

Dialogue on Key Philosophical Matters

In 2012 I had a thoughtful email discussion with my good friend Martin (not his real name – he wanted to remain anonymous) that started with the subject of panentheism and grew to incorporate sacred texts, morality, free will, the nature of God, and various other important philosophical subjects. I wanted to share a few highlights from our chat; I hope you will find them interesting.

I have separated our discussion into sections, each prefaced with a question that was being considered. I thought that this was the best way to sensibly convey the content of an email discussion that contained many segmented comments and quoted passages.

Please note that in Martin's writing he uses the term 'it' to refer to 'god' (lower-case 'G') in contrast to my use of the terms 'He' and 'God'. These differences reflect our different views concerning the nature of God.

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*Panentheist or pantheist?*

Steven:

I don't know if you've ever come across panentheism or pantheism? Panentheism is basically the belief that the whole universe is 'in God', and it's what I believe. The trouble is Christians tend to

believe that some things exist apart from God, like the devil for instance. I find it impossible to understand how something can exist in opposition to God, who for me created and sustains everything.

Martin:

I would certainly say that what seems to have most in common with what I think (or what I used to think when I used to spend more time thinking about such things) is pantheism, rather than panentheism [*pantheism is the view that the world and God are identical – ed*]. I believe that ‘God’ is one with nature/the universe rather than a separate creator of the universe. Perhaps my main reason for this is that I struggle to think of something existing outside the universe and time, when I can’t (and who can?!) conceive of the vastness of the universe and time as they are.

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How are we to understand panentheism?

Steven:

In my view of panentheism, God is creator and, importantly, sustainer. I have a very “present moment” understanding of God, i.e. the reason why blood is flowing round my body, my hair is growing and my heart is beating, is because God is ‘doing’ those things. The scientist would of course argue that they are biological processes, but the question then for me is, what is making those processes

happen? Can this vast and complex universe be purely mechanical? I don't think so; I think the universe is alive with what I call 'the animating power of God'.

Martin:

I feel the same as this, I agree that 'God' is 'doing' these things, and that God is the 'reason' all things happen – and that scientific mechanical explanations and biological processes can fit in perfectly with this. But how is your above belief panentheism rather than pantheism? Because God is creator? I would like to know what pantheists think about how the world was created? In panentheism, if god exists externally to the universe, is he doing something else too? Or is he just sustaining the universe externally – yet also internally because he is the sustainer?

Steven:

I love your question about 'what else is God doing' other than the universe! It's a little tricky to answer. I think my answer would be that there may be a way in which God exists but is doing nothing, as well as everything, and that there is also the potential within God for infinite creativity that is unexpressed. Perhaps these things make Him more than His creation? (I use the capital 'H' in 'Him' and male gender out of Christian habit!).

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*Is the universe ordered by a living God?*

Steven:

I believe that although the universe is chaotic in certain respects there is a very definite order to things. Like the way the planets move, and like the way that if you look down at the earth from an aeroplane at motorways and cities everything seems to be ordered. And there are ecological systems, the bees and the honey and flowers and oxygen and light and how all of that works together, that seems to represent order. How does all this order come about? For me, God is 'doing' everything!

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Do human beings have a special place in creation?

Steven:

As regards humans having a special place in creation, I'm not sure about that one. I can understand that human beings might have more 'power' (e.g. nuclear weapons, huge cranes, space rockets) and some philosophers would say that we have reason which sets us apart, but are we more valuable than other creatures? I think panentheism would veer on the side of 'no', because God permeates the universe and is therefore in birds as much as humans. But Christianity certainly seems to have a special place for humans, as you suggest. I suppose if the Bible really is the true word of God as many Christians believe then we would have to believe humans have a special place because of the

scriptures in Genesis about man having dominion over the other creatures.

Martin:

I think that I disagree with scientists who say that reason sets us apart from other animals. Although I would agree that we have a very well developed capacity to reason, I think that animals also have the capacity to reason, and I also think that we are very similar to other animals in that we obey our instincts and what we have learnt from our past experiences and upbringing, rather than abstract reason far more often than not. So behaviourally I do not think we can wholly separate ourselves from other animals (maybe only in degrees), and thought-wise – we simply do not know what animals think (I think!). So for this reason I don't think I can ever believe that any sacred text is the word of god. We are just attributing human characteristics to god in my opinion.

I think what I am trying to say here is that as I believe that there is no distinction in terms of importance between humans and other animals in the universe, anything that humans 'create' (sacred text wise) has no more value truth-wise than anything any other animals may attempt to create / communicate. I realise that I may have just provided a good argument against myself in that it seems nigh on impossible that any other animal could create a system of beliefs and communicate it, but I suppose it is logically possible!?

