

Discussion about Ultimate Reality with Graham Wood

Graham had recently won a [Templeton Award for theological promise](#), for his thesis examining the so-called 'fine-tuning' of the the Universe. In his words: "this fine-tuning suggests that the Universe is 'improbable' and has been taken by some as evidence of a creator God".

Where I live, Graham runs a philosophy café as an academic philosophy outreach by the University of Tasmania. As a facilitator, Graham is rarely able to engage in the philosophy café discussions on his own terms, but operates as a middle-man and general categoriser. So I was interested to see Graham's own views in his thesis - or were they?

My aim in this discussion was to simplify matters, and explain that the Universe, meaning Everything, could not be improbable because Everything certainly is. But as the discussion proceeded — from the notion of Everything, to things being causes that include the 'actual' and 'not-actual', and ending on Ultimate Reality being not only the set of actual things — I noticed how Graham seemed to be a third-party in the discussion, making the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy the discutant. So I tried to goad Graham a bit to tell his own view of things. It was at that point, Graham had to bring the discussion to a close for reasons of his own. A shame, as it was just beginning to scratch the surface.

I think the main stumbling block was getting bogged-down into defining 'things' as actual or not-actual. As far as I'm concerned, a thing is something finite. End of story.

Graham definitely had a blockage about logical truths vs. logical falsehoods. This notion far supersedes in sheer philosophical power the notion of actual things vs. imaginary things. It was very much like Graham would make some absolute statement, based on his thinking and not sense-data, then regard it as an eternally uncertain piece of speculation.

Any thinker worth his salt should immediately see that there is no ultimate difference between actuality and imagination, since all things occur in consciousness (A=A). From that purely logical experience, it is easy to conclude that things are finite, and Everything is not a finite thing, and therefore, the Universe cannot be an event or tuneable thing, let alone product of a creator God. But getting there is a matter of courage more than anything.

This discussion is presented as letters, although it occurred by email. I'm aiming to create the mood of a Victorian correspondence, when letter-writing was the careful fruit of much premeditation.

Kelly Jones



The Night of the Unconditional

Man has an inborn terror of walking in the dark - what wonder then that he has an inborn terror of the Unconditional, of getting himself involved with the Unconditional, about which it is true that "no night and no darkness is half as black" as this darkness and this night where all relative aims (the ordinary milestones and signposts), where all mutual regards (the lanterns that generally help shed light on our way), where even the tenderest and deepest feelings of affection are extinguished, for if they aren't we are not dealing with the absolutely Unconditional.

— Kierkegaard

22 March 2008

Hi Graham,

By 'improbability', do you mean unlikelihood, or not-probability?

If not-probability, one can't say that the Universe is improbable. It certainly is happening. There's not even probability.

If unlikelihood, still one can't say the Universe is improbable, because an unlikelihood is still in the range of probability.

Kelly

22 March 2008

Hi Kelly,

Given that the universe exists as it is, then, as you say, it cannot be "improbable". Given that it exists it has a probability of one. This is not the sense of improbability I am getting at.

Imagine that the universe did not yet exist. Before the universe exists, we can ask: what is the probability that the universe will be a certain way? (Just as you can ask, before a hand of four cards is dealt: what is the probability that the hand will contain four aces?)

It is in the same sense (although to a much less degree) that we say "it is improbable" that a hand of four cards (dealt from a fair well shuffled deck) will include four aces, that we can say "it is improbable" that the universe is the way it is (assuming that the laws of nature were set by chance).

Finally, by the word "improbable" I do not mean that it is not a probability at all. I just mean that the probability is low. Just how low the probability of an event has to be in order for the event to be "improbable" is an interesting question. In one sense anything with a probability of less than $1/2$ is "improbable", (in the sense of being less probable than not) but that does not seem very helpful. The problem then is finding a definition of "improbability" that is of some use.

Regards Graham

22 March 2008

Graham: *Imagine that the universe did not yet exist.*

By Universe, do you mean everything?

How can everything come into existence, given it would need some *thing* prior to its existence?

Graham: *Just how low the probability of an event has to be in order for the event to be "improbable" is an interesting question. In one sense anything with a probability of less than 1/2 is "improbable", (in the sense of being less probable than not) but that does not seem very helpful. The problem then is finding a definition of "improbability" that is of some use.*

So if the Universe is everything, is there any event at all of its arising?

Kelly

25 March 2008

Hi Kelly,

Graham: *Imagine that the universe did not yet exist.*

Kelly: *By Universe, do you mean everything?*

By Universe I mean the matter and energy of the universe (and the specific laws of nature of our universe).

Kelly: *How can everything come into existence, given it would need some *thing* prior to its existence?*

Quite reasonably, you are assuming that everything has a cause. (The principle of sufficient reason.) But there are a couple of ways to go here. Maybe the universe is not a 'thing' so the principle of sufficient reason is not applicable. Maybe the universe is a thing but there are some things that do not have causes. (Denying the principle of sufficient reason.) Or maybe there was a thing prior to the existence of the universe (Accepting the principle of sufficient reason). But that thing was not the matter and energy of our universe (or the laws of our universe).

