse entropy.

So, the idea of a self-ordering universe is without scientific merit; it assumes, with absolutely no basis, that the universe reversed it's nature at some point.

Life, Entropy & Sequence

If we take the statement as true that *only life creates order in the midst of a general entropy*, then we would also have to accept another conclusion:

Life must have preceded an ordered universe.

Again, the only challenge to this would require the universe to have changed its basic nature at some point in the past. (And the Big Bang would not suffice as this change, since it is presumed to have preceded the universe.)

Word Formulas

I've heard esteemed scientists come up with overtly authoritative pronouncements that "you may not have an argument that requires..." Not to be crude, but regarding such responses, I 'call bullshit'. These pronouncements are used to intimidate and confuse people; they are dishonest and coldly manipulative.

Our question is fully valid and stands on its own: Why is there anything at all? The 'scientist' must either answer it or evade it, and in so doing, he or she judges him or herself. (Again, "I don't know" would be a perfectly acceptable answer.)

Another Step Back

A common challenge to the idea of a first cause is this: *Well then, if there was a creator, where did he come from? What was **his** first cause?*

The honest answer, of course, would be "I have no way of knowing." This, sadly enough, is sometimes followed with "Aha! I got you!"

Catching someone in a question they can't answer, however, proves nothing. We are not required to know everything in order to present a question.

Once these arguments are concluded, the original and essential fact remains: *There IS something here.* People who cling to argumentation are evading the original question: Why is there something here?

PROOF & PROBABILITY

None of this, of course, proves that there is or was a creator, though it does indicate a very high *probability* that there was.

But even if we accept this probability, we cannot say anything about the nature of this creator, only that he/she/it is something whose nature is different than anything we can see.

CLUES FROM LOGIC

The odd thing about logic is that it is in effect everywhere at all times. This seems so utterly normal to us that we'd have difficulty even imagining a place where logic didn't hold. The idea, however, that logic should be universally true, is actually very strange.

Logic exists as a characteristic of the universe. And, so far as we know, for a thing to exist, it must have a cause. All things that are seen are contingent upon other things. This implies that logic, like the universe, was created.

Upon careful analysis (which we will not undertake here), it appears that logic not only had to be created like the universe, but must have actually *preceded* the universe.

Again, these arguments are not proof, but neither should they be ignored.

RECAP

At this point we can recap and make some clear points:

- There is a universe here.
- This universe could not have been made by anything that we can see.

The most likely inference from these facts is that the universe was created by some being or thing which does not appear.

The fact that logic and truth seem to have an existence prior to the universe may tell us something about the nature of the creator. We are speculating, of course, but if logic and truth were associated with the creator even before the universe did, then this creator would:

- Have a continuous nature.
- Would be truthful to him/itself.
- Would have definable properties (whether or not we understand them).

Okay, this is the point where you may *not* insert a myth you were raised with or that you've heard other people discuss. If you feel old ideas creeping into your mind, please push them back. This is not the place and time for them.

We've now established a certain likelihood that the world which appears was made by something that does not appear. And, we've generated some fair guesses about the nature of this creator. We're not completely sure about anything, but it does appear that we've cleared the first of our two hurdles: there is some reason to think that there is or was a creator.

Now we move to our second hurdle.

DOES MAN FEEL OR CONNECT TO THE CREATOR?

It does make a certain amount of sense that man, the most advanced life-form known in the universe, should have some resonance with the creator, but there is a lot implied in that idea and we haven't proved any of it yet. So, let's not jump to conclusions.

Let's also remember that we have to be very careful when analyzing feelings – feelings can be interpreted in any number of ways, and these interpretations should never be mistaken for facts. Feelings are real and do have causes, but they tend to be slippery and poorly lit. The same feeling can elicit wildly divergent interpretations in different people. Further, feelings can be “imagined into existence,” which we also must not mistake for evidence.

