

Hinduism, Metaphysics, and Free Will

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Michael Egnor:

Welcome back. This is Mike Egnor from Mind Matters News. I have the pleasure and privilege of interviewing Arjuna Gallagher. Mr. Gallagher is from New Zealand. He's a Hindu, he has a superb YouTube channel called Theology Unleashed, and has released a wonderful documentary that I highly recommend. And the documentary is entitled, The Persecuted Saints You've Never Heard of. Welcome back, Arjuna.

Arjuna Gallagher:

Great to be here. Thank you.

Michael Egnor:

Thank you. On our last session, we talked a little bit about the evolutionary argument against naturalism. The people who believe in evolution obviously believe in the reliability of their own ability to reason, that is, they believe that they can logically understand themselves, understand nature. But a number of philosophers and theologians, particularly Alvin Plantinga, have put forth an argument that if our ability to reason arose strictly through evolutionary means, we have no reason to trust our ability to reason as a way of ascertaining truth because it evolved as a way to reproduce, a way to maximize the number of our offspring, not as a way to understand truth. So how do you feel about the evolutionary explanations for the human mind?

Arjuna Gallagher:

One thing I want to say first off is that I think we can know that we have an ability to reason, even if our world view doesn't explain that. So like we can have a self-evident understanding that I have an ability to reason as a first principle, even if our worldview doesn't support that. So the argument, it's called in philosophy the argument from reason, would be that there's a contradiction between the worldview and the ability to reason. Not that the ACS is unable to reason or doesn't know that they have an ability to reason. That is a rejection of Presuppositionalism. Some people might be upset by that, but a lot of people will be satisfied.

Arjuna Gallagher:

Donald Hoffman wrote a book called The Case Against Reality where he thinks that evolution can explain us being good at math because there's survival advantages to being up to do math well, I suppose. I don't know if it explains being really good at understanding highly abstract concepts, because you can imagine the mathematician that's pottering around being the one who comes and gets eaten by of the bear because they're not paying enough attention to the outside world, right?

Michael Egnor:

Right. Well it would seem to me there'd be a fairly simple way of testing the hypothesis that evolution was the source of our ability to do math just by checking the reproductive success of mathematicians as compared to say, for example, rock stars. I mean the notion that that sort of esoteric mental activity makes you reproductive successful, that doesn't seem to be too credible if you just look at the average high school dating scene. Mathematicians are not reproductive superstars, so it's hard to buy that argument.

Arjuna Gallagher:

Yeah. The counter argument might be group selection that a gene pool, which is capable of producing these kinds of intelligences is better at surviving, even if the people with those kinds of intelligences don't have a better reproduction rate.

Michael Egnor:

Yeah. Yeah, sure. You can make that argument, but then that gets into the whole problem of group selection versus selfish genes. That it would seem to be, at least within the population, that mathematics would be a vanishingly rare thing because everybody else would be reproducing because the mathematicians have conferred them benefit. So you get fewer and fewer mathematicians as the generations go along. But you get into what I think is a crazy Darwinist way of reasoning that doesn't make too much sense to begin with. So from your perspective on Hinduism, what is the metaphysical structure of reality? That's a big question, but how does metaphysics work?

Arjuna Gallagher:

So the Sanskrit word tattva is the closest you've come to ontological category. It's from the demonstrative pronoun tat, which means that. So, that, when you convert it to a philosophical term comes to mean, things that actually exist. So it's categories of existence. And as that goes, you've got three broad categories as you get more descriptions, which is God, the world, and the living entities. But then with the material creation, it gets a bit more complex. I haven't studied it for a while, but there's something like the Mahabhutas and there's 25 elements. One of them includes God, then there's various other stages. And you get down to 10 senses plus the mind. So the mind is counted as a sense. And then the material energy is composed of five elements earth, aether, the standard five and those five elements each have different qualities and you go from subtle to more gross.

Arjuna Gallagher:

So aether is the first element. And then you get air, I think fires next, water and then earth. And they each contain progressively more qualities. And then there's one idea you do get, which is you don't find in Christianity so much, I think, as this idea of subtle and gross. So there's more subtle energy. There's the subtle body and the gross body and the subtle body is carried from lifetime to lifetime. That includes impressions, so if you suffer trauma or, or whatever other experiences you have that leave a deep impression on the soul, they carry it until the next lifetime. So as anyone who's been around children is aware, there're a diverse collection of personalities that can't be explained by the differences in environments. I've got two kids and they're both completely different from one another.