Graham: *Just how low the probability of an event has to be in order for the event to be "improbable" is an interesting question. In one sense anything with a probability of less than 1/2 is "improbable", (in the sense of being less probable than not) but that does not seem very helpful. The problem then is finding a definition of "improbability" that is of some use.*

Kelly: *So if the Universe is everything, is there any event at all of its arising?*

Good question. Perhaps it is not meaningful to talk of the 'event' of the beginning of the universe. But when physicists talk of the big bang, it certainly sounds like an event. But even if it is an event, many assumptions have to be made if we want to attempt to assign that event a probability of occurring.

Cheers Graham

25 March 2008

Graham: *By Universe I mean the matter and energy of the universe (and the specific laws of nature of our universe).*

Do you think 'Everything' meaning, the above things, plus everything else that isn't 'our universe' or 'matter and energy', has a beginning?

Can it be an event that arises?

Kelly: *How can everything come into existence, given it would need some *thing* prior to its existence?*

Graham: *Quite reasonably, you are assuming that everything has a cause.*

A cause is whatever is necessary for something to exist.

Everything means, all possible things.

So all things are necessary for Everything, and vice versa.

Graham: *But that thing was not the matter and energy of our universe (or the laws of our universe).*

So putting that thing, and the thing that is 'our universe' together, what do you get?

I'm just trying to explain that only if the extent of Everything can be measured, can we talk of the probability of any of its parts arising. Until then, any probability we can conceive of is relative to what?

Kelly

26 March 2008

Graham: *By Universe I mean the matter and energy of the universe (and the specific laws of nature of our universe).*

Kelly: *Do you think 'Everything' meaning, the above things, plus everything else that isn't 'our universe' or 'matter and energy', has a beginning?*

I don't know...

One approach is to say that 'everything' did not have a beginning but has existed in some form for ever.

Kelly: *Can it be an event that arises?*

I don't know...

Perhaps the concept of a beginning as an 'event' is problematic if there is no context within which the event occurs. By the way, I should have said that physicists say space and time also came into existence with the big bang. (If you want to read more on this I suggest you read Hawking's, *A Brief History of Time*.)

Kelly: *How can everything come into existence, given it would need some *thing* prior to its existence?*

Graham: *Quite reasonably, you are assuming that everything has a cause.*

Kelly: *A cause is whatever is necessary for something to exist.*

A cause is whatever is sufficient for something to exist. (A match is not necessary to cause a fire, fire can be caused by a spark, but a match is sufficient.)

Kelly: *Everything means, all possible things.*

Everything means all actual things. So a unicorn is not part of everything, assuming unicorns are not actually existing things. But representations of unicorns are part of everything.

Kelly: *So all things are necessary for Everything, and vice versa.*

One possibility is that everything that actually exists, exists necessarily. In other words if something exists then it necessarily exists.

Graham: *But that thing was not the matter and energy of our universe (or the laws of our universe).*

Kelly: *So putting that thing, and the thing that is 'our universe' together, what do you get?*

You get the totality of actually existing things.

Kelly: *I'm just trying to explain that only if the extent of Everything can be measured, can we talk of the probability of any of its parts arising. Until then, any probability we can conceive of is relative to what?*

You are right. One of the problems with the fine-tuning debate is trying to determine the probability of the existence of this universe. And that is not at all straight forward. If you wish to discuss this probability at all, then it seems that the only way forward is to make some assumptions and then be clear about what assumptions are being made.

Cheers Graham

26 March 2008

Kelly: *Everything means, all possible things.*

Graham: *Everything means all actual things. So a unicorn is not part of everything, assuming unicorns are not actually existing things. But representations of unicorns are part of everything.*

Take all actual things and all existing things and all kinds of things, and put them together with *everything* else.

What do you get?

Kelly

26 March 2008

Hi Kelly,

Once we put all the actual things (which includes all existing things) together, and then perhaps add the ideas of possible things (that are not actual), then there does not appear to be anything else to add to the list of **everything**. (And, of course, the addition of ideas of possible things is not the addition of the possible things themselves, but just the addition of the ideas.)

Graham

26 March 2008

Graham: *Once we put all the actual things (which includes all existing things) together, and then perhaps add the ideas of possible things (that are not actual), then there does not appear to be anything else to add to the list of *everything*. (And, of course, the addition of ideas of possible things is not the addition of the possible things themselves, but just the addition of the ideas.)*

I notice you call both types of things, things. This abstraction covers the lot.

Everything covers the lot of all things.

Is there anything else that isn't covered?

Kelly

27 March 2008

So far I have limited my comments to "things", but it seems reasonable to suppose that there is more than just "things" that are relevant to our considerations.

I have been using the term "thing" to refer to "concrete objects", such as individual chairs or individual atoms. These things can be said to exist. But as you imply, you can still ask the question: what is not covered by the list of all actually existing concrete objects?

And yes there does seem to be other (????).... that are relevant here. Consider concepts like justice or the content of mathematics. These don't exist in the way concrete objects exist, but surely they are part of 'reality' in some sense....

Is that what you are pointing to when you ask: is there anything else that isn't covered?

If this is what you are pointing to you might like to look at the "abstract objects" entry in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy at:

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/abstract-objects/>

Graham

27 March 2008

Hi Graham,

You wrote:

And yes there does seem to be other (????).... that are relevant here. Consider concepts like justice or the content of mathematics. These don't exist in the way concrete objects exist, but surely they are part of 'reality' in some sense....