So, do men and women have some type of connection or feeling for the creator? Let's look at a few specific areas:

The other side of the heart. (Covered at length in FMP #19.) Feelings such as awe and grandeur serve no obvious biological purpose. Why then, do they persist, so broadly, in humanity?

One possible answer is that they are due to some sort of strange and extraneous brain circuitry. Another answer is that they do not pertain to the body, but to the spirit of man: to man's non-physical being. If this second explanation is correct, then the ability to *resonate* with beauty – not merely to observe it – is our spiritual nature in action, resonating with something beyond the simple, physical world.

The human who cannot rise in consciousness to the stimulus of beauty strikes most of us as damaged in some way. This indicates that a spiritual nature (if this theory has merit) is the default condition for human life.

The senses that do not age. As people get old, the pleasures that function in conjunction with

their bodies diminish. The enjoyment of food, the pleasure of movement, sexual pleasures and others, tend to fade. But while their body-centered senses diminish, their 'spiritual' senses remain.

It has often been proposed that old people tend to get more spiritual because they know they are approaching death and fear what might face them afterward. But while this certainly happens, it is far too simplistic to serve as a complete explanation for every old person.

The fact that old people tend to lose enjoyment from physical sensations but do *not* lose pleasure from spiritual sensations points to the possibility that spirituality is not a body thing; that it is something more.

Life presumes omnipotence. There are interesting things to learn from what I call *observations in extremis*: from observing what happens in extreme circumstances.

The following passage is from *The Reawakening*, by Primo Levi. It is an account of Levi's experiences related to the Nazi death camps of Auschwitz. (An extreme situation to be sure.) This is what Levi felt at his liberation:

They [the liberators] did not greet us, neither did they smile; they seemed oppressed not only by compassion but by a confused restraint, which sealed their lips and bound their eyes to the funereal scene. It was a shame that we knew so well... the feeling of guilt that such a crime should exist; that it should have been introduced irrevocably into the world of things that exist, and that his will for good should have proved too weak or null, and should not have availed in defense.

Here, with confusion removed in the "funereal scene," and with death's face uncovered, something deep inside of both Levi and the liberators felt failure "that such a crime should exist." Stripped clear of obstructions, the inner man presumes itself to be potent. In this case, it expected near-omnipotence of itself and experienced guilt that its "will for good" had not been sufficient.

Experiences like this would imply that, stripped of everything external, something inside man is, contacts, or has been affected by, something that assumes itself to be both supremely potent and good.

The unity of the higher impulses. It seems that all of the "higher impulses" we are describing have a certain unity to them. For example, "rising elements" that we are attributing to men and women, like awe and grandeur, are also those seen in devotion to truth, the desire to bless, and the determination to protect life and secure justice, even in situations where there is nothing physical to gain and much to lose. In these cases, something non-physical overrides strong physical concerns.

The fact that these "better impulses of human nature" seem to travel together implies that they all share a single source.

The surprise of spirituality. A huge number of us have, at one point or another in our lives, been surprised by spiritual impulses or experiences.

For example, I once lectured to a fairly large group of highly educated people, a significant portion of them atheists. After apologizing for putting them on the spot, I asked them to raise

their hands if there was ever a time in their lives when they had some sort of spiritual experience: something good that “should not have happened,” but did. A large majority of them raised their hands.

We could explain “surprise of the spiritual” experiences by insisting that they arise from repressed fears and old impulses. But if, even once, they could not be explained in this way, the surprise of spirituality would have to be taken seriously.

None of these things are proof, per se, but they provide a long string of interesting observations, all pointing in a single direction. At what point do we stop inventing reasons to avoid their natural conclusion?

And, if the creator entity we are positing is different in nature than the things which we can see, we may lack simple methods for proving its existence anyway.

HURDLES CROSSED, NOW WHAT?

I think it is fair to say that we have now passed our first two hurdles sufficiently to proceed.

We are now at the point where we can begin building from the bottom-up.

