

THE ALEPH COURSE : Notes for talking.

1 : VALUES.

People of my age and older (and some others) often think that everybody has a collection of built-in values. This is all connected with ideas of conscience, right and wrong, and so on.

I'm not so sure. Look around you, read the news. Look at the casual crime; look at the public figures who think nothing of breaking solemn promises; look at the widespread shirking of responsibilities in relationships of all sorts.

Where are the built-in values ?

BUT WE ALL HAVE VALUES.

Every time we make a choice, which we do many times every hour, we are at least implying that one thing is preferable to another, which is a value judgment.

At a different level, all those people are eager to tell you what YOU should or shouldn't do -

- the criminals say you shouldn't send them to jail;
- the politicians say you should vote for them;
- the irresponsible parents (mostly fathers) say you should pay for their children.

- all VALUES.

VALUES ARE IMPORTANT.

We live by them. Our society runs on them. If we don't have our own, people will impose theirs on us; if we do have our own, people will try to undermine them.

- fashion is the imposition of a sequence of values which change for no reason, except to make money for someone.
- why does it say SHARP at the top of Auckland Hospital ? So that you will recall the name and choose the appliance without evaluating it.

What we value shapes our lives.

"Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (*Matthew 6.21*)

So let's find out more about them.

WHAT ARE VALUES ?

(I'll offer a monologue - perhaps you'll talk about it in the discussion later.)

WHAT DO YOU THINK IS VALUABLE ?

- not just THINGS - they have no intrinsic value. Gold isn't valuable in the same way that it's yellow; it's only valuable because *somebody wants it*. That's "somebody" with desires (to want things) and emotions (to like or dislike).

VALUE DOESN'T EXIST UNLESS THERE IS SOME PERSON TO
ASSERT IT.

Consider that proposition. Does it need a "person" ?
Would a dog be satisfactory ? (Perhaps ?) Would a computer be satisfactory ? (No ?)

I (being particularly pure-minded) think that qualities such as love, compassion, integrity, service are valuable. Your list might well be different, even though you are just as pure-minded.

WHY DO YOU THINK IT'S VALUABLE ?

For example, I think INTEGRITY is valuable because if we have it we can safely be trusted.

Good. Your reasons will probably be different. But whatever they are the statement would only work if the quality given as the reason was *itself* valuable. Wouldn't it ?

"I think INTEGRITY is valuable because tomorrow is Tuesday ?"

All right, then -

WHY IS IT VALUABLE THAT WE CAN SAFELY BE TRUSTED ?

The answer doesn't really matter - consider the principle. I can keep on asking the question every time you answer the previous one, and each time you answer you will do so in terms of something which is in some way valuable.

If I keep going, only three things can happen :

- You eventually say that you can't explain why <whatever> is valuable;
- You eventually repeat yourself;
- You go on for ever without repetition.

In the last case, you must believe that an infinite number of things are valuable. I just don't believe it.

In the second case, you have a circular argument, which reaches no conclusion - it amounts to the first case.

So we're left with the first case.

YOU DON'T KNOW WHY ANYTHING IS VALUABLE.

So why should I respect your values ? Is there any reason why I shouldn't just trample over you and your property and your feelings if it happens to suit me ?

But there's worse -

I DON'T KNOW WHY ANYTHING IS VALUABLE EITHER.

FUTILITY ?

Do we conclude that NOTHING is important ?

Am I forced to believe that my values (love, compassion, integrity, service) are meaningless, valueless, futile ? I think this is inevitable if your beliefs are essentially materialistic - science has no values.

What is left ? Nothing.

I can pursue a meaningless and futile existence so long as I'm happy, warm, and fed, but why should I put up with even the slightest degree of discomfort ? - when I know that even if it passes the only prospect is more meaningless and futile existence.

I am not surprised that people commit suicide. Why not ?

But it's VERY FINAL. Perhaps we should look for other possibilities first ?