I simplify matters by saying what exists, is a thing.

To know 'our universe' or 'concrete objects' or 'ideas' to be what they are, is to be in an absolutist context.

That is, Everything.

That is the context I'm trying to point to.

Kelly

27 March 2008

Hi Kelly,

You say:

Kelly: *To know 'our universe' or 'concrete objects' or 'ideas' to be what they are, is to be in an absolutist context.*

That is, Everything.

That is the context I'm trying to point to.

There seems to be two ways to interpret your characterisation of 'absolutist context'. One way is metaphysical and the other is epistemic.

You say "To know 'our universe' or 'concrete objects' or 'ideas' to be what they are". This assumes that we do know 'our universe ... to be what they are'. But we might be wrong. So I assume that you mean if we know our universe or concrete objects or ideas to be what they are then we have some absolute knowledge of the nature of these things. This is the epistemic interpretation. But I don't see how this epistemic interpretation relates to the absolute that you seem to be pointing to.

So I think you might be referring to some metaphysical absolute. By this I mean you are asking the question: what is the content of ultimate reality? Or what is ultimately real?

And while this is a metaphysical question, there is the further epistemic question: How would we know what was ultimately real?

Graham

29 March 2008

Graham: *You say "To know 'our universe' or 'concrete objects' or 'ideas' to be what they are". This assumes that we do know 'our universe ... to be what they are'. But we might be wrong.*

Regards the nature of all things (Everything), it's possible to know for certain when we're wrong. Is something happening right now? Wouldn't an attempt to falsify it prove it's true?

You'll need to simplify things if you wish to get to absolute truths. I notice you have a habit of doubling categories. For example:

Everything means all actual things. So a unicorn is not part of everything, assuming unicorns are not actually existing things. But representations of unicorns are part of everything.

Things.... becomes actual or not-actual.

A cause is whatever is sufficient for something to exist. (A match is not necessary to cause a fire, fire can be caused by a spark, but a match is sufficient.)

Causes..... becomes sufficient or necessary.

By this I mean you are asking the question: what is the content of ultimate reality? Or what is ultimately real? And while this is a metaphysical question, there is the further epistemic question: How would we know what was ultimately real?

Questions.... becomes metaphysical or epistemic.

Occam's Razor, isn't it?

Graham: *what is the content of ultimate reality?*

Things. Or causes. Same thing.

Graham: *Or what is ultimately real?*

Kelly: *Everything.*

Graham: *How would we know what was ultimately real?*

We'd have to use absolute logical truths, like "something is happening". And logical definitions that don't contradict themselves.

Kelly

29 March 2008

Hi Kelly

Kelly: *Regards the nature of all things (Everything), it's possible to know for certain when we're wrong.*

I don't see how. Consider 'global scepticism'. How do we know that we are not in the Matrix?

Kelly: *You'll need to simplify things if you wish to get to absolute truths.*

What makes you inclined to believe that absolute truth is simple?

Kelly: *I notice you have a habit of doubling categories. For example:*

Graham: *Everything means all actual things. So a unicorn is not part of everything, assuming unicorns are not actually existing things. But representations of unicorns are part of everything.*

Kelly: *Things.... becomes actual or not-actual.*

Graham: *A cause is whatever is sufficient for something to exist. (A match is not necessary to cause a fire, fire can be caused by a spark, but a match is sufficient.)*

Kelly: *Causes..... becomes sufficient or necessary.*

Graham: *By this I mean you are asking the question: what is the content of ultimate reality? Or what is ultimately real? And while this is a metaphysical question, there is the further epistemic question: How would we know what was ultimately real?*

Kelly: *Questions.... becomes metaphysical or epistemic.*

Occam's Razor, isn't it?

Occam suggest that we should not multiply entities beyond necessity. But I take your point about my propensity to divide things into two options. I guess I am pointing to distinctions I think are relevant.

Graham: *what is the content of ultimate reality?*

Kelly: *Things. Or causes. Same thing.*

Do you see the force of gravity as a thing? It seems to be a cause, but is it a thing?

Graham: *Or what is ultimately real?*

Kelly: *Everything.*

Maybe, as long as you are only including the "ultimately real" in your list of "everything".

Graham: *How would we know what was ultimately real?*

Kelly: *We'd have to use absolute logical truths, like "something is happening". And logical definitions that don't contradict themselves.*

But would we have to stop at these absolute logical truths and logical definitions and say that we cannot know any more than these? Or would there be some way to know more about ultimate reality than just these absolute logical truths and logical definitions?

Graham

30 March 2008

Hi Graham,

Kelly: *Regards the nature of all things (Everything), it's possible to know for certain when we're wrong.*

Graham: *I don't see how. Consider 'global scepticism'. How do we know that we are not in the Matrix?*

Whatever it is we are experiencing, can be described as a thing.

Still part of Everything. Still the same nature.

Kelly: *You'll need to simplify things if you wish to get to absolute truths.*

Graham: *What makes you inclined to believe that absolute truth is simple?*

Absolute truth about Everything **is** simple. Everything includes all possible things. What could be simpler?

Graham: *what is the content of ultimate reality?*

Kelly: *Things. Or causes. Same thing.*

Graham: *Do you see the force of gravity as a thing? It seems to be a cause, but is it a thing?*

It exists, so it's a thing.