UNIVERSAL CONDITIONS

As we look out upon our world and the universe in general, we find two primary classes of things: Inanimate matter and living things.

We referred earlier to the difference between these two types of things:

The general nature of inanimate things is that of entropy.

The general nature of living things is to reverse entropy.

Non-living matter moves persistently from higher concentrations to lower concentrations; from pockets of hot and cold to a lukewarm whole. Living things reverse this. For example, plants take water, light and ground minerals and turn them into highly concentrated nutrients.

All living things gather entropic matter and organize it for higher uses. Insects, for example, take the refuse of the planet and become tiny flying machines, as well as (in the case of bees) performing chores such as pollinating plants and providing highly concentrated energy (honey). And this pattern holds for all living things. It is in the nature of life (and may be the *essential* nature of life) to reverse entropy.

But while all living things organize the world toward higher and more useful concentrations of energy, they have fixed sets of abilities: Bees can produce honey, but not oxygen; plants can produce oxygen, but they cannot move pollen; and so on.

One living thing, however, surpasses fixed abilities, and that thing is man. *Humans have the ability to create abilities.* Furthermore, humans are willful beings. We generally accept this condition uncritically, but we find ourselves in an astonishing position:

We, alone in the known universe, can reverse entropy willfully. We are able to improve the world, if and as we wish.

This astonishing ability provides man with a unique vocation: that of a junior creator. We cannot create matter of nothing, but we can mold it to an infinite number and variety of uses. Furthermore, we can continually add to our abilities. We can create new ways of creating.

Man, by nature, is self-surpassing.

It appears that we bear the impress of the great creator, in that we are structured to be creators in our own realm. The creator made the matter of this universe, and we organize that matter and its resident living things toward higher uses and higher values.

If this is true, then we should think of ourselves as assets to be developed; as creators without clear limits, whose appropriate vocation is to create value and benefit in the world.

THE SANCTITY OF LIFE

Life is the essence of counter-entropy in this world. Through the lower forms, life provides an environment for higher life to exist in the universe. Man, the highest form of life we can see, is gifted with the ability not only to create profusely, but to choose what he will or will not create.

Life itself appears to be an emanation from the creator into the world. As with most of the things we covered earlier, we can't really prove this, but it follows a clear chain of causality. If we accept the probability that the universe was made by some sort of creator entity, it seems to follow that life is the creator's continuing expression in this universe. And it is very clear that life finds expression limitedly in plants, more so in animals, and most fully (so far as we know) in man.

It would thus seem that life itself is the great ennobling agent in the universe – and that we all bear the expression of the creator simply by being alive.

HUMAN EVIL

As we all know, humans have displayed some bad characteristics over the years. The first thing to realize about this, however, is that natural religion has absolutely no obligation to address such things.

Natural religion is concerned with man connecting to the creator and developing himself. People who are acting badly stand outside the realm of natural religion. If and when they stop destroying, they can learn about life and creation, but until they do, they simply stand outside. And nothing needs to be done about this.

Furthermore, natural religion has no obligation to fix the problems of the world; it is a set of ideas and practices that address individuals, and individuals only. To apply the findings of natural religion to mankind as a whole would create problems.

Natural religion is for those who want to elevate themselves, and no one else. Those who wish to degrade themselves have no part to play. They are outside, and those who are inside have absolutely no obligation to drag them in.

Natural religion does, however, uncover one important fact about humans and evil:

All of man's special abilities are controlled by his will. Men's wills, therefore, should be protected more diligently than men's bodies.

It is very difficult to control men in the same way that animals are usually controlled, by restraining their bodies. Humans are intelligent beings and adapt to avoid such methods. The unique structure of mankind requires that a successful strategy for abusing them must capture (or at least manipulate) their wills. Where the will goes, all of man's creative and productive abilities follow.

