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What's Going on?

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Abstract

In this brief essay, I argue that while human knowledge is necessarily limited, fragmented and incomplete, one can embrace the resulting mystery, even find coherence, meaning and a peaceful relationship to “not-knowing”. In this sense, the question that burns deep into the spirit as to “what’s going on?” while not answered as such, can help

humans develop and evolve their paradigms and knowledge systems, while also requiring humility in the quest and search, and a coming to terms with not been able to solve the conundrum, yet still fostering a better self and world in the process of such a cry in the dark, as it were. One learns to live with the mystery.

Keywords: Knowledge, Limitation, Mystery, Meaning

1. Introduction

It may occur to one that the whole of life, simply existing or being in this world is utterly absurd, and that one just cannot fathom what is happening – in crude terms, an underlying angst festers deep within and a kind of scream that shouts in silence: “what’s going on?”. In addition to this metaphysical quandary of being one may add the social and cultural realm, where, in a world where evil is often termed good, one may cower at the realization that the human life world is a sick joke and one simply does not know why it is so or even if one could surmise the causal origins of all things, why does it have to yet be so.

In this brief essay, I begin by outlining the unique self-awareness that characterizes those who embark on a quest of understanding, that this search is prompted by a desire to know that which is true, the facts, or at least express a creative world with its own logic – in either case it is such a search that attempts to give sense to the question – what is going on? Nevertheless, such knowing is elusive and beyond one’s grasp, and no amount of causation can explain and solve this strange hum of existence or that which lies on the other side of death, if anything. I conclude that the best solution is simply to embrace the mystery and use the energy that is life wisely in the process, for one can come to both love and deeply respect the mystery.

2. Self-awareness

Even at a very basic level, human beings are aware that they are aware. Usually. Many may just be a victim of their narrative or only aware insofar as they are aware that others are aware of them. But even in such cases, every human being senses – however ill-formed – the sensation “I exist”. Now once this is in place as early as the desire for food and defecation and so on, there is an immediate duality. I am here. There is the world. How can the world satisfy me, or in more mature levels, this may develop to “how can I satisfy the world”. In either case there is an existential abyss between self and world, and more poignantly this is predicated on a lack in both the self and the world. I exist, I need to be satisfied or it or you exists, it is somehow defective, and I need to change it or come to know and understand its mechanisms and so on. As the individual will invariably suffer the slings and arrows of life, so one might ask – what is all this, what is actually going on? The fashions of the day may provide him security and comfort – it’s an accident of the big bang where trillions and trillions of particles exploded out of nothing and through various processes, by accident or infinite experimentation produced life, of which he is the latest evolving concoction. That story is partly rather grim for it promulgates no telos, no deity, no magic – only a mindless dance where even determinism fails.

Such a paradigm sees the human as no more than a more sophisticated animal. There is indeed truth to this and in fact man is also the most ferocious and violent of all animals. Nevertheless, with all the science and culture that tells this story, one still has a deep unease – why all of this? What really is matter and how can it produce consciousness? Is the cycle ever broken –

does mankind ever become peace-loving and more aware or conscious of levels beyond the animalistic? Surely the human mind can grasp truth and answer the question “what’s going on?” in an ultimate sense.

3. Fact or Truth

The idea that humans might accrue knowledge, true facts about the world would appear to assuage this pain of not knowing, and provide comfort, control and solutions. One might come to know the fundamental laws of nature, the nature of social formations and human development, the biological structure of all creatures, even the very cosmological geography of the observable universe. One might divine truths about this world and the ability to produce machines that ease material existence, provide food, shelter, medicine in great abundance, and thus overcome what his predecessors could not. Yet for all this, humans appear insanely irrational. Wars have never abated, individual psychosis continues and social ills, disease, ignorance and so on are pervasive. The march of knowledge has not halted this dreary situation and there is no end point to knowledge, no final word, no ultimate stasis and knowing.