Steven:

I agree in that I think animals also have the capacity to reason. As you suggest, we cannot know, but I see birds making decisions to sit on a branch or swoop for that worm, and I'm not sure how much that differs from our reason. Animals may also have imaginative thoughts. I'm not sure it's simply a matter of brain size, as you get some animals without brains (Jellyfish I think?) that live lives of doing and moving and eating just as we humans do.

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*How important are 'sacred texts'?*

Steven:

Is there something special about the Bible? Perhaps. I know that all three times I have been in psychiatric hospital, for reasons that I can't explain, I turned to the Bible for truth and for help. In those dark moments it seemed to provide light and encouragement. Who can explain why I turned to the Bible and why it spoke to me so profoundly at those times? Why has the Bible lasted for two thousand years? Why do Islam, Judaism and Christianity all have scriptures in common, i.e. the Old Testament prophets? Can man alone make these Scriptures so globally important?

Martin:

This is the crucial point I suppose. Where I cannot believe that any

sacred text, or any human made religion (as I see them) to have really stemmed from God in any way more vital or powerful than anything else that exists in the world, I can completely empathise that a feeling of faith is the only way a person ever could or should believe in one particular religion or text, and that this faith is surely more worthwhile when grounded in a specific experience (or 3!) rather than something that has been taught.

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Which religion is correct?

Steven

With a panentheistic view, God has created all religions, therefore how do we pick which one is correct?

Martin:

My immediate response to this, and it must be crucial to our different views, is that humans have 'created' all religions, not god, in my view. Although I would agree that god is and does everything in the universe, and so in that sense has created all religions, in my opinion god has no more created religions that he has created cars. In my opinion, humans have invented cars and religions, though cars and religions are part of God's creation, if you follow what I mean!? And therefore it would be logical in my view that religion has no more value truth wise in informing us about God than cars do.

Steven:

Ah, now this is important, and to me is about the whole question of what God is doing and not doing. You see in my view, God is responsible for all human action, and that goes back to what I was saying about how it is God that makes my hair grow, my blood flow, etc. So I see the world as kind of like a play, wherein we are animated entirely by God. I get the impression you don't see things in quite this way, and believe in free will? I don't believe there is any will aside from God's will, so I don't believe in free human agency. How can God be in all things, and doing all things, and there still be free will? Very interested to get your thoughts on this.

Martin:

Can't god's 'will' be that all beings have free will? As god has free will (though I'm not sure it does – see below) and we are all part of god (god makes our hair grow etc), it seems to me that we can't but have free will – all actions we take are gods actions as we are part of god. It is logically impossible to act against god's will, as our will is gods will. The thing that strikes me as I write this is that I don't believe that god has a will as such, god just 'is'. It may be just a language problem, but whenever we use human attributes when talking about god, it doesn't seem right to me. I don't think god cares whether we have free will or not, and it doesn't care whether we manufacture items, sports or religions – although god is the force that enables us to act/manufacture (and any other verb).

Probably the reason why we seem to agree that god is the motivating force behind everything, and indeed, in my view, is everything, but yet we don't agree on much / anything else, or perhaps even understand quite what the other is getting at (not so surprising given our method of communication!) is that we probably mean different things by 'god'. I don't think god has desires, a will, emotions, requirements, or a 'mind' as such. I think god is nothing like a being that we would recognise. God to me is a force, and not just a force, the force. The force that forces all forces, and would not 'be' otherwise.

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*How important is Jesus to all of this?*

Steven:

In terms of choosing a religion, if Jesus really was the son of God then I would have to choose Christianity, but the degree of difference between Jesus and other human beings is troublesome in panentheism, because if God is in everything, there is a sense in which we are all sons and daughters of God.

Martin:

I agree with this view – all beings are sons and daughters of god of equal value.

Steven:

But I can still conceive that Jesus may have been different in some way, set apart as unique by God. At Jesus' baptism there was a voice from heaven that said "This is my son, the beloved, in Him I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). What does this mean? Do we have to assume that this was some kind of false vision?

Martin:

To me this is purely a matter of faith, not reason, so I can't comment on it as I don't have religious faith.

Steven:

OK but to me there is an important question about whether or not to believe these things. Because Jesus' claim to be the Son of God is very significant and has implications for everyone on earth. One still has to ask questions (and reason) about the truth of Jesus' claims, no?