Arjuna Gallagher:

And this is explained by them carrying over impressions from past lives in the subtle body. And then the gross body is something produced as a result of that. And there's the material universe, which is composed of matter. And there's the spiritual world, which is composed of Sat, Chit and Ananda, which

is eternity, knowledge and bliss. So it's said that the qualities of this living entity, that the jivatma is Sat-Chit-Ananda just as God is Sat-Chit-Ananda. So we're one in quality with God, but different in quantity. We're a tiny spark of the divine, whereas God is the infinite absolute divine.

Michael Egnor:

Yeah. David Bentley Hart wrote a wonderful book on that particular topic, *The Experience of God*, I think. And he divided the book into those three topics and pointed out that although there are a lot of differences between individual face, they all seem to identify those three things as being central to existence and to be characteristics of God in one way or another.

Arjuna Gallagher:

Yeah. It's called *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness and Bliss*.

Michael Egnor:

Right.

Arjuna Gallagher:

Yeah. I highly recommend that book. It's really good.

Michael Egnor:

And you had a chance to interview David Bentley Hart on *Theology Unleashed*, right?

Arjuna Gallagher:

Yeah. I've had him on twice. Once it was just me interviewing him along with a fellow Christian and yeah, it was really interesting. He was a good sport.

Michael Egnor:

He's a fascinating guy and he is a magnificent writer. I mean, he's a beautiful writer. He did a wonderful book on the problem of evil related to the east Asian tsunami back about 15 years ago called *The Doors of the Sea* was the title of it. It was a beautiful reflection on the nature of evil and the odyssey, was very interesting stuff.

Arjuna Gallagher:

I haven't read that one. I'll have to check it out.

Michael Egnor:

Yeah. As I recall, his basic argument was we do not understand why evil occurs, that God is completely good, that there is nothing evil in God. We don't understand why evil occurs. And it's better for us that we don't meaning that it's a topic that is simply beyond us. And that our job is to try to help out as much as we can and to love God and not to blame Him for evil. And I found it a very thoughtful a way of looking at it.

Arjuna Gallagher:

Yeah. Sometimes you'll see people who have gone through immense suffering come to a realization that they gained some immense wisdom, which they attribute to having gone through that suffering. And they come to some understanding that the suffering was necessary and the wisdom they got from it is so valuable that they wouldn't trade it for not having suffered that suffering. But of course, oftentimes we're not out on that plateau of having come to that realization. We're having to employ a skeptical theism where we have this assumption that God is all good, and there's a higher purpose for all of us, but we're not able to see the reasons for it.

Michael Egnor:

There's an analogy that I find very helpful in thinking about this. I have four kids and when they were babies, if you put them down to nap time before they wanted to go to take a nap, they would scream bloody murder. They'd be very upset that they had to take a nap. So they'd be standing in their cribs screaming. And from the baby's perspective, this was the worst thing that ever happened. But obviously taking a nap is a good thing for them, but they were too young to really understand it but I understood it as the parent. And the gulf between me and the ultimate reality is infinitely greater than a gulf between a parent and a child.

Michael Egnor:

So no matter how terrible something may seem in my life, it's like, I'm that infant standing in the crib screaming. And I can't even really begin to understand why God lets this happen, but it doesn't mean that it's, in the grand scheme of things, not explainable in a way consistent with God's goodness. It just means that I can't even begin to understand it myself, but that's my problem. The other thing is I've always considered the problem of evil to be a very powerful argument for the existence of God. Atheists tend to use the problem of evil as an argument against the existence of God. However, if you acknowledge that evil exists, then you acknowledge that a moral law exists independently of opinion, because when people say that things are evil, they don't just mean that something has happened that they disagree with.

Michael Egnor:

It means that they think it's objectively wrong, that there is something evil about a child dying of cancer or a tsunami killing thousands of people. But if there is something objectively evil about that, then there has to be a source for that objective moral law, by which you judge it to be evil, and that source can only be God. So I think the problem of evil actually presupposes God's existence. If God didn't exist, we wouldn't see evil as a problem. We would just have things that we agreed with and disagreed with, but we wouldn't ascribe any moral importance to it.

Arjuna Gallagher:

Well, the atheist can give it as an internal critique and say, you guys believe God's all good. You believe an objective moral value such as that these things are wrong. And yet these things are going on. God's all powerful therefore, He could stop it and He's not so he can't be all good. That's an argument they can offer but often when these people say these things, they genuinely believe that it is objectively wrong for these things to happen. And if they do hold to an objective morality, then the argument flies.

