

Mr g – The Story of Creation as Told by God

The Academy's 2017th Stated Meeting on February 11, 2015, featured members of the Catalyst Collaborative@MIT performing a staged reading of *Mr g*, a novel by Alan Lightman (Professor of the Practice of Humanities at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology) adapted for the stage by Wesley Savick (playwright, director). *Mr g* is the story of creation as narrated by God (Mr g). In it, Mr g's uncle Deva and aunt Penelope give him advice as he sets about creating the universe; he also spars with a Satan-like character about various ethical and philosophical issues raised by his creation, especially when intelligent life emerges.

Debra Wise (Artistic Director of the Underground Railway Theater and Codirector of the Catalyst Collaborative@MIT) introduced the reading. The program also included a welcome from Jonathan F. Fanton (President of the American Academy) and a panel discussion featuring Lisa Sowle Cahill (J. Donald Monan Professor in the Department of Theology at Boston College), Edward J. Hall (Norman E. Vuilleumier Professor of Philosophy at Harvard University), and Alan Lightman. The following is an edited transcript of the discussion.



Lisa Sowle Cahill

Lisa Sowle Cahill is the J. Donald Monan Professor in the Department of Theology at Boston College. She was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1996.

I am a Christian theologian, but I will stay away from anything specific to Christian theology and try to address *Mr g* on the basis of the Book of Genesis and some contemporary theological questions that it raises. When I first opened the book and

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started to read it, I thought, “What do they need a theologian for? It’s fiction; who cares whether it conforms to any theological criteria?” But as I continued to read, I realized that the book is in some ways quite traditional, or at least many of the things that it suggests are also suggested in the Book of Genesis. The questions that *Mr g* opens are actually at the heart of some of the liveliest debates in theology today. Specifically, I see it dealing with three enduring questions – enduring because they are very difficult to answer. The first is: Why is there something rather than nothing? The second is: Is there one god or many? Or, at least, might there be multiple primordial beings who are working at cross-purposes? And the third: Why does evil exist? (To me that was the driving question of the book, or at least the one that I related to the most as a nonscientist.)

Let us start out with the first question: Why is there something rather than nothing? In the Book of Genesis (specifically Genesis 1, which reached its final form in about the sixth century BCE), it is God who creates something. Incidentally, God is creating out of the Void, but the Void is not nothingness, exactly. It is the earth with a sort of watery covering. So the idea of creation “out of nothing” was really a later Christian doctrine; Genesis remains much more ambiguous about exactly what is going on. One of the most historically and theologically striking things about the Genesis creation narratives is that they are less concerned with the nothingness that came before than with the creation of a habitat that is beneficial to human beings and an orderly environment in which human society can exist. In the other ancient near-Eastern myths there is usually a contest or conflict

between primordial beings who struggle until the world is created. The story that is most often compared to Genesis is the Babylonian myth of Enuma Elish, in which there is a masculine God named Marduk and a feminine goddess of the waters named Tiamat. They struggle and Marduk wins. So you have a picture in which a primordial conflict between two different beings creates the world and humanity.

In Genesis as well as in *Mr g*, there is just one creator who looks at his creation in the end and says, “This is good.” So the theological suggestion is that there is one universe; even if it is not completely orderly, its fundamental nature is at least not based on conflict. At the same time, though, Mr g does not seem entirely sure of what he is doing; he bumbles a little bit. This is actually also true of the creation of human beings in Genesis, which is chronicled in an older piece of the book that is more like folklore. In it, God makes the first human and then belatedly realizes that it does not have a partner. He runs through all the animals trying to find one before finally realizing he has to make another human.

The second issue in *Mr g* is of unity and plurality, or monotheism and polytheism. The problem of evil, which we will get to in a moment, is a lot easier to resolve if there are multiple forces in conflict; that is, if there is a polytheistic system. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are monotheistic religions, so we struggle with how to explain evil if God is good. So I looked at the names of Mr g’s companions: Uncle Deva and Aunt Penelope. Deva is a Hindu word for a god; Penelope is the spouse of the hero Odysseus in Homer’s *Odyssey*. In Genesis 1:26 when God is about to make humankind, God actually says “let us make,” and there has always been a big scholarly debate about whom the plural pronoun is referencing. The biblical scholars’ solution to that is that “us” is the heavenly court. So that is a little bit like Aunt Penelope and Uncle

Deva. There is another rather odd reference in Genesis 6 to marriages between sons of God and daughters of men. There is a parallel between Uncle Deva, who’s a god, and Aunt Penelope, who might be a human being. That plurality is tacitly reflected in Genesis, despite the fact that the Abrahamic religions are monotheistic.

