

00:06.31

So, those three then, together are a presentation of Buddhist ethics. And I'll leave it there.
Thank you.

EVAN THOMPSON

Thank you.

APPLAUSE

00:06.47

Our fourth and final respondent is Professor Robert Pollack, who is Professor of Biological Sciences, Lecture and Psychiatry at the Center for Psychoanalytic Training and Research, Adjunct Professor of Science and Religion at Union Theological Center- Seminary, excuse me, Adjunct Professor of Religion at Columbia University and Director of the Center for the Study of Science and Religion here at Columbia University. Thank you.

APPLAUSE

ROBERT POLLACK

00:07.18

Thank you. Jay comes to work on three continents. I come to work on four planets. I want to begin by thanking Jay Garfield for sending in his essay to the conference in time for me to have a chance

to think about my response in advance of this afternoon's session.

00:07.39

In his talk he gave me a door through which to go from my understanding of our place in nature to his. He said - and I'll quote from his talk - "The truth of suffering sets the problem that Buddhism sets out to solve. The universe is pervaded by suffering and the causes of suffering. The Buddha did not set out to prove this, he took it as a datum. One that is obvious to anyone on serious reflection, though one that escapes most of us most of the time precisely because of our evasion of serious reflection in order not to face this fact."

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I find a lot to agree with here. Suffering is an obvious datum, all right, and denial and repression of it certainly informs our lives and the lives of most of our colleagues. But I cannot say I'm wholly through that door. As a scientist of the old-fashioned sort, not a social

scientist, not a philosopher scientist, just a biologist, I cannot help but note that Professor Garfield's paper lacked a full recognition of that aspect of suffering that seems to me central to our place in nature.

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That is, the eventual mortality of everything. From each of us to our species, to the universe as a whole. So, rather than attempt to speak to the ethics of Western science in a general way, I thought I would, instead, lay out for us today the ethical consequences of this inescapable data point.

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Because we are all part of the one species whose members have demonstrable self-awareness of individual mortality and an equally demonstrable capacity to modulate that self-awareness through denial and repression, we all share the primary and initial tasks of acknowledging this central fact of the mortality of others and ourselves and

of then finding meaning in our acts despite these facts.

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The ethical question then becomes - has Western science anything at all to contribute to these primary tasks. And if so, how may science best contribute? Here are two clear negative responses from past generations - one from a great scientist, the other from a great humanist.

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First, quote, "What I am really interested in is whether God could have made the world in a different way. That is whether the necessity of logical simplicity leaves any freedom at all." Second quote. "Science is meaningless because it gives no answer to our question. The only question important for us - what shall we do and how shall we do it."

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The first quote is from Einstein, the second is from Tolstoy. They're examples of the convergent fact that in the West - absent a Buddhist

perspective - serious scientists and humanists, people of deep religious conviction and people for whom religion is so much detritus to be swept from the temple of human accomplishment are equally unshielded by science from the fact of mortality and the deep issue of meaning it raises.

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What ethics then can we get from Western science? The absence of purpose, the impossibility of perfection, the centrality of individual mortality - I will call these the natural design of life. It's my contention that the materialist reality of this natural design built - as it is on mortality - nevertheless permits all of us, but especially the scientists who best understand it, to choose to act, not to do harm, but to do good.

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This, by the way, is why as an article of faith intelligent design is truly powerful and deeply troubling. As science, it is meaningless. Nothing

in nature supports it, nothing in nature demands it, nothing we can do will either prove or disprove it. But as a belief, it distracts us all from acts we may - as individuals, but more importantly as families, faiths, nations and species - perform in this world to diminish the catastrophic consequences of natural disaster and human cruelty.

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Our origins in nature do not merely permit us to act to diminish suffering, they also guide us whether or not we first trade the Western tragic sense of our own individual mortality for a Buddhist interdependent perspective. Our data tell us, for instance, that all life is related.

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The tens of millions of kinds of living things, which can have fertile offspring with each other, we call them species. All share common ancestry. But the price of this ethically rich fact of common descent comes in the cold notion that each

species must have a finite lifetime for new ones to emerge from old.

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Species are not the stable entity they seem to be. Each is transient. As variant individuals in each species jostle with each other for food, sex, space and a fighting chance for their offspring, some will survive and others not. In time a species will change as a result and eventually- and a species' lifetime can run for many millions of years or even be much shorter.

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It will either die off as a species as it is pushed aside by other species invading its ecological turf, or it will be supplanted in that turf by a new species emerging from a minority of its members.

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That is why either replacement or simple disappearance is the certain fate of all species, including our own. The two notions of common descent and species mortality were well laid out

by Darwin and confirmed by others immediately thereafter. But it took another century for another unintuitive insight to complete today's Western scientific understanding of the origin of species.

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The fact that inherited change in a chemical called DNA could accomplish much of what the Darwinian idea of common descent and origin of species required. When copying errors generate new sequences of DNA text that happen to encode enhanced survivability in the offspring of a species, a new fertile population may emerge from an existing species.

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The problem is that while this scientific explanation of our origins permits our individual choice to act ethically on behalf of a suffering individual, so as to alleviate that suffering, such acts, such ethical acts must emerge in spite of our data, not because of them.

00:15.01 These data tell us instead that our species with all our appreciation of ourselves as unique individuals within it is simply the transient, meaningless result of the sifting out of viable texts from a set of randomly generated typos.

00:15.18 The methods and strategies of science have thus brilliantly succeeded in explaining how we got here and where we are going next and the explanations seem to leave absolutely no door into a natural justification for ethical behavior. A mutation just happens to land in the sperm or egg that will make one individual and not another. Intentionality is neither necessary nor even demonstrable.

