Life: A chemical dilemma?

by Clifford Goldstein

Why scientific materialism is inadequate as a worldview.

A leafless tree, a country road, and two homeless men vying for existence. It's night, and everything's shrouded in the bottom of the earth's shadow. That's all it takes, the bottom of the shadow—and the world goes half dark.

Vladimir and Estragon wait for a mysterious figure whose promise to come prods them toward life.

"His name is Godot?" asks Estragon.

"I think so," answers Vladimir.

As Vladimir and Estragon stand, suckled by the dehydrated hope that Godot will come, a procession of human suffering stomps past them. Bored, not so much by all the pain but by life's uselessness, they seek diversion in doing good, such as lifting a blind man who has stumbled to the ground.

"Come, let us get to work!" says Vladimir. "In an instant all will vanish and we'll be alone once more, in the midst of nothingness!" But as Vladimir reaches, he falls and can't get up. Despite more promises that Godot will come, they lean toward death again—this time planning to hang themselves. But having no rope, Estragon takes off the cord that holds up his pants, which collapse around his ankles. Testing the cord's strength, they pull; it breaks and both men almost fall. They decide to find a better rope, and try again...later.

"We'll hang ourselves tomorrow," says Vladimir. "Unless Godot comes."

"And if he comes?" asks Estragon.

"We'll be saved."

Godot never comes—which means they're never saved. Of course, they were never meant to be—which is why, from its first performance at Paris' Théâtre de Babylone in 1953, Samuel Beckett's drama *Waiting for Godot*[1] always ends with these two atrophied souls stranded in an existence they hate but can't escape. Nor are they even sure they should try because they had the promise that Godot will come. That Godot never does hardly matters; what matters is the promise that he will.

Beckett's drama is the most cruel anti-Christian polemic since Voltaire's acid invectives in the18th century. It's hard to imagine any serious Christians who believe in the Second Coming not seeing themselves caricatured, to some degree, in Vladimir and Estragon's pathetic attempt to balance their fears and doubts about human suffering with a loving and all-powerful God who has promised to come, to make it all right—but hasn't.

Beckett's tragicomedy in two acts, however, didn't mock just the promise, but life without the promise, the promise of something beyond the earth. What's worse? A false hope, or no hope at all?

However unkind to the Second Coming, *Waiting for Godot* was worse to the secularist; it ruthlessly brutalized life that exists only to keep itself alive. As the drama mimicked and mimed the obtuse mimicry of life lived without final purpose, Beckett asks the question that has dominated the post-Christian world: "How does one live a life that has no meaning?"

Life is too complicated, too full of traps and unexpected tricks to be lived, in and of itself. When people have no clue as to the purpose of their existence, when they can frame only diluted hy-

potheses about their origins, when all they can do is speculate on what death brings—then it's a wonder that humans can live at all.

The predicament

"We can neither," wrote Francisco Jose Moreno, "rid ourselves of the certainty of death nor achieve an understanding of life."[2] How incredible that something so basic, so fundamental as life can't even justify, much less explain, its own existence. We just, one day, are born; eventually we become aware of ourselves—pain, fear, hunger often being our first sensations of self-consciousness.

We're given something none of us sought after, planned for, or acquiesced in; we're not sure what it is, what it means, or even why we have it; its most real and immediate givens—pain, sorrow, loss, fear—remain absurdly inexplicable. Nevertheless, we cling to it even though we lose it anyway.

Is this all there is to human life?

Waiting for Godot divided reality into two spheres. The first one is mechanistic, atheistic, and secular. Here truths exist only as mathematical equations; they are amoral. The second is spiritual. It transcends a single-tiered reality and proclaims that truth doesn't originate in creation but in the Creator. In the first, human is the means, the ends, and all in all. In the second, God is. In the first, humanity is the subject of truth, in the second it's the object—and a vast gulf exists between the two.

If the mechanistic option is true, then our responses in the long run don't really matter; the end's the same for all of us, regardless of who we are or what we think, believe, or do. If the second is true, our responses have eternal consequences. If the first is true, we'll never know; in the second, we have hope of absolutes.

Between these two centers of gravity, a black fog looms. The option of a compromise, of a balance between them at "the end of history" doesn't (ultimately) and can't (logically) exist. It's either one or the other, but not both. Neither view's philosophic architecture is so tightly woven, so perfectly packaged that even their most faithful adherents can't trip over the loose ends. No matter how tightly fused one may be to his or her beliefs, they are still *only* beliefs—subjective encounters with phenomena, mere opinions always tainted by what was woven in the genes at conception or by what's frothing in the belly at the particular moment of thought. Belief, ultimately, has no bearing upon the truth or the falsity of its object. No matter how fervent, belief can't make the false true or the true false. What's false never existed, even when we passionately believe that it did; what's true, in contrast, remains even after we long since stopped believing in it.

Where are we?