Graham: *Or what is ultimately real?*

Kelly: *Everything.*

Graham: *Maybe, as long as you are only including the "ultimately real" in your list of "everything".*

Is a cup ultimately real? Is it not existing relative to ... the observer, the cup's environment, the spectrum of light it total, in relation to everything it isn't?

Therefore, only the totality of all things that can possibly exist, the Totality itself, can be ultimately real. It's absolute.

Totality is what I meant by Everything.

Graham: *How would we know what was ultimately real?*

Kelly: *We'd have to use absolute logical truths, like "something is happening". And logical definitions that don't contradict themselves.*

Graham: *But would we have to stop at these absolute logical truths and logical definitions and say that we cannot know any more than these? Or would there be some way to know more about ultimate reality than just these absolute logical truths and logical definitions?*

We can use absolute logical truths, and logical definitions, as tools to point to Ultimate Reality. It's like using a relative logical definition, like, 'A hammer is a hand-tool that drives nails into wood.' Only absolute.

Kelly

30 March 2008

Graham: *Everything means all actual things. So a unicorn is not part of everything, assuming unicorns are not actually existing things. But representations of unicorns are part of everything.*

Is one kilometre length really one kilometre long? Compared to what?

Graham: *A cause is whatever is sufficient for something to exist. (A match is not necessary to cause a fire, fire can be caused by a spark, but a match is sufficient.)*

How about the absence of not-spark in the same location as a spark - is that a necessary or a sufficient cause for a fire?

Graham: *By this I mean you are asking the question: what is the content of ultimate reality? Or what is ultimately real? And while this is a metaphysical question, there is the further epistemic question: How would we know what was ultimately real?*

Perhaps you can recall to mind the perspective you used to tell the difference between metaphysical and epistemic. Now what would you call that perspective ?

Kelly

30 March 2008

Hi Kelly

Kelly: *Absolute truth about Everything *is* simple. Everything includes all possible things. What could be simpler?*

Are you suggesting that all possible things actually exist?

Graham: *what is the content of ultimate reality?*

Kelly: *Things. Or causes. Same thing.*

Graham: *Do you see the force of gravity as a thing? It seems to be a cause, but is it a thing?*

Kelly: *It exists, so it's a thing.*

Is justice a thing? If it is you are using a broader definition of 'thing' than I am.

Graham: *Or what is ultimately real?*

Kelly: *Everything.*

Graham: *Maybe, as long as you are only including the "ultimately real" in your list of "everything".*

Kelly: *Is a cup ultimately real? Is it not existing relative to ... the observer, the cup's environment, the spectrum of light it total, in relation to everything it isn't?*

Therefore, only the totality of all things that can possibly exist, the Totality itself, can be ultimately real. It's absolute.

Totality is what I meant by Everything.

So you are saying that things that could possibly exist, but don't actually exist are still part of ultimate reality... Other people might want to say that what is ultimately real is just what has/does/will exist, but that which has never/does not/will never exist is not part of ultimate reality.

For me the distinction between "actual" and "possible but not actual" is central to the question of what is ultimately real.

Graham: *How would we know what was ultimately real?*

Kelly: *We'd have to use absolute logical truths, like "something is happening". And logical definitions that don't contradict themselves.*

Graham: *But would we have to stop at these absolute logical truths and logical definitions and say that we cannot know any more than these? Or would there be some way to know more about ultimate reality than just these absolute logical truths and logical definitions?*

Kelly: *We can use absolute logical truths, and logical definitions, as tools to point to Ultimate Reality. It's like using a relative logical definition, like, 'A hammer is a hand-tool that drives nails into wood.' Only absolute.*

I think you are pointing to the distinction between analytic truths and synthetic truths see:

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/analytic-synthetic/>

Graham

30 March 2008

Graham: *Everything means all actual things. So a unicorn is not part of everything, assuming unicorns are not actually existing things. But representations of unicorns are part of everything.*

Kelly: *Is one kilometre length really one kilometre long? Compared to what?*

Again this might point to the distinction between analytic and synthetic truth. See:
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/analytic-synthetic/>

Graham: *A cause is whatever is sufficient for something to exist. (A match is not necessary to cause a fire, fire can be caused by a spark, but a match is sufficient.)*

Kelly: *How about the absence of not-spark in the same location as a spark - is that a necessary or a sufficient cause for a fire?*

Depends what you mean by the absence of a non-spark. A duck is an non-spark, so is a flower. So do you mean the absence of a duck or a flower in the same location as a spark?

Or do you mean by "the absence of a non-spark" a spark, and if you do then it is still sufficient but not necessary for a fire.

Graham: *By this I mean you are asking the question: what is the content of ultimate reality? Or what is ultimately real? And while this is a metaphysical question, there is the further epistemic question: How would we know what was ultimately real?*

Kelly: *Perhaps you can recall to mind the perspective you used to tell the difference between metaphysical and epistemic. Now what would you call that perspective ?*

Metaphysical questions are questions about what is ultimately real. But metaphysicians might be wrong when they answer such questions.

Epistemological questions then arise, such as: how do I know that I have got knowledge about what is ultimately real (as opposed to mere opinion about what is ultimately real)?

So metaphysics sets aside the question: "how do I know that I have knowledge?" and simply asks the question: what is ultimately real?