00:15.48 This most successfully defended null hypothesis of science has been so amply confirmed that there's no longer any reason to doubt it. Worse, our data also tell us that the living world, ourselves included, is intrinsically imperfect and intrinsically imperfectible. It changes, but

even the changes that make each of us individually unique and interesting to each other are, in the end, meaningless differences in our DNA, creating the differences among us toward no purpose beyond the possible improvement in the survival of one or another particular version of DNA over time.

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And even that imputation of purpose to the data may be unjustifiably teleological. I am not exaggerating the seriousness of this problem. Scientific insight into the meaninglessness of DNA-based life is not simply missing meaning. It is the demonstration that a satisfactory, elegant explanation of the workings of this aspect of nature actually conflicts with ethical undertakings.

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There is no evidence of eschatology in nature, nor any sign that greater meaning and purpose will one day be drawn from these data, but with one exception. The reality of the faith and hope

that like our ethics, do emerge in our minds despite the absence of scientific evidence in their support.

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Honest scientists know their limits. Newton excused himself from the task of finding meaning in his discovery of the laws that govern the movement of stars and planets by saying, "I have not been able to deduce from phenomena the reason of these properties and I do not feign hypotheses."

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Unless we force science to do just what Newton did not deign to do and simply articulate our wishes as if they were in the data, though they are not, we must accept the tragic, meaninglessness and purposelessness of our presence on earth as the verdict of testable science.

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That said, the fact that we find within ourselves the capacity to choose on any grounds at all, but

especially on irrational grounds against judgment, against data, against survival, against reason, even against death, choose to learn to remember to teach and to act in one way and not another can return meaningfulness to us.

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In Western religious terms then, it is the God-given inexplicable reality of free will that allows us to accept an idea or not. How then, does a particular ethical stance emerge from within those of us Western scientists who are religious, but who accept the natural world as Western science finds it? Not by data.

00:19.02

But by acknowledging the felt necessity of responding to these facts with acts of loving kindness. That felt necessity can and does emerge in a wholly Western context, as well. Even as we still see ourselves as distinctive, tragically separate individuals. The ethics of science in the West may be said then, to emerge as a

reaction against the data that describe the natural world.

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But this should not be surprising. Western sciences and in particular, medicine and the life sciences are themselves profoundly unnatural human activities. If we were to surrender medicine and all other manifestations of our capacity to understand nature and use that understanding for our own purposes, it would allow us as a species to be less intrusive, more natural for sure.

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But we know from ecology and from environmental science that all other primates alive today, especially those whose body size approximates our own, have a species size in the hundreds of thousands of individuals and a life expectancy of 35 to 40 years, no more.

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That would become our fate, as well. Compare that to the current situation - life expectancies can

be doubled to 80 with current science and technology. And our species now numbers in the high billions. And you can see the true and unimaginably high cost of any serious attempt to move away from science, back to our natural place in the natural world.

00:20.51

Who among us are prepared to see 99 out of a hundred people we know, disappear. And 99 out of a hundred of those disappear and then 9 out of 10 of those. Who among us is so naïve about statistics as to think we would be one of the survivors of such a culling?

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And if we were, who would be satisfied to live no longer than it may take to get tenure? Pain, suffering, the unreasonable maldistribution of good and bad fate – these are the stuff of natural design. The visible expression of the random genetic variation which provides nature with the eerie capacity to produce some living thing that will survive any contingency.

00:21.42

To work against these aspects of life, while still clinging to the importance of one's acts is the Western way to work against nature's deepest mechanisms and also to work against the meaninglessness of these mechanisms. This raises the question that is the subject of my own current work - if we are convinced we must forswear the dream of returning to nature, how can we hope to redirect the powers of science and technology that got us here to help our species reach a sustainable equilibrium with ourselves and the rest of nature.

00:22.22

I feel a sense of urgency here that may well be alleviated by a better understanding of our interconnectedness. But perhaps should not be so alleviated. We can be sure that social policies based on natural design will always consign innocent people to suffering whenever we do not use our capacity to choose to act with loving kindness.

00:22.47

In our country today, racism has always been and remains an all-too-common behavior and the choice to steer clear of it is a good example of the sort of act that makes one a full human being. The natural evil of Katrina forced us all to see the consequences of decades of earlier failures to act out of loving kindness.

00:23.11

The failure to properly evacuate and care for the beleaguered citizens of the Gulf Coast was only lastly, a failure of government efficiency. It was initially the predictable outcome of decades of persistent racism - the intentional dehumanization of the population of that area whose ancestors had come from Africa most recently as slaves at the hands of others whose African ancestors had first stopped over in Europe some tens of thousands of years earlier.

00:23.45

To place this Western notion of urgency and obligation to care for the suffering of others as

individuals singled out by evil intention in a larger Western religious context, I turn in closing to two great Christian ethicists of the just past century.

00:24.05

First, from the writings of the martyred German pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, quote: "Christianity has adjusted itself too much, much too easily to the worship of power. It should give much more offense, more shock to the world than it is doing. Christianity should take a much more definite stand for the weak than to consider the potential moral right of the strong."

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End quote. Thirty years later, forty years ago, right here in New York, up the block from where we sit, Dr. Martin Luther King addressed this issue of ethics and science by extending the meaning of a foundational Western religious text from the personal to the social and political.

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Speaking at Riverside Church one year to the day before he was assassinated, he said, quote: "A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand, we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day, we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway."

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True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. The question of ethics as an aspect of science in the West then becomes a simple one. It is how can Western science contribute to this restructuring. Thank you.

APPLAUSE

EVAN THOMPSON