With his five unenviable characters on a barren stage, Samuel Beckett dramatized the West's most immediate dilemma: God is dead, so where does that leave those made in His image? For Beckett, they're left between two hard fetters: one, Christ hasn't come as He promised; two, we are in a sad lot because He hasn't. Between these cruel fates, humanity is manacled in a bond that offers no escape. How could it, when the knot itself is made of all reality, when it's woven of the only options possible, and when it's tied together by irreducible logic?

"Nothing to be done," mutters Estragon because there's nothing *to do*. Frankly, nothing *can* be done—not in a godless universe where our most inflexible and uncompromising enemy accepts no surrender and takes no prisoners but snipes and shells until every cell wall crumbles and all within drains out and decays. Death is a foe impossible for us to hunt out and destroy because it's made of what we are. In a naturalistic, single-tiered universe, life and death are but different mixes of the same stew. The living are just a pubescent version of the dead.

The pre-Socratic Protagoras said, "Concerning the gods, whether they exist or not I do not know because of the difficulty of the topic and the shortness of human life."[3] From then, through the materialistic presuppositions of modern science, a naturalistic worldview has had a long (in terms of time) but thin (in terms of adherents) history. But only in the past 100 years or so has secularism tilted the whole edifice of Western thought, with scientific and intellectual leaders preaching it with the fervor of crusaders. Conceived in the debris of the 17th century Cromwellian Revolution, birthed in arable Enlightenment ideals, nurtured by the goddess of reason and unwittingly encouraged by so-called intellectual and open-minded Christians, secularism came of age in the 20th century. Now it's so infused into Western culture we'd have to climb out of our eyes in order to see what it has done to our minds. Never before has there been such a widespread, institutionalized, and intellectually fertile movement to explain creation, and all its predicates (life, death, morals, law, purpose, love)—without a Creator.

After all, why bother with the texts of the dead when there's the science of the living? What can Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Paul possibly say to those raised on Newton, Einstein, and Heisenberg? Didn't the *Principia* vitiate the Apocalypse? Who needs the Lord moving over the "face of the deep" (Genesis 1:2) when Darwin did the same on the *H.M.S. Beagle*?

Wrapped in airtight numbers, expressed by scientists, and explained by well-woven theories, the secular worldview has commanded an aura of objectivity, of validation that's (at least for now) beyond the reach of religious faith. Special relativity has enjoyed proofs that the death and resurrection of Christ haven't.

Despite the apparent triumph of scientific rationalism, its victory has never been tethered to anything except itself and its own dogmatic presuppositions. The fit, in fact, is not as tight as has been taught, and the longer it shrouds the world, the more threadbare the cover becomes until reality is bursting through the seams. Sure, the world flashes across our senses as material; sure, rational thinking solves puzzles and helps jets fly; sure, science has dissected the atom and constructed the space shuttle. Yet these facts don't prove that materialism, rationalism, and science contain the potential, or even the tools, to explain all reality any more than classical physics alone explains France's 1998 World Cup victory.

Equations inadequately define a reality riotous with passion, effusive with thought, and spry with creativity. What algorithm can explain the passion of *Hamlet*, what formula the cooing of a dove, what law the foreboding of Van Gogh's *Wheatfield With Crows*? Are the symphonies of Beethoven and the lyrics of Shelley nothing more than the manuscripts upon which they are written? Theories and formulas, principles and laws don't make stars shine, robins fly, or mothers feed their young any more than carving the symbols $E=MC^2$ on a piece of refined uranium will make an atomic explosion.

Squandering away the essential

However great the scientific achievements of the past few hundred years, something essential and intrinsically human has been squandered along the way. Isaac Newton declared, "O God! I think thy thoughts after thee!" And Stephen Hawking, occupying the same chair at Cambridge as did Newton, says, "The human race is just a chemical scum on a moderate-sized planet, orbiting around a very average star in the outer suburb of one among hundreds of billion of galaxies."[4] Between the two, there is a whole dimension, unable to fit in test tubes or conform to formulas. Heaven, instead of being the throne of the cosmos, has been shattered, the pieces parceled out and fragmented into nothing but fickle myths scattered in the human imagination. And the God who once reigned in that heaven, now, instead, has disappeared, twice removed from that throne (created by the creatures He had once created).

Thus the divine has been contorted and demoted in order to fit the frame that for the past hundred years has outlined the boundaries of all reality. In addition, whole aspects of human existence have been painfully crammed by scientific rationalism into containers that can no more hold them than a fishnet can restrain whirlpools. Ethics and love, hate and hope transcend not just the Periodic Table of Elements but all 112 other facets of reality the Table represents. Scientific formula—no matter how finely tuned and balanced—can't fully explain heroism, art, fear, generosity, altruism, hate, hope, and passion.