Graham

30 March 2008

Hi Graham,

Kelly: *Absolute truth about Everything *is* simple. Everything includes all possible things. What could be simpler?*

Graham: *Are you suggesting that all possible things actually exist?*

No, that all things that can possibly exist, make up Everything.

Existence, as I see it, refers to things.

Graham: *Is justice a thing? If it is you are using a broader definition of 'thing' than I am.*

Yes, justice is a thing.

Thing is the basic, fundamental abstraction, that can be used in any situation. It can be applied to anything that any consciousness can imagine.

This is why 'Everything' has such a profound meaning.

Graham: *So you are saying that things that could possibly exist, but don't actually exist are still part of ultimate reality... Other people might want to say that what is ultimately real is just what has/does/will exist, but that which has never/does not/will never exist is not part of ultimate reality.*

A concept like, a married bachelor, or anything that's impossible, is similar to a unicorn-thing in that it has some form in consciousness. It's obviously nonsense, but nonsense is still a thing. It's distinct.

Graham: *For me the distinction between "actual" and "possible but not actual" is central to the question of what is ultimately real.*

I think you may be looking at Ultimate Reality as a thing of some kind. That'd be a mistake.

A thing, meaning something finite and short of something else, is necessarily not all things.

But Ultimate Reality must include all, else it is not Ultimate. Something else would still exist 'beyond it', if it were finite.

Graham: *How would we know what was ultimately real?*

Kelly: *We'd have to use absolute logical truths, like "something is happening". And logical definitions that don't contradict themselves.*

Graham: *But would we have to stop at these absolute logical truths and logical definitions and say that we cannot know any more than these? Or would there be some way to know more about ultimate reality than just these absolute logical truths and logical definitions?*

Kelly: *We can use absolute logical truths, and logical definitions, as tools to point to Ultimate Reality. It's like using a relative logical definition, like, 'A hammer is a hand-tool that drives nails into wood.' Only absolute.*

Graham: *I think you are pointing to the distinction between analytic truths and synthetic truths see:*

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/analytic-synthetic/>

Yes, an absolute logical truth is a synthetic [*edit: analytic*] truth, that is about Everything, and verified using deductive reasoning. It's not verified using empirical evidence, or by relation to other finite things.

Graham: *A cause is whatever is sufficient for something to exist. (A match is not necessary to cause a fire, fire can be caused by a spark, but a match is sufficient.)*

Kelly: *How about the absence of not-spark in the same location as a spark - is that a necessary or a sufficient cause for a fire?*

Graham: *Depends what you mean by the absence of a non-spark. A duck is an non-spark, so is a flower. So do you mean the absence of a duck or a flower in the same location as a spark?*

Anything that's not a spark.

Graham: *Or do you mean by "the absence of a non-spark" a spark, and if you do then it is still sufficient but not necessary for a fire.*

Okay. So if we look at causes in that scientific manner, then no causes can be said to be sufficient, since causal relationships can never be established with certainty. We are looking for definitive, certain, logical truths here. Thus, we have to look at the causes for things using synthetic *[edit: analytic]* statements.

For example, 'things are finite', therefore 'no thing exists in isolation', and therefore, 'the total causes for a thing are everything else'.

Once we see all things as causes, then it's clear that the Universe cannot have a beginning.

Kelly: *Perhaps you can recall to mind the perspective you used to tell the difference between metaphysical and epistemic. Now what would you call that perspective ?*

Graham: *Metaphysical questions are questions about what is ultimately real. But metaphysicians might be wrong when they answer such questions.*

Epistemological questions then arise, such as: how do I know that I have got knowledge about what is ultimately real (as opposed to mere opinion about what is ultimately real)?

So metaphysics sets aside the question: "how do I know that I have knowledge?" and simply asks the question: what is ultimately real?

So the perspective you're using to define these two types of questions comes down to: metaphysical? epistemic?

I notice they're presented definitively, as absolute truths.

I'm just trying to see how you draw a conclusion about what's absolutely true. Or were you just guessing?

Kelly



1 April 2008

Hi Kelly,

Kelly: *Absolute truth about Everything *is* simple. Everything includes all possible things. What could be simpler?*

Graham: *Are you suggesting that all possible things actually exist?*

Kelly: *No, that all things that can possibly exist, make up Everything.*

Okay, you have a different understanding of "everything". If I was asked to list "everything" in my kitchen, I would not include on the list things that are not actually in my kitchen, but could have been in my kitchen. I would only list the things that were actually in my kitchen. So the painting "The Mona Lisa" would not be on the list, even though it could have been in my kitchen.

Kelly: *Existence, as I see it, refers to things.*

Graham: *Is justice a thing? If it is you are using a broader definition of 'thing' than I am.*

Kelly: *Yes, justice is a thing.*

Thing is the basic, fundamental abstraction, that can be used in any situation. It can be applied to anything that any consciousness can imagine.

This is why 'Everything' has such a profound meaning.

Okay, so you do have a different understanding of the word "everything".

Graham: *So you are saying that things that could possibly exist, but don't actually exist are still part of ultimate reality... Other people might want to say that what is ultimately real is just what has/does/will exist, but that which has never/does not/will never exist is not part of ultimate reality.*

Kelly: *A concept like, a married bachelor, or anything that's impossible, is similar to a unicorn-thing in that it has some form in consciousness. It's obviously nonsense, but nonsense is still a thing. It's distinct.*

Graham: *For me the distinction between "actual" and "possible but not actual" is central to the question of what is ultimately real.*

Kelly: *I think you may be looking at Ultimate Reality as a thing of some kind. That'd be a mistake.*

A thing, meaning something finite and short of something else, is necessarily not all things.