The third issue is how to explain suffering and evil. In *Mr g*, Belhor is a male character, imposing, very thin, and sinister, with two little sidekicks who are based on pagan deities. Belhor is a variation on a demon in the Bible called Belial – which means “worthless” – who is not quite evil, but rather destructive and lawless. There are two accounts in *Mr g* of why Belhor – and evil – exist, which in my opinion are never resolved. Belhor claims that Mr g created him, or at least that Belhor came into existence when and because Mr g created the world. Mr g, on the other hand, maintains at the end of the book that Belhor is immortal and is his – Mr g’s – antipodal companion rather than his creation. In the first case, God (Mr g) remains the sole primordial being and creator, as in Genesis. In the second, the scenario is more like the Babylonian Enuma Elish: Mr g and Belhor are independent forces.

Furthermore, Belhor and Mr g have different explanations of evil. Belhor claims that it is impossible to have good without evil and vice versa, and also that a consequence of having free and intelligent beings is that they must be free to do evil. This is actually the standard theological explanation of why evil exists in the world, so it is interesting to me that it comes from the mouth of Belhor, who in the book is certainly not to be trusted. He may not always be wrong, but he certainly was when he said all worlds would end in tragedy; at the end of the book, Mr g says the world was beautiful, that it was full of joy as well as sadness, and that it was a lovely thing.



Edward J. Hall

Edward J. Hall is the Norman E. Vuilleumier Professor of Philosophy at Harvard University.

When I read *Mr g* it was very natural for me to interpret it against the background of two very basic, almost primordial philosophical questions. For many of us these questions are inescapable, which explains a lot of the book's power to draw the reader in so quickly. The first question is a cosmological one, which I will state in an extremely simplistic and flat-footed manner because I think that is the way we actually confront it within ourselves: What is this thing that we find ourselves part of? By "this thing," I mean the whole shebang, all of it, everything that exists in the past, present and future – or out of time, for that matter. In short, all of reality. What is it? It is fascinating to me how much of a grip that question has on us. If you think about our location in evolutionary history, it is not obvious that it would be a good design principle to build intelligent beings that are particularly gripped by that question, but it is not hard to see that this is exactly what we are.

It is interesting that Mr g himself possesses all three of these human features: he is capable of self-conscious thought; he makes choices; and he takes himself to be subject to moral norms. In that sense his nature is fundamentally similar to the nature of part of his creation, and I wonder if that was done on purpose.

So imagine as a thought experiment that an oracle of some kind came to you and said, "I've got five minutes. You have two options. I can give you a sort of synopsis of the whole shebang, which is not going to be hugely informative because I only have five minutes and you're not that smart. But I can tell you as much as I can in five minutes about all of reality. Or, if you like, I can zoom in on one particular detail and spend the time talking about that." You can imagine people who would take the second option. You know, "I was at a dinner party the other night and I left the room for five minutes and when I came back people were sort of chuckling. I'm sure they were talking about me and I want to know what exactly was happening in that five minutes." But for a lot of us, at least, choosing the first option would be a no-brainer. Of course you'd want the synopsis – and you'd be hungry for more after it was over. That, I think, is fascinating. One of the things *Mr g* does is provide the reader with an imagined version of that synopsis, an educated guess, because Alan was consciously attempting to do justice to the physics of the cosmology of our universe as we currently understand it.

