

## CHAPTER FIVE

### REPLY TO ALAN HOLLAND

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Alan Holland, a renowned philosopher for whose work I have the greatest respect, has raised some searching questions and penetrating problems. I consider here his remarks on each of his five themes in turn.

Holland claims in Part I that in effect I introduce God as creator to explain why there is something rather than nothing. But actually, because God, if able to bring about material things, would also be something (and certainly not nothing), the existence of God could not itself possibly explain why there is something rather than nothing. Nor was I suggesting otherwise. Indeed I argued in *Creation, Evolution and Meaning* (Attfield 2006, 94) that there cannot be a sufficient reason for there being contingent positive states, since necessary explanations cannot explain what is contingent, while contingent states, if put forward as explanations, would be among the states to be explained, and yet these are the only possible kinds of explanations.

Unfortunately Holland's mistaken belief that I was seeking to explain why there is something affects his subsequent would-be refutation of my reasoning. For he represents my reasoning as based on the premise that there being something and not nothing is not self-explanatory, and proceeds to argue that we have sufficient reason to hold that there need not be an explanation for there being something (or indeed for there being nothing).

My reasoning, however, relates not to there being something, but to there being a material universe. The Principle of Sufficient Reason, in the form that I endorse, does not require there to be a sufficient reason where (as in the matter of there being contingent positive states or in that of there being something) no such explanation is possible (see the reasoning presented above). But where there is no sufficient reason why an explanation is impossible, it maintains that there is an explanation; and such, I suggest, is the case with the existence of the material universe.

Holland's refutation, with its steps (a) to (e), leaves this reasoning untouched.

However, Holland proceeds to introduce an argument intended to show that the quest for an explanation of sets whose members are existing beings which can be caused to exist is bound to be futile. Yet we know from beforehand that such a quest need not be futile. For the set of my children is a set of existing beings which can be caused to exist, and which clearly has an explanation. The only issue is whether the set of all existing beings that can be caused to exist has an explanation, as the Principle of Sufficient Reason (interpreted as above) claims. The issues raised in Holland's dialectic here were tackled some time ago in William Rowe's article 'Two Criticisms of the Cosmological Argument', in *The Monist* (1970, 441-459). Rowe showed there to my satisfaction that for both finite and infinite sets, the questions of what brings it about that the set has members (rather than none) and has the members that it has (rather than others) can only be answered by reference to something outside the set. This granted, the issue of whether the set of existing beings which can be caused to exist is a member of itself becomes a side-issue. On a material interpretation of sets, the set simply is its members, but we can still ask the same explanatory questions about them, using another sense of "set". On an abstract interpretation of "set", sets with material members are not likely to be members of themselves; but the explanatory questions about such a set having members (etc.) do not go away, even though talk of a set which is not a member of itself happens to be generated when we reflect on sets of this kind.

As for moving from "this could have been otherwise" to "there is a sufficient reason why it is as it is and not otherwise" the missing step is precisely the Principle of Sufficient Reason, with the same proviso as above that this does not apply to states where there is a sufficient reason for there being no sufficient reason. But this kind of explanation is surely an ordinary kind, and not an extraordinary one. In any case Holland has not contrived to show that "there cannot be an explanation for the very existence of material things".

Holland's remaining remarks in Part I relate to the Fine-Tuning Argument (see Atfield 2006, 105-108). And here the issue is not how life might arise from what is almost life, but what explains the stringent conditions in the absence of which there would be no possibility of life being satisfied in the real world. While, under some descriptions, there being life is no more improbable than any other contingency, the universe having constants with values in the narrow bands suited to life when any of the full range of values was equally possible continues to call for an

explanation, and thus to supply a contemporary version of the teleological argument to there being a cosmic architect or designer.

This matter is also relevant to the request for evidence of theism that surfaces in Part II. Holland there grants that, where its content is concerned, Darwinism is compatible with theism, but raises doubts about the compatibility of theism and “methodological Darwinism”, which involves “the admitting of evidence”. Holland illustrates this by referring to a remark of Darwin about Christ and the need for epistemological caution.