I assume you saying that although Ultimate Reality is the totality of things, it is wrong to say that the Ultimate Reality itself is a thing.

Kelly: *But Ultimate Reality must include all, else it is not Ultimate.*

I guess I would say that I don't want my list of what is Ultimately Real to include everything (in your sense of the word) because I don't want "mere appearances" or "mere possibilities" to be on the list.

Kelly: *Something else would still exist 'beyond it', if it were finite.*

Graham: *How would we know what was ultimately real?*

Kelly: *We'd have to use absolute logical truths, like "something is happening". And logical definitions that don't contradict themselves.*

Graham: *But would we have to stop at these absolute logical truths and logical definitions and say that we cannot know any more than these? Or would there be some way to know more about ultimate reality than just these absolute logical truths and logical definitions?*

Kelly: *We can use absolute logical truths, and logical definitions, as tools to point to Ultimate Reality. It's like using a relative logical definition, like, 'A hammer is a hand-tool that drives nails into wood.' Only absolute.*

Graham: *I think you are pointing to the distinction between analytic truths and synthetic truths see:*

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Kelly: *Yes, an absolute logical truth is a synthetic truth, [edit: analytic] that is about Everything, and verified using deductive reasoning. It's not verified using empirical evidence, or by relation to other finite things.*

Do you really mean absolute logical truth is a synthetic truth or an analytic truth?

The relationship between logical truth and analytic truth (or synthetic truth) is very interesting.

See:

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/logical-truth/>

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/analytic-synthetic/>

Graham: *A cause is whatever is sufficient for something to exist. (A match is not necessary to cause a fire, fire can be caused by a spark, but a match is sufficient.)*

Kelly: *How about the absence of not-spark in the same location as a spark - is that a necessary or a sufficient cause for a fire?*

Graham: *Depends what you mean by the absence of a non-spark. A duck is an non-spark, so is a flower. So do you mean the absence of a duck or a flower in the same location as a spark?*

Kelly: *Anything that's not a spark.*

If a non-spark is "anything that is not a spark", then I don't see how I can make any statement about necessary or sufficient causes of fire.

Graham: *Or do you mean by "the absence of a non-spark" a spark, and if you do then it is still sufficient but not necessary for a fire.*

Kelly: *Okay. So if we look at causes in that scientific manner, then no causes can be said to be sufficient, since causal relationships can never be established with certainty. We are looking for definitive, certain, logical truths here. Thus, we have to look at the causes for things using synthetic statements.*

For example, 'things are finite', therefore 'no thing exists in isolation', and therefore, 'the total causes for a thing are everything else'.

Once we see all things as causes, then it's clear that the Universe cannot have a beginning.

Some philosophers take the position that not all "things" (in your sense of the term) are causes. For example it is not clear to some how the truths of mathematics cause anything to occur in the universe. For example how does the mathematical truth that $2 + 2 = 4$ make anything happen in the world?

Kelly: *Perhaps you can recall to mind the perspective you used to tell the difference between metaphysical and epistemic. Now what would you call that perspective ?*

Graham: *Metaphysical questions are questions about what is ultimately real. But metaphysicians might be wrong when they answer such questions.*

Epistemological questions then arise, such as: how do I know that I have got knowledge about what is ultimately real (as opposed to mere opinion about what is ultimately real)?

So metaphysics sets aside the question: "how do I know that I have knowledge?" and simply asks the question: what is ultimately real?

Kelly: *So the perspective you're using to define these two types of questions comes down to: metaphysical? epistemic?*

I guess I am just trying to make it clear what question is being asked.

Kelly: *I notice they're presented definitively, as absolute truths.*

I'm just trying to see how you draw a conclusion about what's absolutely true. Or were you just guessing?

I don't know what is absolutely true. But I am interested in the question!

Graham

1 April 2008

Kelly: *Absolute truth about Everything *is* simple. Everything includes all possible things. What could be simpler?*

Graham: *Are you suggesting that all possible things actually exist?*

Kelly: *No, that all things that can possibly exist, make up Everything.*

Graham: *Okay, you have a different understanding of "everything". If I was asked to list "everything" in my kitchen, I would not include on the list things that are not actually in my kitchen, but could have been in my kitchen. I would only list the things that were actually in my kitchen. So the painting "The Mona Lisa" would not be on the list, even though it could have been in my kitchen.*

But there could be carrots singing sea-shanties in your kitchen cupboards at midnight for all you know.

What would you call an idea? Is it an actual, existing thing, or not?

What is actual ? Is it based on empirical evidence (which is uncertain), or a consensus reality (which is equally if not more uncertain)?

Graham: *I assume you saying that although Ultimate Reality is the totality of things, it is wrong to say that the Ultimate Reality itself is a thing.*

Yes. The Totality cannot be a thing, because a thing is, by definition, finite.