But one aspect of the cosmological story in *Mr g* goes beyond what a standard physics textbook would give you. That is, the universe is created by a rational being who ponders over what the organizational principles should be. He tries some out and dis-

covers that adding a fourth principle breaks things, so to have this universe behave in a rational manner he needs to stick to these three principles. This backstory rationalizes a central part of scientific discovery, particularly in the field of physics, in which we are always in the business of looking for mathematically elegant principles. It is child's play to write down physical principles that will issue correct predictions but in an ugly and ad-hoc manner. Most physicists learn very early on in their training not even to think of these principles as options; they're off the table. When I teach philosophy of science, I put them back on the table and then students get worried – why is it that we're so confident that the world *doesn't* work that way? Why assume that the world works according to simple, elegant, mathematized principles? Of course, if you think the world is the creation of some very intelligent – not all-knowing, not omniscient, but very intelligent – and rational being, then that makes sense.

This first inescapable cosmological question kind of gets an answer within the book. But it is not a complete answer, because there are unresolved questions. For example, if Mr g has an aunt and an uncle, does that mean he has a parent or parents? Where is that parent? What exactly is Belhor's relation to Mr g?

The second inescapable question for us humans, I think, is: What are we, who are

part of this thing? How do we fit in? To see the urgency and difficulty of that question it is helpful to notice, I think, three features of human existence. It is difficult to see at first how they fit in to the world as it is revealed to us, particularly in the modern scientific image and in the image given to us by physics.

One of those essential features is that we are capable of self-conscious thought, and by thought I mean thought in all its varieties: beliefs, fears, hopes, speculations, desires. We are capable of representing reality to ourselves in certain ways *and* of being fully aware that we are doing so. That is really quite remarkable; it is not clear that any other creatures on the planet can do that. Take my dog Milo, for example. I think he has thoughts—although there aren't many, he does occasionally have them. But I very much doubt he ever has self-conscious thoughts; that is, the sort of thought displayed with crystalline clarity in Descartes' second meditation: "I think, therefore I am." That is the essence of self-conscious awareness. How does that fit in? In the book, Alan has lots to say about the physics of the universe, albeit in a very gentle and user-friendly way. When it comes to how consciousness arises, however, there are beginnings of speculations, but it is left very vague and unclear. We are told simply that there are about 200 million cells, and when they start interacting in a very complicated way, this somehow becomes thought. What I like about this description is that it is honest with respect to the current state of scientific understanding. We do not really see how self-conscious thought fits into the grand scheme of the universe, nor how it can be explained in light of our present knowledge of neuroscience.

The second fact about human life is that we take ourselves—perhaps mistakenly—to be capable of guiding our action according to reason. We believe we possess the kind of

free will that endows us with genuine responsibility for what we do. That leads us to the third distinctive feature of humans: we take ourselves to be subject to moral norms. It is not just that we can do things that are harmful or hurtful; animals can do that too. But only we can have obligations to one another, we can have rights and responsibilities, we can be morally praiseworthy or blameworthy for our actions. It is quite remarkable that a collection of atoms could have that ability. In *Mr g*, how these three features arise is, again, left as something of a mystery. I think that is as it should be and I think it is helpful that Alan makes *Mr g* less than perfectly omniscient, so there is room for this kind of mystery even in his own creation.

I want to close with a question. It is interesting that *Mr g* himself possesses all three of these human features: he is capable of self-conscious thought; he makes choices; and he takes himself to be subject to moral norms, as the debates with Aunt Penelope and Uncle Deva show. In that sense (and in that sense alone) his nature is fundamentally similar to the nature of part of his creation, and I wonder if that was done on purpose.



Alan Lightman

Alan Lightman is Professor of the Practice of the Humanities at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He is the author of several novels, including Einstein's Dreams, The Diagnosis, and Mr g. He was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1996.

I want to touch briefly on some philosophical, intellectual, and literary motivations for the book. First of all there is the portrayal of God – Mr g. Most religions have a fearsome and judgmental god who takes himself very seriously. I wanted to challenge the traditional understanding of God, because we really have no idea what God is. So I wanted to challenge the traditional notion of God by creating a much more humble and playful God. I've also been interested in the ongoing conversation between science and religion for a long time, and I think it is one of the great conversations of human civilization. The challenge that I gave myself in the book was to propose a kind of god that would be completely compatible with science. All the science in *Mr g*, as Ned said, is in keeping with the modern understandings of physics, chem-

Most religions have a fearsome and judgmental god who takes himself very seriously. I wanted to challenge the traditional understanding of God, because we really have no idea what God is.

istry, and biology. But I do have the Void in addition to the physical universe, and I have God creating the universe, because science can never know what created the universe. We can have theories of quantum gravity, but we can absolutely never know what created the universe. So for a believer, there is always room for God to have created the universe. However, if God then intervenes in His creation, as He does in most religions, that is definitely in conflict with science. In attempting to write a book in which God was completely compatible with science, I made sure that Mr g did not intervene in the universe (although he badly wanted to at times to relieve the suffering of some of his intelligent creations). That decision gave rise to the various debates between Belhor and Mr g about why he is not intervening.