Martin:

I don't believe in the truth of Jesus' claims to be the son of god. Not as being son of god in anyway more significant than all beings are caused by god, and are as such 'sons of god'. So Jesus' claim to be the son of god has no implications as such for me as I don't have faith in this. No Islamic beliefs have any implications for me, and no religious beliefs have any implications for me unless / until I start to subscribe to a religion.

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Is truth more important than faith?

Steven:

It's interesting to consider whether 'the truth' is more important than 'faith'.

Martin:

Definitely – I believe this consideration is absolutely paramount.

Steven:

This is something I have struggled with a bit recently. Perhaps there are some things we aren't supposed to understand, and should simply believe? Perhaps that is what Christianity asks us to do, and what if this is right in God's eyes and really is the way to salvation?

Martin:

This seems perfectly sensible in terms of a religious purpose – but it is very difficult to persuade someone without faith to believe in this.

Steven:

...but then there is the history of philosophy, which seems to have been about a search for the truth, so maybe when there are things that we believe to be more rational than a particular belief it is right to go with that. Maybe truth is the ultimate thing worth searching and living for.

Martin:

I wouldn't say that because something has the appearance of being more rational and reasonable than it is right to 'go with that' instead of a religious / faith belief. If you hold a sincerely felt religious belief which is hard (or impossible) to explain using reason, to me this is possibly worth more than a point of argument that has the appearance of reason on its side. Philosophers can be greater slaves to reason, maintaining their viewpoint no matter what strange conclusion it made lead them to, than a religious person may be a slave to their belief system. And we haven't explained everything away yet using reason (as far as I am aware) so why should reason be held in such esteem? As you may have noticed I'm all for arguing against things, but I don't have much positive to offer in terms of what I do believe. I hold out absolutely no hope of establishing anything that I firmly believe in – I doubt I will ever subscribe to a religion unless I have a certain experience, but who knows. But I seriously doubt I will ever subscribe to a purely scientific / reason view either. Basically I have no faith (!) that anything humans can conjure up – whether religious, scientific or philosophic – can hold any perfect (or even near perfect) explanation of the universe. Not that it isn't worthwhile trying...

Steven:

I'm not even sure I believe in reason! I think reasoning seems to be relative. But then we could get into logic and mathematics in thought

and then it would seem like there is reason, as $A + B$ really does lead to C , etc...

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*Does God have a plan?*

Steven:

You seem to be saying you don't have all the answers, and probably won't ever have, and that seems to me to be quite realistic. It seems to be part of God's plan that we don't have all the answers in this life. But as you suggest, you may well have experiences that develop your faith in a certain way at some point, we shall see!

Martin:

I don't believe that god has a plan. I wouldn't say that I had a faith, just a belief (quite possibly unfounded and quite possibly not a true belief) that god exists. Given the inklings I have hopefully given you about what I believe 'god' to be, do you think that I actually believe in god? Because I would say that I do, but I could understand why a religious person would say that I didn't believe in god. But I think what I believe does seem to be in common with pantheism?

Steven:

I really am intrigued about your idea of God. I believe God to be the supreme being with complete free will, who created and is shaping the

universe in every moment. I am quite sure that God does have plans, as the vast networks of interactions that take place between things and creatures in the world seem to me to be purposeful, rather than random.

You say God is a force, *the force*, which is quite interesting. That does sound panentheistic and I do agree in a sense. Maybe where we disagree is that I believe God to be in a sense personal, God is living, and able to talk to people, for instance. Do you believe that God is living? Do you believe God can talk to people? Do you believe God makes a decision about whether or not a thunderstorm is going to happen, or whether a person will be born? If the answer to these questions is no, then I'm not sure what you mean by God.

It seems to me that if God is doing everything, as we both seem to agree He is, then that implies that He is doing things in a certain way. If this is the case, then things could be other than they are, if God chose to do differently. Otherwise, in what sense do you believe God is doing everything?

Martin:

My main problem is that I neither agree nor disagree with what you have stated about the nature of god, mainly I just believe that somehow the language you use such as 'plans' 'decisions' 'living' 'talk' to describe god are inconsistent with what god is/does.

I would have to say that I don't think of god as a 'being' as such. I think god is a force – but maybe there's no difference between force and being. The idea of god as a being who makes decisions, communicates with humans etc seems to me to be detrimental / denigrating to god's nature/power but I agree god created and is shaping the universe. I suppose what I believe is that there is a force who exists and whose nature is beyond the possibility of human cognition and I call this god – but maybe I should call it something else!

Steven:

I'm intrigued to know what the force is doing. Can you describe it in any more detail? For instance, what is the force doing in an apple? (making it grow, presumably). What is the force doing in a table? Is there anything behind the force, making it happen? If not it must be intelligent, right?