Since I too am committed to “the admitting of evidence”, I should first register that while the historicity of Jesus seems well established by the evidence of the synoptic gospels, I take seriously also the new evidence from the Gospel of Thomas, and the evidence supplied by Elaine Pagels in *Beyond Belief* that St. John’s Gospel was a polemical work in which Thomas is intended to emerge as discredited, while it also makes questionable claims about Jesus’ uniqueness and divinity, conflicting with those of the Gospel attributed to Thomas (Pagels 2004). This approach to sifting the evidence about Christ seems to resemble Darwin’s.

So I would seem qualified to claim to be a methodological Darwinist, and furthermore that theism and methodological Darwinism really are compatible. Holland suggests that this all depends on whether the re-workings of the cosmological and design arguments that I propose are successful, and implicitly that if not then theism and this kind of Darwinism could be incompatible. But where methodological Darwinism is in question, what is important is the appeal to evidence (as opposed to appeals to feelings, a contrast introduced by Holland at the end of Part II). Yet this is precisely the appeal that I (and many other theists, including Ward) actually make. So even if our arguments somehow fail, our methodological Darwinism seems compatible with theism insofar as our theism at least purportedly rests on evidence in accordance with just such a method.

Before I move on, it should be remarked that when Holland writes of my re-working of the Design Argument in the forms of the Fine-Tuning Argument (Attfeld 2006, ch.5), and of my reconstruction of Keith Ward’s Argument from Value (Attfeld 2006, ch.8), it is less than clear that my re-expression of the traditional Design Argument (in chapter. 5, at pp. 101-106) has come to his attention. This passage is much indebted to the work of Richard Swinburne, and involves an appeal to the evidence of laws of nature, as independent evidence for there being a cosmic designer. This being so, this version of the Design Argument should also be taken into account, if only as evidence that I appeal to evidence. Readers who have

hitherto assumed that the Design Argument consists merely in Paley's analogy between a watch and the universe should pause to reflect on the distinctive argument (and thus the evidence) presented in this passage.

In Part III, Holland criticises my revised version of Ward's Argument from Value. His first move is to contest my objectivism about value, offering a perspectivist account instead. He accepts my objections to the kind of perspectivism that claims that what is valuable is what is valued from a certain perspective, but advances in its place the view that "there may be different perspectives on what there is reason to cherish". So far, however, this is an innocuous claim, for there may be different perspectives on most matters (without any implication being entailed that there is no truth of the matter). Further, if two people disagree on whether there is reason to cherish something, they may be appealing to reasons of different kinds (prudential, anthropocentric or biocentric), and this might explain why people disagree about whether there is reason to cherish the smallpox virus. But from this it would not follow at all that the question of whether the smallpox virus should be preserved "becomes indeterminable".

Here Holland introduces the problem of the values of Caligula (who reportedly valued tearing the wings from flies), to illustrate the thesis that values are matters of judgement made from some perspective or other, rather than being facts. Here I suspect that we are at cross-purposes. For while "values" (in the plural) always belong to someone or some society, and are thus perspective-related, this need not be the case with "value" and "valuable", concerning, as they do, what there is reason to desire or foster or cherish. ("Value" in the singular is only sometimes the singular of "values", but is sometimes logically akin to concepts such as "dignity" or "worth", which of course do not have a plural at all.) My view is that the perspective-related nature of "values" in no way indicates that value (as in "having value" or "having intrinsic value") is perspective-related. Indeed in my view it is important that "value" in this sense is not invariably perspective-related (at any rate where there are more than one possible perspectives), since this means that it is possible to compare perspectives in respect of the value of what they approve or commend, and that we do not have to grant that there is no appeal beyond perspectives.

