

"The Fable of the Dragon-Tyrant": A Christian Look

"The Fable of the Dragon-Tyrant" is an analogy written by Dr. Nick Bostrom. It was originally published in *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 2005, Vol. 31, No. 5, pp 273-277. It is a tale that addresses the aging process (and ultimate death) of humans, and it is a call to divert government funds into research that will slow down or even arrest the affects of aging. Dr. Bostrom is a professor at the University of Oxford and is the Director of the Future of Humanity Institute. His web page can be found at <https://www.nickbostrom.com>, and he has an impressive library of writings, many of which have appeared in professional magazines, and videos. He has also been the host of several TED Talks. His work is to primarily help society visualize the future and to make efforts to prepare for them. At this time, I have only read three of his works, all of which address slowing down the aging process, possibly to the point of achieving immortality. "The Fable of the Dragon Tyrant" has been adapted to video format by several sites on YouTube. Below is the link to the adaptation by CGP Grey. I have seen many CGP Grey videos, and while his videos tend to be more factual than those of his contemporaries, he still has a strong anti-religion (anti-Christian in particular) bias. From what I have seen of both CGP Grey and Dr. Bostrom, Bostrom is less patronizing of the religious, but they seem to be a good fit for each other.

The idea of a perfect society is nothing new, and Plato's *Republic* is probably the oldest surviving philosophical text to this effort (written about 2,400 years ago). The idea of a perfect society is not foreign to Christians, either. We are all called to do our part in improving this world. But what separates the Christian from the secular philosophers is the acceptance of the fact that man, in his natural state, is evil. Man is incapable of performing in a non-selfish way. A deranged, sadistic serial killer stops at red lights for the same reason the most devout Disciple of Christ does: he does not want to get hit by the semi-truck that has the green light. Any effort to create a perfect society that has any chance of succeeding must address this reality. I have often proposed that there are only two possible ways to take man out of his natural evilness: either to turn to Jehovah or to enforce strict laws controlling behavior. It is for this basic reason that I claim that Socialism is the only recourse for an Atheistic government (not to be confused with a secular government).

I have a friend who likes to tell me that I am building a "straw man" with that. He claims that one can be an Ethical Atheist without Socialism, but he agrees with my observation that each and every Socialist experiment in the last 100 years has been Atheist, and that it has destroyed human dignity in its efforts to preserve it. But I don't want to digress here any more than I have to. I just want to emphasize the fact that the selfish, evil nature of man *must* be accounted for when one contemplates improving the social good.

I have come across many such theories, all claiming to know what is "best" for society. While some ideas are truly thought out and presented in a competent way, most make the same mistake time after time: tunnel vision. They look at one single "problem" or "social ill," come up with a knee-jerk solution, implement it (usually depleting what little tax money the poor community can afford) and then move on to the next project. This is what I call the "build and forget" mentality. My favorite example is the education problem. A decision to build a school in a poor neighborhood is made, with no thought of making the area safe enough to attract competent teachers who will want to teach there. Rather than fix the security issue, however, it is assumed that simply increasing the salary will attract the better teachers. Instead, it gives inflated salaries to teachers not good enough to be hired on by the better schools. And this shortsightedness is not limited to the common person; it is truly sad how many highly educated people make this mistake.

What attracted me to this particular short story, however, was the fact that it lay somewhere in between these two extremes. Dr. Bostrom clearly did not see a religious solution to the problem of aging, but neither was he overly hostile to religion. That, and a few other similar observations, made me curious as to what he really thought, inspiring me to read a couple more of his papers that seemed to deal with this same subject. He did speak of quality of life and human dignity. I feel his treatment of those subjects was grossly naive, but I was impressed he addressed them at all. But despite his honest efforts, he still fell into a very deadly trap: corrupting the ideas of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel.

Today, Hegel's views have been perverted into what was in the past may have been fine for the past, we must always look to the new as the old gets in our way. "The Fable of the Dragon-Tyrant" is a perfect example. I could point to several examples of this, but for this paper I want to address how Hegel's ideas influenced the way Bostrom presented religion. In the story, we see the religious class teaching the subjects to accept death through aging (as represented by the Dragon), and the religious are presumed to be with the doomed on their final journey to provide comfort until the end. Bostrom makes it clear that, as long as no other choice was possible, this was actually a laudable activity. It is only when the kingdom is on the brink of being able to make a choice that the "old" ideas (of religion) become a hindrance to progress. When Bostrom had no further need of the comforters, they become "villainous." While this story did not discuss different moral theories, this is known as using people as a "means to an end." It is attributed to Emmanuel Kant and is widely held as ethically impermissible. Even those who don't agree with Kantianism as a whole still accept this concept. But we also see in the story how the Hegelian idea that the old must make way for the new is present. In neither case are we addressing the real question: is Jehovah real? If Jehovah is real, then the religious are neither merely consoling the doomed in the old days, nor are they getting in the way of science in the new days. They are performing a Moral obligation. Whether intentionally or not, by reducing religion to a "means to an end," Bostrom is promoting religion as a Bad Faith (or unfounded) belief.

Next, I want to come back to what I said earlier about man's sinfulness. We are only given a vague idea of the challenges that await in a new world where aging no longer happens. I think these challenges are grossly understated here. This was my primary motivation to read a few more papers to get a better understanding on where Bostrom stood. He did address them a little bit more, but I still feel he is "sugar-coating" the problems. He claims that we have been brainwashed into thinking there is dignity in old age and death only because we had no recourse. Once we do have recourse, he rationalizes, we will look at old age and death as abhorrent. I find this difficult to accept.