Finally, there is the literary side of the book. Every writer has literary influences – we all read and try to learn and borrow from other writers. Some of my writing has been very influenced by the magic realist writer Italo Calvino, who died in 1985. His best-known work is probably *Invisible Cities*, but he also wrote a lesser-known book called *Cosmicomics*, in which he invents a group of celestial beings who have supernatural powers. They can stride through the galaxies with ease, but they also squabble among themselves and have humanlike qualities. They sometimes take an interest in the mundane affairs of human beings on Earth. Calvino's cosmic beings are really a modern version of the ancient Greco-Roman gods and goddesses, but with a perspective in keeping with modern science. So I got the idea for the heavenly family of Mr g, Aunt Penelope, and

Uncle Deva from Calvino's celestial beings. Finally, a bit about my character Belhor – he is a sparring partner with Mr g, sort of like a devil character, but he's neither all bad nor all good. He's not completely evil. He is a complex devil, as are, I think, the most interesting Satan-like characters, both in scripture and in literature. My literary inspiration for him was the devil in Mikhail Bulgakov's great novel *The Master and Margarita*. I will end my remarks there. I want to thank the wonderful panel for your thoughts. It is really a great compliment to an author to have scholars provoked by a book.

Question and Answer Session

Question

I am fascinated by the fact that you depict God as a teenage boy. Would you like to talk about that?

Wesley Savick

Alan Lightman didn't do that – that was my fault. One of the greatest challenges of adapting a work intended for one medium into another is finding visual metaphors that will make the work successful onstage. As I read the book, I came to terms with Mr g as a character who is a bit bored, who is omniscient in his own way, who is impulsive, very confident in his abilities, and

interesting for the stage. Like a teenager, the character is very certain of himself and yet prone to great doubts, is capable of both making big decisions and second-guessing them, and worries a great deal about the suffering that he's causing. In casting, a teenage boy just seemed to ring all the bells and opened up the play for me. That led further, then, to my decision to change Belhor from a male to a female character, making her a kind of girl next door. I wondered, "What if Belhor doesn't broadcast what she is really about from the get-go? What if there is a progressive effect for the audience where at first she seems nice and they think that perhaps she and Mr g might even make a nice couple – but then her true character is revealed over time?" That is one way I tried to make the story unfold in the real time of a play.

and a Void that would be compatible. In terms of the epistemological question and the nature of being – I think that that might be a little too abstract for what I wanted to do in the book.

Edward J. Hall

I would add that one of the attractive features of that compatibility is that it also makes sense of the successes of the creatures within Mr g's universe who engage in scientific inquiry. Presumably, if Mr g were a meddler, he might occasionally interrupt the elegant organizational principles that he laid down, which would have introduced a fair bit of noise into an otherwise orderly system. This is another way of saying that when I think about problems about the compatibility of science and religion I do not think so much about specific factual claims but about a certain epistemological mindset. Within physics, at least one aspect of that mindset is that we insist that statements about how the world works should be testable and should have a certain precision and elegance. Mr g's meddling could have made that kind of inquiry impossible for the intelligent beings. And that is, I think, interesting to notice. As for why I would put the cosmological question first, it is not because the epistemological questions are not important, but because I think in the order of inquiry they tend to come later. I think when we try to make ourselves as philosophically innocent and naive as possible, the cosmological question – "what is this thing and how did it get here?" – is one of the first to strike us. It is only later as we reflect on that question, and in particular on the very different ways of trying to answer it and the challenge of adjudicating those answers, that we start worrying about epistemology. Then we consider epistemological questions such as the extent to which we can know an answer to a question and, perhaps even more insidiously,

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hyper-focused on a particular concern. I was looking for an element in my adaptation that would open up the metaphor and best reflect those characteristics. In theater you have to think in very concrete terms and make very concrete decisions, and the way I come to those decisions is to think, "Which decisions will provide the most accurate and expansive echoes?" What's the metaphor that will make the play happen in the audience's heart and mind, rather than remaining a self-contained entity?