However, if the view is taken that value-ascriptions are relative to a universal perspective which potentially recognises all reasons as reasons, then I have no objection to perspectivism of this kind. Holland's verdict on Caligula's values may supply an example of such a universal perspective, when he writes that "the human perspective contains the resources with which to critique Caligula's predilection".

Holland now turns to criticising my claim that “there is an immense amount of value in the world”, and here he accepts the persuasiveness of my case for holding that we have no reason to believe that the actual world is not a world that a good God would create (Attfield 2006, 141). However, he proceeds to suggest that we have no reason either to believe that a world with a better balance of good over evil is not possible, and that I have not persuaded him otherwise. In this connection, he claims that belief in a beneficent creator requires us to believe both that there is a preponderance of value in the world, and that no greater preponderance could possibly have been brought about, propositions which he takes me to set about defending.

But I was not claiming that a world with a better balance of good over evil is not possible. Imagine the actual world supplemented with one extra violet; this sounds like a better balance of good over evil, and a possible one at that. Further, belief in a beneficent creator does not seem to require anyone to believe that the creator could not have brought it about, or is less than beneficent through failing to do so. If so, then theists have no need to deny that such a supplemented world is possible.

However, I did argue that “the system of nature may well be regarded as having an overall balance of value over disvalue” (Attfield 2006, 143). This was concluded in the light of a biocentric account of the value of the flourishing of lives, whether human or non-human, and in the course of a re-working (Attfield 2006, 139-143) of Holmes Rolston’s arguments about waste, pain, suffering, predation and parasitism as “necessary features of a system” that produces “all that we find valuable in the world” (Holland’s phrasing). Holland indeed allows that I “convincingly demonstrate” that this is the case, but adds that comparisons about the balance of value over disvalue are unreliable, and that the concept of value may not be capable of bearing the weight put upon it here. He also complains that in the absence of any “obvious commensurating unit”, comparisons of the intrinsic value of the life of the cuckoo and the life of mistletoe would have an elusive basis. Yet many comparisons are made in the absence of commensurating units, and his problem with this comparison may well relate to his scepticism about the very concept of intrinsic value (which I have defended in an article cited by Holland (Attfield 2001), and have insufficient space to defend again here). But people can and do compare worlds, and whether they are worth preserving or promoting (that is, whether they are sufficiently valuable), not least when they deliberate on how to enhance the actual world, and they are not invariably confused when they do. Nor does it seem far-fetched to suggest that people can compare a world with cuckoos and no mistletoe with a world with

mistletoe and no cuckoos (which latter we may be accidentally heading towards unless we preserve habitats better than at present). Inter-world comparisons, then, do not seem to be an insuperable problem, even when they turn on value.

At the end of Part III, Holland refers to “respected viewpoints” holding that “no amount of benefit can justify the suffering of even a single sentient creature”. Thomas Hardy held such a view, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s character Ivan Karamazov seems implicitly to have upheld something similar. Such views, far from being neglected, are considered in *Creation, Evolution and Meaning*, and reasons for dissent are offered at pp. 128 and 137 respectively. In some forms, these views imply that a creator would not be justified in generating any animal life at all if it was going to mean that one sentient creature would suffer a single headache. This, I suggest, further bears out the need for comparisons between perspectives, in which some may defensibly be deselected.

In Part IV, Holland contests my conclusions about evolution having a direction. First, however, he handsomely acknowledges that Darwin may well have held similar views at one stage, and also may have accepted that the world manifests “a preponderance of value”. He resists, however, the twin view ascribed to me that “a world imbued with value was where we were likely or even obliged to end up”. But I would not assent to “obliged”, either in its ordinary sense or in the sense of “predestined”; and because of this, I need not subscribe to the view that the world’s being as it is, is somehow guaranteed (a view Holland here ascribes to me).