Martin:

I would say that the vast networks of interactions that you mention, are certainly not random, but I would be very reluctant to call them 'purposeful' either (though of course they serve purposes on a 'lower' level). They are powered by god hence aren't random, but again, the use of the word 'purpose' proves a struggle for me. God could have a purpose in creating the universe, but what would that purpose be, and would we be able to comprehend it? If the purpose has anything in particular to do with humans, then I would be unable to accept it. Why

would a force of such immense and incredible power (and I believe these to be denigrating words, but what can we do!) 'care' about creating this universe that is so large and beautiful etc etc – wish I could think of better words – with any kind of 'purpose' specifically for such insignificant, temporary beings as humans?

Steven:

I don't know that we are insignificant or temporary, I rather think we are significant and eternal. Because I believe God 'animates' us, I see that He is taking great care in each moment to unfold our lives. I believe all of creation is 'animated', and so God is taking great care in all of it, making all of the parts interact, giving us thoughts and feelings and actions – it seems as though a lot of work is going into it (although to describe God as working is a bad metaphor as there may well be an ease to the way in which God works as He is supremely powerful).

You ask about what God's purpose might be in creating the universe. Perhaps the whole of creation is God exploring God's nature. If within God are infinite possibilities, then God's creating is like self-expression. Perhaps God is the animator of a grand universal play, and it all exists for God's pleasure?

Martin:

If god does have a purpose (which seems such a human concept to attribute to it) then the chances of the purpose of this whole universe having anything at all to do with humans seems minuscule to say the

least. And to my mind the only 'proof' we have that would suggest otherwise is the existence of texts/religions as written by humans (though of course humans' capacity to create such things is entirely due to the existence of god – in the same way that anything else we have produced is).

Steven:

But surely, if God takes the time and effort to make our blood flow, our hair and nails grow, etc, then that shows tremendous care towards humanity? Why would God create humans unless there was a point to us? Or do you not see God as creating humans, is it more chance that we exist?

Martin:

To answer your questions – for what my answers will be worth (not a lot)- I believe god is living, I believe god can communicate to people (but that it can also communicate to monkeys, ants, weeds, the sea, mountains). I believe god makes thunderstorms happen in the same way that it makes everything happen, so in a sense does make a 'decision' about this – but not a human style decision!

Likewise for a child being born. And for me there is no more value in God's 'deciding' whether a child is born or not, than God's 'deciding' about anything else at all. So I suppose my answers are not 'no', but not 'yes' in the same way that I presume you would answer 'yes'.

I agree that god is doing everything, and that it is doing them in a certain way, and most certainly agree that things could be other than they are if god 'acted' in a different way.

Steven

Yes, I agree. God has choice in every moment. God can 'intervene' in any situation, although in doing so God is really intervening in God's own action.

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If God is a 'force', how does that work?

Martin:

I wouldn't know how to explain what my force is doing in objects, other than to say I believe it is the cause behind, and in, the objects. Also, the force is intelligent in itself, and doesn't have anything behind it making it happen – I suppose it is self causing – hence it feels natural for me to call it 'god'!

Steven:

This seems to relate quite well to my understanding of God – being in and behind all things.

Martin:

As for the type of 'decision' god makes – I think god is the cause of all things and is responsible for all that happens, as the intelligent force.

However I don't think god makes a conscious decision of whether to proceed with a thunderstorm or not each time one occurs – more like thunderstorms are a necessary feature of god's creation. So god is the reason thunderstorms occurs, but I struggle to say it has made a decision each time.

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*What role does God play in creation?*

Martin:

I like the idea of god's creating/creation as being god's self expression – I think this would allow me to say that all of creation is serving no particular purpose, although I doubt you would say this....

I do see god as creating humans, and wouldn't say we, or anything else, is 'chance' – I'd be more tempted to say all of creation has come about as necessary continuations. The main point I am trying to make below is that there is no more value in humans than there is in any other being.

Steven:

I'm not sure what necessary continuations are?

Martin:

Necessary continuations – please refer to my mate Spinoza! I suppose what I mean is that although god is responsible for the existence of humans – and in that sense 'created' us – I don't believe that god

created us out of nothing – we are a necessary continuation (or evolution) due to all (or part) of the other parts of god's 'creation'. With god's creation as it is, there could not not have been us, in other words, there must have been us!