In fact, of all the dangerous men and woman and societies down the ages and in our time, it is precisely the claim to knowing the truth that is most pernicious, and it is to religion that the primary culprit remains. It assumes absolute veracity and blind adherence and belief. People kill and die in the name of their god. The facts that it claims to know are not facts but belief systems that indoctrinate huge swaths of people. Science does not necessarily have a better claim and often amounts to scientism, another kind of religion, while art and culture, while not claiming to know or to bear facts and truths, is just a game which is largely meaningless, often illogical and only rarely about anything profound, other than simply fashion and entertainment and aesthetic play.

4. Beyond one’s grasp, complexity of causality

There are at least three major problems with the idea that humans can have ultimate or complete knowledge:

- 1) A causal system is the best explanatory formation one can have in trying to understand how an element or elements of creations function. However, in order to have complete understanding and total grasp it would require knowing the whole edifice of the causal chain from beginning to end. Firstly, if creation is ex nihilo this is impossible. Secondly, if it is eternal, it is equally impossible to know the entire chain of events and relationships. On a small scale, this is possible, but not in an ultimate and all-encompassing sense.
- 2) Our senses are limited in capacity and idiosyncratic. This means their grasp is a) determined by the limits of our perception and b) specific to humans in which case other creatures filter reality differently and thus our grasp or understanding is not reality as it is but rather a very human way of processing and perceiving. It is not a view from no-where and no more transcendent than the hungers of a giraffe or ant – humans are part of the system, programmed as such and limited in its grasp of reality.
- 3) Nature is continuously evolving in which case knowledge too changes as we do, so that rather than achieving absolute knowing, accrual is one of a slow process of exploration in a changing universe,

humankind being but one element within a vast set of such creatures and elements.

5. Living with the mystery

Given the inability to understand reality and have complete and ultimate knowledge, the next best bet is simply to bracket out reality and maintain that at its base and essence, it is but a mystery. This is not to forestall knowledge, but to recognize in humility that humans cannot know reality as it is (Kant’s Noumenon) and but plays with the shadows (Plato’s cave analogy). Now, returning to this existential, angst-ridden sense of “what’s going on?” question by those who dare to question and face the abyss and torment of life, one might however come to terms with the mystery and make peace with it, rather than recoil into the world of heavy metal and just swirl in madness and noise.

How is this possible? Just as one can enjoy a meal without knowing the precise details as to why or move one’s body while oblivious to the mechanical capacity to do so, so one might take pleasure in life without having to grasp all the details. Secondly, in the pursuit of knowledge, albeit limited, one can be in awe rather than terror at the inexplicable nature of reality. Thirdly, one can find peace without knowing why simply because there is love and connection where there is harmony between elements, whether in an artwork, a relationship, grasping at least something or simply the awareness of being alive amidst something indescribably beautiful even though certainly pain, suffering and violence also exist on the “stage”. In fighting for the former in one’s personal life and in relation to the set of circumstances one finds oneself in, one might attribute a meaningful strife and noble struggle in the face of entropy, death and violence, though victory might not be at hand, as all life forms have an expiry.

6. Conclusion

So, while I can offer:

- **The scientific view:** We’re atoms in motion, evolved from stardust, entangled in cause and effect, trying to make meaning in a cold but majestic universe (awe).
- **The spiritual view:** We’re souls in exile, part of an infinite unity, climbing toward God — one’s choices matter beyond what one can see, even in heartbreak (mystical).
- **The psychological view:** One is narrating one’s pain and pleasure through a mind that hungers for coherence, significance, and love (meaning).
- **The literary/mythic view:** One is a character in a story that is still being written (is evolving), one that repeats and yet hopes for transcendence — a reincarnating soul at the turning of the wheel.

But **what’s actually going on** — beyond all stories, frames, symbols?

That remains *hidden*, perhaps by divine design. Even the Torah ends with Moshe looking at the Promised Land but not entering. Even the Zohar speaks in riddles. Even modern physics dances in uncertainty.

At best, one ought to acknowledge being here, alive, questioning — and that might be the point.

Maybe the search itself is the flame. And maybe the deepest truth isn’t something to grasp, but something to *become*.