Holland goes on to deploy his “random walk argument” for the conclusion that the existence of value cannot have been the result of design. However, if either of the arguments for design succeed (whether from the laws of nature or from the world’s intrinsic value), then either one or another of the premises of the random walk argument cannot stand or possibly the argument is invalid, maybe through failure to block the possibility that the laws of nature are so structured as to generate value, albeit through random processes. A further possibility is that the opening proposition, which reports the neo-Darwinist view of evolution, supports conclusions for neo-Darwinists (or one sort of neo-Darwinist) only, and that evolutionary theory (or Darwinism as opposed to neo-Darwinism) is open to alternative metaphysical interpretations which, unlike neo-Darwinism, allow value to be generated.

At the end of the section, Holland suggests that explanations of the world’s value by Ward and myself are “acknowledged to lie beyond human comprehension”; but I, for one, do not acknowledge this, and have argued in the first four chapters of *Creation, Evolution and Meaning* that

the concept of God can be understood sufficiently to allow of arguments to God as creator. Imaginably Holland is here alluding to my endorsement of Reichenbach's view about the difficulty of showing that a better world is possible (Attfield, 141), since that would involve the ability to foresee comprehensively the difference that different laws of nature would make. But it does not follow that human beings cannot follow arguments to the best explanation about the world as it is, or be reasonable in endorsing their conclusion.

In Part V, Holland summarises arguments concerning the relation of meaningful lives and belief in a beneficent creator. His conclusion is that "the creator hypothesis casts the possibility of such a life [sc. a meaningful life] into the greatest of doubt".

There are several problems with these arguments. Why are the "stipulation of a purpose", the "assurance of a "solution" to the problem of suffering" and the "guarantee that meaningful lives are possible" ascribed to theism all characterised as "prior"? For many theists, there are few or no stipulations, assurances or guarantees, and the actual beliefs held arise out of experience rather than apriorism. Again, why is belief in suffering being redeemable characterised as making suffering what it is not?

Holland now adds a further consideration. Meaningful lives lived under "the creator hypothesis" presuppose that there is a preponderance of value in the world, and that no greater preponderance could have been brought about. (I have contested above the claim that the latter actually is presupposed.) But the possibility of such lives is thus "hostage to a value calculus of cosmic proportions that lies well beyond our human capacities", and thus cannot be relied on. By contrast, meaningful lives lived without this hypothesis depend on nothing more than "a sufficiency of value", "of which we can reasonably be assured", and their possibility is thus less unreliable.

This argument itself presupposes the coherence of the concept of non-relative value recently contested by Holland (Holland 2009). It also asserts that we can "reasonably be assured" that there is a sufficiency of value in life or in the world. But this already suggests that people can reason about how much value there is. However, they need not go much further than this to reach the view that there is a preponderance of value in the world. This is a view with which, as Holland mentions earlier, Darwin concurred in "remarking on 'the generally beneficent arrangement of the world'"; and so it can hardly require "a value calculus ... that lies well beyond human capacities". Besides, they have no need to reason about whether or not a greater preponderance could have been brought about; such reasoning is, surely, for metaphysicians rather than for theistic religious

believers in general. In the circumstances, the possibility of meaningful lives lived on a basis of belief in a creator ceases to seem far-fetched or inaccessible, particularly as praising God for life's blessings need require no calculation at all.

The possibility of meaningful lives associated with neo-Darwinist beliefs has recently been questioned by Herman Daly (Daly 2002). Difficulties that he raises for meaningful planning of the future turn on what he considers the tendency of neo-Darwinists (a) to reject belief in value and (b) to endorse determinism, and thus accept that there is only one possible future. But it is less than clear that neo-Darwinists need to make either of these moves; Daly seems to have been over-generalising about neo-Darwinism. He does, however, show that there are possible problems for lives lived on this basis being meaningful, even though the problems are avoidable.

Indeed there are probably problems about the possibility of meaningful lives lived on any basis, religious or materialist, and for ones lived on an agnostic basis as well. Sooner than focus on the metaphysical problems closest to our own or others' basis and beliefs, it may be better to focus on opportunities for meaningful work, a topic on which Holland and I are clearly in agreement.

## References

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