A worldview that limits its world, and its view, only to rationalism, materialism, and scientific atheism misses all that's beyond them—which is so much of us, of what we are, of what we hope for, of what we aspire to, of love and worship, of life and death. Chemical scum doesn't mull over loftier worlds, envision eternity, write *Les Misérables*, or evoke the sublime. Formulas and chemicals are part of life, of course. But are they all of it? Never. To think that they are is to surrender onself to the lowest possible denominator, to settle for the cheapest option when others, more hopeful, rich, and promising exist.

Moral responsibility

In fact, in a purely materialistic, chemical, and mechanical world, how can humans ever be responsible for their actions? If physical laws alone control us, we're like the wind or combustion. Any society based on purely materialistic premises would have to let its murderers, child-molesters, thieves, rapists—in fact, all offenders—go free because we're machines, and who can ascribe moral culpability to a gizmo? It would be like putting an AK-47 on trial for murder. No society, even those glossed with secularism, allows for such moral inculpability, except among the criminally insane. Thus, what society says, implicitly at least, is that if scientific materialism were true, we'd all have to be lunatics. Every culture rejects hard-core materialism, believing instead that we're morally responsible beings not manipulated by deterministic physical forces beyond our control.

We're activated, obviously, by something more than what we immediately perceive—even if we don't know what—but only that it's there and real, and without it we're not alive, or free, or human. Immanuel Kant argued that the mere act of reason itself surpasses nature, transcends emotions, trumps urges, and upstages instincts. How could we even think transcendent thoughts if there were not something about us beyond nature, something greater than the sum of our chemicals, something more to our minds than pulsating meat? Isn't there some principle out there stating that effects can't be greater than their causes?

What science cannot tell us, said philosopher Bertrand Russell, mankind cannot know. Really? Then we can't know love, hate, mercy, good, evil, happiness, transcendence or faith. But because *we do* know them, a worldview like scientific materialism, which says *we can't* is obviously inadequate.

The incomplete vision

"An uneasy sense nonetheless prevails," wrote mathematician David Berlinski, "—it has *long* prevailed—that the vision of a purely physical or material universe is somehow incomplete; it cannot encompass the familiar but inescapable facts of ordinary life."[5]

Science and materialism can't even

justify themselves, or their own existence, much less explain everything else's. Austrian mathematician Kurt Gödel showed that no system of thought, even scientific, can be legitimized by anything within the system itself. You have to step outside the system to view it from a different and broader perspective in order to appraise it. Otherwise, how does one judge *x*, when *x* itself is the very criterion used to do the judging? How can humans objectively study the act of thinking, when they have only the act of thinking to do it?

For years reason has reigned as epistemological king of the West, the sole criteria for judging truth. Yet what has been the criteria for judging reason? Reason itself! But to judge reason by reason is like defining a word by using the word itself in the definition. It's a tautology, and tautologies prove nothing. How fascinating, then, that reason itself—the foundation of thought, particularly, of modern thought—can't really be validated any more than the statement, "The house is red because the house is red."

The problem for scientism and materialism is, How can one step outside a system, into a wider frame of reference, when the system itself purports to encompass all reality? What happens when we reach the edge of the universe? What's beyond it? If there were a wider frame of reference to judge it from (God perhaps?), then the system itself would not be all-encompassing, as scientific materialism often claims to be.

"In short," wrote scientist Timothy Ferris, "there is not and will never be a complete and comprehensive scientific account of the universe that can be proved valid."[6] In other words, even science and materialism will always have to be taken on...faith?

What? The inherent limits of science itself require *faith*? But isn't faith, the notion of belief in something unprovable, outside the purview of science, whose whole purpose is to prove things empirically? Isn't the concept of faith a leftover from a distant, mythic pre-rationalistic, pre-scientific age?

Because it is based on materialism, science implies (at least hypothetically) that everything should be accessible to experiment and empirical validation. Ideally, there shouldn't be room for faith in a scientific universe, *yet the very nature of that universe demands it.* What a paradox! Within the materialistic and scientific worldview, then, there reigns the potential for something beyond it, something outside of it, something that explains why love is more than endocrine function, why ethics is more than chemical synthesis, and why beauty is more than mathematical proportions... something, perhaps, divine?

Clifford Goldstein, a prolific author, is the editor of the adult Sabbath School Study Guide *at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. His mailing address: 12501 Old Columbia Pike; Silver Spring, Maryland 20904; U.S.A. E-mail: GoldsteinC@gc.adventist.org*

Notes and references

1. Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove Press, 1954).
2. Francisco Jose Moreno, *Between Faith and Reason* (New York: Harper Books, 1977), p. 7.
3. Quoted in *From Thales to Plato*, edited by T. V. Smith (Chicago: Phoenix Books, 1956), p. 60.
4. Quoted in David Deutsch, *The Fabric of Reality* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), pp. 177, 178.
5. David Berlinski, *The Advent of the Algorithm* (New York: Harcourt Books, 2000), pp. 249, 250.
6. Timothy Ferris, *Coming of Age in the Milky Way* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), p. 384.