Arjuna Gallagher:

I've heard William Lane Craig describe that... I think he was talking about this specific argument, often, there's two premises to the argument from objective morality to God's existence. And he's had one

conversation where he was experiencing that when he talked about the first premise, the person would reject that premise and rely on the second premise. And when you talk about the second premise, the person would accept that premise and reject the other one. So in this case it would be, objective moral values don't exist, I'm just offering an internal critique. And then when you go over to talking about objective moral values existing like, oh, I do think objective moral values exist, I'm just rejecting the other bit.

Michael Egnor:

Right, right, right. Exactly. Exactly.

Arjuna Gallagher:

Another point on the problem of evil is, and the Hindu traditions, it never really came up and I've often puzzled over that. And finally, I think it was Dr. Howard Resnick explained to me that it didn't come up because there was this bedrock idea of personal responsibility, thanks to Cameron reincarnation. So the question didn't really come up as a serious philosophical question, other things were delated and it was just a bedrock assumption that we had personal responsibility. And well, the real thing that Christianity doesn't have, which we have with Cameron reincarnation is the ability to explain why this person and not that person. Why me rather than someone else? Because with previous lifetimes, I can actually have responsibility that's genuine. It's just the fear will of the divine that some people fall here and some people fall there and we just got to learn and grow from whatever we're given.

Michael Egnor:

Right. Yes, but the difficulty with ascribing responsibility based on prior lifetimes is that it very much presupposes a moral law giver which certainly requires a personal God. I mean, we don't see any credible mechanistic way how moral problems in previous lives could be punished in future lives or rewarded in future lives without a personal God. So I'm not sure that Hinduism necessarily solves that problem. It just removes it one generation.

Arjuna Gallagher:

Yeah. You still do need God. I was doing a comparison between the Christian views. There's plenty of views you could argue against using the moral argument. The Cameron reincarnation point can't be explained by plenty of other Hindu views which lack a personal God.

Michael Egnor:

Sure, sure. With the modern debate between the new atheists and Christians, there's a tremendous debate about the existence and reality of free will. What is the perspective on free will in the Hindu belief?

Arjuna Gallagher:

So there might be Hindus that reject the existence of free will. It's not a question I've really pondered, and there actually were traditions free will is accepted as bedrock and not questioned at all. I don't know if it's something that was debated much in the tradition. Probably not. We're free agents. I mean, I said there's five factors of action so we're not 100% free. I can't remember the list of five actions that's in Bhagavad Gita. One of them is the living entity. One of them is karma. One of them is God. One of

them is the modes of material nature, which is actually another part of metaphysics we could get into. So that modes of material nature are ignorance, passion, and goodness.

Arjuna Gallagher:

Ignorance is suffering now and suffering later, like a drug addiction. The person's taking the drug, they think it's happiness, but actually it's suffering like getting drunk at a party or something. And then they suffer the next day too with the hangover. Happiness in the mode of passion is chasing goals and happiness in the mode of goodness, one way it's described is, it's happiness later. Whereas we do some benefit for now later, but it sounds similar to passion when you do that. But the motor goodness one is more peaceful and conducted.

Arjuna Gallagher:

So as for free will, we associate with the modes of material nature by listening to certain things, hanging out with certain people. And that creates a certain attitude in us. We get covered by a particular combination of the modes of material nature. And then those drive our behavior. So people who are on alcohol are more likely to commit violence. This is caused by becoming more in the mode of ignorance. One analogy for it is certain choices we make limit our free will. So if I choose to get on an airplane, maybe I don't have that choice right now, but normal times you can choose to get on an airplane. But once you're on the airplane, your choices are restricted. You can't just get off the airplane in the middle of a flight. There's certain things you can do while on the airplane. You still have free will there.

Arjuna Gallagher:

And another aspect we can talk about with free will is how it's described that it plays out is what we really do as desiring, accepting, rejecting. I want this, I don't want that. And then all of the actions are said to be carried out by the most material nature. So I will for my arm to move, but it's not actually me that moves the arm. I wouldn't to have the foggiest clue how to execute all the neural actions that are required for the arm to move. All I can do is desire that it happened.

Announcer:

Many thanks to Mike Egnor and this week's guest Arjuna Gallagher. They'll be back next time to discuss creation and the universe along with the Hindu perspectives on those topics. Thanks for listening. And until next time, be of good cheer.

Announcer 2:

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