BACK TO VALUES.

It is still true that VALUES ARE VERY IMPORTANT TO US. That we don't know where they come from is not a demonstration that they don't exist.

It DOES suggest that we should look for some values of some sort on which we can rely. They would have to come from outside ourselves in some sense, because it seems that the argument has destroyed the basis for any purely internal values. Are there any such values ?

1 : I DON'T KNOW.

2: - but I'm pretty sure that there are, and it's certainly worth looking.

How do we look ?

Our current position is that we'd like to find some values, but we don't know what they are or where to look or how to go about finding out where to look. Or anything, really.

So we have to find a way to start from nothing.

AND FORTUNATELY WE HAVE AN IMPRESSIVE AND WELL REGARDED PRECEDENT -

| |
|----------|
| SCIENCE. |
|----------|

DIGRESSION ON SCIENCE.

I'm going to talk about this a bit because I want to use it as a pattern, and we should understand it just a little.

The current position at the beginning of what is now science was that we'd like to find some rules which describe the behaviour of things, but we don't know what they are or where to look or how to go about finding out where to look. Or anything, really.

Familiar ?

The science method is "What if ... ?".

There are one or two big assumptions you make to begin with. For example :

We assume that the universe behaves according to regular rules.
We assume that the rules can be expressed in mathematics or logic that we can understand.

Then you can work on specific cases.

You assume that things work as you'd like them to.
You can make as many assumptions as you like, but it's simpler if you don't have more than you need. (Not science - Occam's razor.)
Then you do some logical argument, which you can express something like this -

"IF those assumptions are true,
THEN <something specific> will happen".

Then you look to see whether it does happen.
If it DOESN'T, then you know that at least one of your assumptions is wrong; you can start trying alternatives.
(If it DOES happen, you've learnt nothing.)

Once you find some assumptions that seem to work reliably, you start building models. Those are just special assumptions - for example,

IF all matter is made out of little things called atoms
and IF different atoms behave according to <some set of rules>
THEN we'd expect <some sort of chemical behaviour>.

But

| |
|--------------------------------------|
| WE CAN NEVER PROVE THAT ATOMS EXIST. |
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Consider -

IF the air were full of little invisible insects
AND they liked to sit on top of every object
AND while sitting they flapped their wings trying to push downwards

THEN if you let go of an object it would fall towards the floor.

You do the experiment; IT WORKS - THE OBJECT FALLS TOWARDS THE FLOOR !!!

Do you believe in the insects ?

THAT THE EXPERIMENT WORKS DOESN'T SHOW THAT THE
ASSUMPTIONS ARE TRUE.

I believe in atoms. I am as sure as I can be that matter is indeed made of atoms.

But I CAN'T PROVE IT.

BACK TO VALUES.

I think we can use similar methods for our enquiries into values.

There is a difference : it's much harder to do the experiments. (But that doesn't destroy the method - you can't do experiments in astronomy either. You can observe what you see in the astronomical world - and we can observe what we see in the world of values.)

What are the big assumptions ?

We assume that there are real absolute values.

Now we can already start making arguments - in fact, we already have. (And if you find it hard to accept the arguments, you can still accept the conclusions as further big assumptions if you wish.) We've shown that -

Any such absolute values must come from "outside" us.
There can only be values if there is a person to whom things can be valuable.

We can add (from observation, or introspection, or guesswork) -

We will only accept values from someone who we know to be extraordinarily wise.

- and we reach this interesting conclusion :

Given those assumptions,

THERE IS SOMEONE EXTRAORDINARILY WISE,
SOMEHOW "OUTSIDE" OUR SYSTEM,
WHO ASSERTS A SET OF VALUES.

I'm going to call that someone

GOD

Notice that this is NOT A PROOF. (I shall never give you a proof - if I can't prove atoms, I haven't much hope of proving God.) It IS a demonstration that someone something like a moral, personal God is necessary if you want to have real worthwhile values.