Kelly: *But Ultimate Reality must include all, else it is not Ultimate.*

Graham: *I guess I would say that I don't want my list of what is Ultimately Real to include everything (in your sense of the word) because I don't want "mere appearances" or "mere possibilities" to be on the list.*

You are really saying, I think, that you wish to be absolutely certain of what is ultimately real.

But one cannot be absolutely certain that a specific interpretation of what's happening is really the truth, as you pointed out with the Matrix idea. For that matter, a spark or a match may turn out, with new evidence, not to be a spark or a match. The 'scientific' identities projected onto experiences are fundamentally uncertain. They're guesses.

So, to be absolutely certain, we cannot use scientific identities, like I mentioned this evening at the philosophy discussion. We have to use, analytic statements. I mistook the difference in my last email, where I said synthetic truth - sorry about that :

Kelly: *Yes, an absolute logical truth is a synthetic [edit: analytic] truth, that is about Everything, and verified using deductive reasoning. It's not verified using empirical evidence, or by relation to other finite things.*

Graham: *Do you really mean absolute logical truth is a synthetic truth or an analytic truth?*

Analytic.

Graham: *If a non-spark is "anything that is not a spark", then I don't see how I can make any statement about necessary or sufficient causes of fire.*

You can say a fire is not equal to everything else.

It's fairly obvious that things aren't responsible for their own existence, at that moment in time and space.

So, what's ultimately responsible for a thing, is everything a thing isn't.

Hence I call things causes.

Kelly: *So if we look at causes in that scientific manner, then no causes can be said to be sufficient, since causal relationships can never be established with certainty. We are looking for definitive, certain, logical truths here. Thus, we have to look at the causes for things using synthetic [edit: analytic] statements.*

For example, 'things are finite', therefore 'no thing exists in isolation', and therefore, 'the total causes for a thing are everything else'.

Once we see all things as causes, then it's clear that the Universe cannot have a beginning.

Graham: *Some philosophers take the position that not all "things" (in your sense of the term) are causes. For example it is not clear to some how the truths of mathematics cause anything to occur in the universe. For example how does the mathematical truth that $2 + 2 = 4$ make anything happen in the world?*

It may mean a bridge doesn't fall down from poor calculations!

Though labels, including truths, aren't the only causes for what is experienced, they're one of the most significant causes for understanding and perception. So, they do affect what happens.

Kelly: Perhaps you can recall to mind the perspective you used to tell the difference between metaphysical and epistemic. Now what would you call that perspective ?

Graham: Metaphysical questions are questions about what is ultimately real. But metaphysicians might be wrong when they answer such questions.

Epistemological questions then arise, such as: how do I know that I have got knowledge about what is ultimately real (as opposed to mere opinion about what is ultimately real)?

So metaphysics sets aside the question: "how do I know that I have knowledge?" and simply asks the question: what is ultimately real?

Kelly: So the perspective you're using to define these two types of questions comes down to: metaphysical? epistemic?

Graham: I guess I am just trying to make it clear what question is being asked.

Okay. I'll switch tack.

Is metaphysical = epistemic?

Right now, are you in a metaphysical place or an epistemic place?

Kelly: I notice they're presented definitively, as absolute truths.

I'm just trying to see how you draw a conclusion about what's absolutely true. Or were you just guessing?

Graham: I don't know what is absolutely true. But I am interested in the question!

Is it absolutely true that you don't know what is absolutely true?

Kelly

28 May 2008

Hi Kelly,

Sorry it has taken so long to get back to you, but here are my thoughts.

Kelly: *Absolute truth about Everything *is* simple. Everything includes all possible things. What could be simpler?*

Graham: *Are you suggesting that all possible things actually exist?*

Kelly: *No, that all things that can possibly exist, make up Everything.*

Graham: *Okay, you have a different understanding of "everything". If I was asked to list "everything" in my kitchen, I would not include on the list things that are not actually in my kitchen, but could have been in my kitchen. I would only list the things that were actually in my kitchen. So the painting "The Mona Lisa" would not be on the list, even though it could have been in my kitchen.*

Kelly: *But there could be carrots singing sea-shanties in your kitchen cupboards at midnight for all you know.*

Okay so I am making a distinction between the things that I believe actually exist, and the things that I believe are not actual but possible.

Kelly: *What would you call an idea? Is it an actual, existing thing, or not?*

An idea that is being thought is an actually existing idea. But the thing the idea is about may not actually exist.

Kelly: *What is actual ? Is it based on empirical evidence (which is uncertain), or a consensus reality (which is equally if not more uncertain)?*

If one believes that there is a reality that exists independently from one's beliefs about it, then the 'actual' is that which really exist independently from my beliefs. So, on this view, the 'actual' is not based on empirical evidence or consensus reality. So far I have been talking metaphysics. Now to turn to the epistemic question: how do I know what is 'actual' (in the metaphysical sense)?

Answer: I don't really know. But that is because I have sympathies for 'global scepticism'. However, other less sceptical people think that we can know what is actual.

Graham: *I assume you saying that although Ultimate Reality is the totality of things, it is wrong to say that the Ultimate Reality itself is a thing.*

Kelly: *Yes. The Totality cannot be a thing, because a thing is, by definition, finite.*

Would you class 'the set of all real numbers' as a thing? If you do that would seem to be a infinite thing.

