Philosophical Reflections (part 5 of 5)

Description: This series of articles provide a conceptual framework for answering the 'big questions' related to our existence. Part 5 continues with the discussion on the thought process that should be employed to reach the right conclusions and explains that the intellectual foundations of any world-view should be assessed to judge the validity of its truth.
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Though we can understand the world around us using rational thought, how can we formulate an argument or verify our conclusions? Well, this lies in the study of logic which essentially means the principles of reasoning, with particular emphasis on the structure of our arguments.

Let's illustrate the use of logic in the following example: if our friend Mary says oeJohn is coming to dinner tonight", and David says oeMary is not coming to dinner tonight". Is what they say consistent? Well, logic would tell us that if they are referring to the same person and the same day then no, their statements would not be consistent. However if they are referring to a different person or a different day then yes their statements would be consistent.

So let's combine the two processes. John says oeWhatever begins to exist has a cause and the universe began to exist, therefore the universe has a cause". Now from a logical perspective it is a valid argument as the last statement oetherefore the universe has a cause" logically follows from the first two statements. But this doesn't mean it is rational or reasonable. In order to find out that it is reasonable we would have to investigate using our innate ideas and our sense experience to see if the first two statements are true. If they are, then the conclusion will not only be a valid argument but it would also be a sound argument.

Just relying on empiricism would not give us an answer as it would lead us to suspend judgment on whether the universe has a cause or not because it cannot be sensed. However this would be equivalent of denying the existence of your great great great great great great great grandmother, because there is no empirical evidence for her existence. You may argue oebut I wouldn't be here today!", that is true, but that would be using rational thought to form that conclusion, as you would have deduced that you must have had a great great great great great great great grandmother as all human beings must have had a grandmother in order to exist.

This is how all of us should start to think about life and the universe, so we could form the right conclusions using valid arguments.

World-view

oeBut perhaps you hate a thing and it is good for you; and perhaps you love a thing and it is bad for you. And God Knows, while you know not." (Quran 2:216)

Live and let live, don't harm others and you'll be fine. This makes sense, right? Even to the point that it shouldn't be questioned. But why is this? Why do we automatically accept some ideas and reject others? Why do certain viewpoints seem agreeable to us yet we disagree with others, all without really thinking about them?

The answer lies in the concept of a world-view. A world-view is a philosophy of living that enables us to make sense of life and our daily experiences. The world-view we adopt affects the way we process ideas, and allows us to understand society and our place in it. A world-view is important in particular association with our society today " this is because the contemporary world has had a huge effect on human psychology. We seem unable to deal with the unpredictable changes and increased complexity of life " subsequently stress, uncertainty and frustration become common and our minds are overloaded with information. A world-view is the framework that ties all of this together, and allows us to understand life's complexity and unpredictability, it helps us make the critical decisions that will shape our future and our own selves, and it aids us in providing a picture of the whole.

World-views vary and can range from being shallow to comprehensive. A shallow world-view is one that just gives us the framework to react to day-to-day experiences, such as work and friendships. This type of world-view is usually formed via our previous experiences in life and it develops by creating templates of understanding the world by contemplating on our history with it. This type of world-view is problematic as it obstructs us from progression by maintaining an inflexible fixation on the past, with no possibility of viewing the world in a positive or different way that will enable our transformation. It is limited in its scope as it becomes only as comprehensive as your experiences, and individually our experiences are very limited.

A comprehensive world-view, as discussed by the philosopher Leo Apostel, encompasses everything in life and it includes various components, for instance it provides a model for the world by answering the basic question oewho are we?" In addition it provides an explanation usually answering oewhy is the world the way it is?" and oewhere did we come from?" Another important part of a comprehensive world-view includes extrapolating from the past into the future to answer the question oewhere are we going?" It should endeavour to answer oewhat is good and what is evil?", in other words to include morality and ethics, while giving us a sense of purpose, direction and goals for our actions. Additionally, the answer to the question oewhat for?" may help us to understand the real meaning of life and a comprehensive world-view must answer oehow should we act?" thereby helping us to solve practical problems. Lastly a comprehensive world-view should answer the question oewhat is true and what is false?", this is equivalent to what in philosophy is called oeepistemology" or oethe theory of knowledge", therefore it would allow us to distinguish between what is correct and what is incorrect.

For any situation there are various possible outcomes all of which are dictated by the world-view that someone adopts. Instead of discussing the actions, or fruits, of a world-view the foundations of the world-view should be challenged and validated. So the world-view that is more correct or has stronger intellectual foundations should be the one to adopt.

This is why when looking into Islam the primary focus should not be an assessment of women's rights, clothing and on instances sensationalized by the media, because the assessment of these will be biased and skewed in line with your existing world-view. But rather, the intellectual foundations of any world-view should be assessed for its truth, and the one with greater reasons to believe in its truth should be the world-view to adopt, because it will be in line with the principle of: whatever comes from truth is true.

So let the journey begin!

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