The great human problem, then, is not destruction or even slavery, but deception. A successful attack on a man's will turns him into a persistent tool of the attacker. And, truthfully, this is where the vast

majority of human destruction comes from, not from individual monsters, as horrifying as they may be.

At the root of human destruction lies obedience, not blood lust. (See FMP #25.)

So, were natural religion to address evil, it would do so by training men to guard their wills; to recognize and reject manipulation. Men and women need to be fitted with armor for their wills, far more than armor for their bodies.

THE PRACTICE OF NATURAL RELIGION

There is no fixed set of practices for natural religion. Natural religionists can each create their own practices or choose to have none at all. There is only one firm principle in this area, which is this:

*Natural religion is a **means**, not an **end**. It is merely a tool to help humans self-surpass: to create, to produce, to bear fruit.*

Religion as an end, serving and extending itself, is a type of idolatry.

I suggest the following as a set of practices that seem suited to natural religion:

- The practice of self-examination and self-knowledge.
- The practice of integrity.
- The practice of understanding. (I *know* a fact, I *understand* a hint.)
- The practice of passion. (The great enemy of passion, by the way, is not apathy, but vicarious experiencing.)
- The practice of reality-centeredness.
- The practice of love. (By love, I mean *the primal desire to bless* – more or less what the ancient greeks called *agape*.)
- The practice of meditation.

I think that an old Jewish method would be best for comparing ideas and practices: Joint repositories of arguments, but none for dogmas or doctrines. Each person makes up their own mind. Each local group makes their choices and is answerable to no one.

The philosophical problems to expect would be those that arise in response to death and injustice. Religions dealing with these tragedies are pressed to explain them in terms of hidden justice, which pushes them into the acceptance of grand patterns. These are painful problems, to be sure, but any religion (or set of beliefs) that moves to a grand pattern destroys their future progress. Natural religion builds from the bottom-up, not from the top-down. Reversing its nature would also reverse its virtues.

* * * * *

Final Thoughts

I think that my New Year's Editorial fits very nicely here at the end of a January issue covering natural religion. Please accept my very best wishes for you and yours in 2013.

We are one longitudinal family of mankind.

If you could go back in time a thousand years, you would find individuals who reminded you very much of your current friends and companions. The same is true of people who will live a thousand years from now: Some of them will be nearly identical to the people you love now.

You would love and care for those people the same as you do their counterparts here and now.

Please understand this: Those in the future, who would be our beloveds, can only advance in the same way that we have: By the benefaction of their predecessors.

Can you imagine how long it took for completely ignorant men to learn the rules of metallurgy? Or engineering? Or a hundred other things we can barely imagine being without? Our lives are advanced only because they created new ways of living and passed them down to us. Hundreds of generations of men and women lived through dark times, fighting toward whatever bits of light they could find, opposed by other men nearly the entire way, to bring us where we are now.

Some day our generation will also be gone, and we will have played – whether we've understood it or not – the crucial role of transmitting civilization to following generations. What do we want them to be like? How would we like them to live?

Numberless men and women have struggled toward the future and spent all they had to bring us here. We owe them something. It may be that they no longer care, but their gifts to us will cease to exist, unless we continue to pass them along.

We make them matter, and they deserve to matter.

We stand now at the threshold of the stars, but we have been immobilized by self-serving structures designed to control and reap from every human action. We must get past them if we are to move forward.

Foolishness and waste bid us to forget the future; to chase status instead of goodness, conquest rather than production, and thrill rather than substance. A thousand self-serving voices call us aside, ever-grasping at our assets and our energy.

We must turn away from it all.

We owe this to the people of the past. We owe it to the people of the future. We owe it to ourselves.

What happens next is up to you. It's not up to leaders or bosses. It's up to *you*.

The truth is this: The consequences of your failures are inescapable and the consequences of your good deeds are inescapable. Regardless of your acknowledgement, your descendents will live or die by them.

What you are and what you do matters a very great deal.

Engage your will. Act. Awake.

* * * * *

See you next month.

PR