Kelly: *But Ultimate Reality must include all, else it is not Ultimate.*

Graham: *I guess I would say that I don't want my list of what is Ultimately Real to include everything (in your sense of the word) because I don't want 'mere appearances' or 'mere possibilities' to be on the list.*

Kelly: *You are really saying, I think, that you wish to be absolutely certain of what is ultimately real.*

That would be nice.

Kelly: *But one cannot be absolutely certain that a specific interpretation of what's happening is really the truth, as you pointed out with the Matrix idea. For that matter, a spark or a match may turn out, with new evidence, not to be a spark or a match. The 'scientific' identities projected onto experiences are fundamentally uncertain. They're guesses.*

Yes, hopefully, good guesses.

Kelly: *So, to be absolutely certain, we cannot use scientific identities, like I mentioned this evening at the philosophy discussion. We have to use, analytic statements.*

Okay, but can we get from analytic statements (statements true due to the meaning of the terms) to knowledge about the world?

Kelly: *Yes, an absolute logical truth is a synthetic [edit: analytic] truth, that is about Everything, and verified using deductive reasoning. It's not verified using empirical evidence, or by relation to other finite things.*

Graham: *Do you really mean absolute logical truth is a synthetic truth or an analytic truth?*

Kelly: *Analytic.*

Graham: *If a non-spark is 'anything that is not a spark', then I don't see how I can make any statement about necessary or sufficient causes of fire.*

Kelly: *You can say a fire is not equal to everything else. It's fairly obvious that things aren't responsible for their own existence, at that moment in time and space. So, what's ultimately responsible for a thing, is everything a thing isn't.*

Perhaps some of the 'everything a thing isn't' might not be responsible for that thing. Is everything causally related to everything else?

Kelly: *Hence I call things causes.*

Kelly: *So if we look at causes in that scientific manner, then no causes can be said to be sufficient, since causal relationships can never be established with certainty. We are looking for definitive, certain, logical truths here. Thus, we have to look at the causes for things using synthetic statements [edit: analytic].*

For example, 'things are finite', therefore 'no thing exists in isolation', and therefore, 'the total causes for a thing are everything else'.

Once we see all things as causes, then it's clear that the Universe cannot have a beginning.

Graham: *Some philosophers take the position that not all "things" (in your sense of the term) are causes. For example it is not clear to some how the truths of mathematics cause anything to occur in the universe. For example how does the mathematical truth that $2 + 2 = 4$ make anything happen in the world?*

Kelly: *It may mean a bridge doesn't fall down from poor calculations!*

Yes, there is definitely an interesting relationship between mathematics and the world, but the question is: what is that relationship? One way to think about this is by using the concept of laws of nature. Perhaps laws of nature are 'out there' in the world and it is they that cause a bridge not to fall down. So, on this view, laws of nature cause stuff to happen in the world. Now, we can represent laws of nature with mathematical formulae. But do the mathematical formulae actually make stuff happen in the world or are they just convenient ways for us to represent and/or understand the nature of the laws?

Kelly: *Though labels, including truths, aren't the only causes for what is experienced, they're one of the most significant causes for understanding and perception. So, they do affect what happens.*

That is an interesting take on truth. I guess I think about 'truth', in a different way. For example, consider me making a particular statement that is 'true'. I think of the truth of that statement as the effect of my understanding (I got something 'right'), not the cause of my understanding (I might think of something as true but that does not make it true).

In contrast, I think you are saying that our ideas about the world, shape the way we see the world. So, in that sense, our ideas about the world cause the world to appear to us to be a certain way. If I have understood you correctly, then you are not talking about 'truth' as I understand it.

(I think our different perspectives here might be explained by different positions on the the question of metaphysical idealism.)

Kelly: *Perhaps you can recall to mind the perspective you used to tell the difference between metaphysical and epistemic. Now what would you call that perspective ?*

Graham: *Metaphysical questions are questions about what is ultimately real. But metaphysicians might be wrong when they answer such questions.*

Epistemological questions then arise, such as: how do I know that I have got knowledge about what is ultimately real (as opposed to mere opinion about what is ultimately real)?

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Kelly: *So the perspective you're using to define these two types of questions comes down to: metaphysical? epistemic?*

Graham: *I guess I am just trying to make it clear what question is being asked.*

Kelly: *Okay. I'll switch tack. Is metaphysical = epistemic? Right now, are you in a metaphysical place or an epistemic place?*

First I will answer on the assumption that you are using the word 'place' metaphorically. If I am asking a metaphysical question then I am looking for a metaphysical answer, so I guess I am in a metaphysical place. If I am asking an epistemological question then I am looking for an epistemological answer, so I guess I am in an epistemological place.

Now I will answer on the assumption that you are using the word 'place' literally. If you are asking "what is the nature of the place I am in?", then ... I don't know!

If metaphysical idealism is true then the ultimate nature of the place I am in is mental, or in other words, ultimate reality is mind.

But if metaphysical realism is true, then the ultimate nature of the place I am in is independent of my mental conception of it. Perhaps the ultimate nature of the place I am in is physical.

Kelly: *I notice they're presented definitively, as absolute truths.*

Kelly: *I'm just trying to see how you draw a conclusion about what's absolutely true. Or were you just guessing?*

Graham: *I don't know what is absolutely true. But I am interested in the question!*

Kelly: *Is it absolutely true that you don't know what is absolutely true?*

I'm not sure!

Cheers Graham

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