Suppose the best possible outcome *is* possible: not only do we stop aging, but we have the means to do anything we want (which, in his other works, he claims will be difficult but achievable). Can we honestly say that, as we are now, we could be happy doing what we want to do all the time? Is not part of the joy we get in life knowing that our chances to enjoy it are few? Do we not grow bored with the routine, no matter how exciting it was at first? It is man's natural sinfulness that spoils our joys, not the difficulty in achieving our joys. It seems to me that for us to truly enjoy eternal life, we must eliminate this natural state of evil within us.

Christians propose that Jehovah will do just that for those who enter Heaven, and Bostrom actually suggests (in other works of his) a secular equivalent. He calls it "supra-humans" (he makes no allusions that humanity will have to exist as something other than *homo sapiens*). Apparently the genetic engineering and/or cybernetic alterations designed to stop our aging will also control our emotions. How can science do this without infringing on our Free Will? Jehovah designed us to control our emotions while still having Free Will, so it is certainly possible. But should we trust

science, no matter how advanced, to be able to do just this? I find it doubtful because Free Will is anathema to science. Free Will suggests there is something beyond nature, at least the nature that science can study. And even if we suppose that it is possible after all, why would we want to trust imperfect humans attempting to make the perfected human?

And who actually believes that the best will come of it? In his book *That Hideous Strength*, C.S. Lewis identifies death as the ultimate protection against our own evil nature. Will all humans be made immortal so they can live free lives, or will a new slave class of immortals be made to care for the elite as history warns us? And while I hate to place a price on a person's life, Bostrom has already done so. By making it such an important point that 1/7 of our nation's wealth goes to health care, does that mean we should spend 1/7 of our wealth on making people immortal? What if it's not enough? Even if all the nation's wealth were put towards this goal, would it be enough for all, or will the rich gain immortality while the poor remain mortal?

Now I want to point out a peculiar contradiction that is easy to miss. When the king finally does convene a hearing to discuss killing the dragon, we see a great debate between science (the anti-dragoners) and philosophy (Chief Adviser for Morality). I find the title of Chief Adviser for Morality to be one of the most inappropriate titles I have seen in a long time. Nothing in his speech dealt with what is good or bad, which is the essence of morality. Instead, he talked about the purpose in life for dragons and humans. This is existentialism, which is very different and distinct from morality. Any connection between his argument and whether or not the dragon should be allowed to live only exists in the mind of the reader. I am not blaming the gentle reader for falling for this, as I suspect this is exactly what Bostrom hoped would happen. If this was indeed deliberate, then it is a technique known as "using a snuck premise." This trick involves slipping in a key premise that, on the surface, appears reasonable and therefore agreed upon by the other party without consideration. But later in the argument, the full impact of this premise is made apparent and leaves one feeling like they lost the argument but can't understand how.

But getting back to the main point, notice that both the anti-dragoners and the Chief Adviser for Morality make their arguments on reason, which both Christians and Atheists agree is natural and proper for mankind. Also note that neither one convinced the king. What convinced the king is the boy's declaration that "the dragon is bad," followed up by an emotional plea. I wonder if Dr. Bostrom realizes what he actually wrote here. Neither science nor secular philosophy could convince the king for a definite decision. So what did convince the king to make a decision? We have one of two choices: it could have come from emotion (the plea), or it could have come from recognizing a Truth that transcends science and secular philosophy (the concept of evil). I will let the gentle reader decide which one it was for themselves, but based on the story as whole, I do not think Bostrom really wanted to promote either solution. The problem is, he did not give us a third choice on the matter.

If I may be allowed to ignore the emotional solution and speak a bit about the concept of evil, then I think Bostrom has presented an unintentional dilemma to his own argument. Transcendental concepts imply a higher Truth, so where does this Truth come from? We really only have a handful of choices here. We cannot use a Deterministic basis, as good and evil do not exist in this theory because there is no Free Will with Determinism. An Evolutionistic view is what I suspect Bostrom intended, but again there is no good and evil in Evolutionism. Instead, one either survives or does not. I don't see how Paganism will work here, as the people would make the dragon a god and worship him instead of seeking to kill him. Any seeking to kill the dragon would have been summarily killed out of fear of retaliation. This leaves us Jehovah and Bostrom's dilemma. If the courage to kill the dragon can only be found by embracing Christianity, then how can Bostrom claim those who know Jehovah are "in the

way?" What we see here is Bostrom picking and choosing what he wants to suit his own agenda, with little concern as to how things really come together.

In conclusion, while this was a much better project than what one normally comes across on this matter, I still find problems that no amount of wishful thinking can overcome. I also found a curious dependence on a god to make the story work while at the same time suggesting this same god was only a useful myth to be used or discarded as one sees fit. I am certainly in favor of scientific and medical advances that can improve the human condition, but at the same time we need to be careful that such advances will not do more harm than good. I am personally rather liberal on where this line is drawn, but there is a line nonetheless. Under no circumstances should these lines be a direct challenge to God's sovereignty. Attempts to achieve immortality, or even near-immortality, is one of those lines we should never cross.

CPG Grey video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cZYNADOHhVY>

Raymond Mulholland
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