Steven:

Your use of the term 'necessary continuations' seems to me to be linked up with evolution, and the idea that God set the world in motion and then it subsequently evolved according to God's laws. I don't know if that's exactly what you believe, but a lot of people do believe that, I think it's called Deism. My problem with Deism is that it takes God out of the everyday, like my current decision to take a sip of coffee. To me God is presently doing this through me, whereas I think to a Deist God is more detached from the present. I'm not sure what a Deist would say God is doing right now!

Martin:

I could sympathise with the idea of Deism, but I wouldn't say that god set up the world and left it. I would probably agree that "the creator does not intervene in human affairs or suspend the natural laws of the universe" (Wikipedia!) but I wouldn't agree that God has 'left' the world. In answer to your question about what god is doing now, I would say that as god exists independently of time, it is both doing everything and nothing – in which case it doesn't make sense to think of god as 'doing' anything at any particular time. I would probably

have to say that god has some involvement in your decision to take a sip of coffee – god has certainly made this possible – but can I really say that and that it is not intervening in your affairs?! I'm not sure! I really think that our language and our concepts restrict so much of what I would say about god.

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How does this discussion relate to morality and ethics?

Martin:

I'm keen to find out your thoughts on ethics / morality, which seems to be a natural progression from what we've been talking about. What do you think about good and evil/bad and right and wrong? My understanding of these terms is that they are human inventions – very useful ones – but that that they do not exist. I'll leave it there for now!!

Steven:

Good idea to move on to morality/ethics! Because I believe God to be doing everything, it's difficult to talk about good and bad and right and wrong. Everything has the same source, so how can you distinguish between these criteria? I believe God uses suffering in people's lives as a way of adding to earthly experience. Life is a journey directed by God, and suffering is part of what God chooses for us to experience. My hope is that God never lets the amount of suffering that

any individual experiences get too bad, even though I appreciate that suffering can be extremely horrible in certain circumstances.

I do believe that there is a way in which we exercise free will, even though I believe free will is illusory, and that it is really God's will operating in us when we make decisions. But make decisions we do, and therefore there is a way in which we can choose between good and bad action, between harming others or benefiting them. I am not sure at the moment whether I believe the Bible to be God's word, or not. If it is, then clearly it is there for our moral guidance and we should learn the lessons contained in it. I know you don't believe this is the case.

Martin:

I pretty much agree with what you have said about good/evil/right/wrong! It seems that we both deny that good and bad objectively exist. I would also agree about the free will part – we are able to make decisions, and we can attempt to choose between what we believe to be right and wrong, although these are subjective values. I suppose the problem if one does believe the bible to be the word of god, is that then there is such a thing as good and bad (I would say that the bible indicates that there is such thing as 'good' and 'bad'?), and god is telling us the difference between them (again, I'm presuming he does?). Therefore we should apply the guidance he gives in the bible to all aspects of our modern lives, and this, I would imagine, is pretty difficult. Is what I have just said remotely sensical / sensible?! I would

add that even if the bible isn't the word of god, and even if right and wrong don't exist, the help these provide are crucial in our attempts to live in the most beneficial way to society and ourselves.

Steven:

In terms of the ethical stuff it surprises me that we are largely in agreement as well! I agree with what you have said about the Bible and it's significance if it is or isn't the word of God. It's something I feel I really need to figure out my stance on, as if the Bible is God's word I need to spend my life studying it! Have you read much of the Bible? I've read all of the New Testament, and Genesis, Exodus and a couple of other books from the Old Testament, there's lots that I haven't read though. I sometimes listen to UCB Bible, which is a radio station where the Bible is read out all day every day. But since I have started to believe myself to be a panentheist, I have stopped reading the Bible, as there is a big question mark over the Bible's significance (as much discussed by us!). I'm not sure whether it's something I will be able to settle in my mind, or whether I will remain in doubt for the rest of my life!

With the Bible there is also the issue of its openness to interpretation. Even if the Bible does give moral guidance, it's still human beings with their radically differing opinions who have to interpret what the Bible says. Christians would normally say they rely on the guidance of the Holy Spirit to show what truth is. I believe in

the Holy Spirit in a sense, although I think it is the ever-present spirit of God that permeates everything, whereas for most Christians it seems to be something that comes and goes (i.e. one might or might not be 'filled with the Holy Spirit').

Martin:

I haven't read any of the bible since whatever we may have had to listen to at school, so I am completely unable to talk about its contents! Perhaps I should read some of it, but I've never felt the inclination, any more than I have to read any other religious text.

Ends



BOOKS BY STEVEN COLBORNE

The Philosophy of a Mad Man (SilverWood Books, 2012)
Ultimate Truth: God Beyond Religion (SilverWood Books, 2013)

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