So all of a sudden I started thinking about a teenage boy. My wife Lourey and I heard a reading of an early draft and we wondered what it would do to the story if Mr g was a teenager. It actually made the story more

Question

Why does the panel start with the cosmological question and not with the epistemological question? I also want to pose a question to Mr. Lightman. Why must God be compatible with science? Maybe it should be that science is compatible with God in terms of the nature of being.

Alan Lightman

Thank you for the correction. I should have said the compatibility of science and God. It is not about one taking precedence over the other; it is about mutual compatibility. My challenge to myself was to create a cosmos

whether our own concepts and representational capacities are even up to the job of framing a correct answer, let alone an answer that we can know to be true. So although those questions are hugely important, they do not feel to me like urgent starting points. They feel like things that we find ourselves grappling with later on in moments of philosophical despair.

Lisa Sowle Cahill

In the book, the creatures on earth ask questions about why they are there, why they are suffering, and whether God is accountable for their situation. These epistemological questions are posed from the creatures' own standpoints and experiences. Some of the things they express do not particularly reflect Mr g's position. A related issue in the book is that Mr g cannot really explain why suffering exists, but still has a response on the basis of compassion. Two other things stand out about his relationship to the intelligent beings he creates: one is that he gives them a glimpse of immortality at the last moment, and the other is he gives them a religious sense – some ability to discern the larger frame of the universe or the existence of God. It is not stated quite in those words, but it is clear to Mr g's creations that there is a mystery beyond their comprehension. So I think the epistemological questions – what is an appropriate starting point from which to ask questions, how do we know our questions are the right questions, and how do we know whether we have an answer – were embedded in the book in a useful way, and the diversity of questions and viewpoints was thought-provoking.

Edward and I also both noted that Mr g has what I would call a deist relationship to the world. That is, he is like a clockmaker whose creation is self-running. Mr g creates the world and then stands outside of it as it runs on internal principles. That is

not really the God of the Bible. It is also not the God described by many contemporary theologians, who talk about deep creation or continuing creation: the idea that God is not the *same* as the world but is also not completely separate from it as a spectator. He is somehow inherent in and present to the world, a force behind the natural processes of creation and regeneration. Some theologians even talk about the imperfect creation, a creation that is still going on. This would reframe the epistemological and cosmological issues in a way that leaves a much greater margin for uncertainty, which I think was also an important part of the book. Mr g does not really seem like he has the Greek “omni-” attributes – omnipresence, omniscience, omnipotence – and truthfully, those are not really part of the biblical depiction in Genesis either. Those are some of the reasons that I really liked the book. It was very provocative in getting to those contemporary open-ended questions.

Question

If Mr g is in the Void and is capable of creating a universe that is separate from the Void, how come Aunt Penelope can feel time? How come time has to affect the Void?

Alan Lightman

Oh, that's a good question. Mr g is capable of creating a separate universe because he, Aunt Penelope, and Uncle Deva live in the Void. But then when he creates time they feel it in the Void and Aunt Penelope complains about it. Why is this? I think that time is more pervasive than matter and energy and space and that when time is created it exists in the Void as well as in the material universes that are floating around. But it is a wonderful, very perceptive question.

Edward J. Hall

I would like to add that when questions about space and time come up in the philosophy of science, the observation is often made that we can imagine space itself as somehow being a derivative or emerging property. It was not presented that way in the book, but there are versions of physics that see the fact that we live in a three-dimensional space as a relatively superficial, nonfundamental feature. For that matter, you can imagine space itself being an illusion. Think of George Berkley's subjective idealism, which posited that the material world does not exist. It is much more difficult to imagine time being an illusion in the same sense. It is hard to even begin to make coherent sense of that. I think that is something that Alan captured in his book: time is the necessary prerequisite for the existence of any kind of causal relations, which you would need to draw on if you were to explain anything. ■

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