

Example Question

Buddhism

- (a) What is stewardship? [1]
- (b) Give two examples of environmental issues. [2]
- (c) What are the main scientific theories concerning how the world and humanity began? [3]
- (d) Explain why some Buddhists may not accept scientific theories about the origin of the world? [6]
- (e) 'The world is ours to treat as we like.'

Discuss this statement. You should include different, supported points of view and a personal viewpoint. You must refer to Buddhism in your answer. [12]

Total: [24]

Origins of the world and life

Scientific theories about the origin of the world and humanity

Big Bang Theory – The theory that the universe began with an explosion 14 billion years ago. The universe is still expanding and getting cooler.

Evolution – The theory that living beings evolve over time. Genes change (mutate) randomly to form slightly different versions of the same being. If the change is beneficial then the being reproduces successfully and the change is established and if the change is negative then the being will die out. As mutations occur and spread over long periods of time, they cause new species to form. Over the course of many millions of years, the processes of mutation and natural selection have created every species of life that we see in the world today, from the simplest bacteria to humans and everything in between.

Why Buddhists may not accept scientific theories

Explain why Buddhists might reject scientific theories about the origination of the world and humanity. (6 marks)

The Buddha refused to explain the origination of the universe and instead he told the poisoned arrow parable. This parable told the story of a man who was shot by an arrow and insisted on knowing the details of the arrow and who shot him. The Buddha commented that the man would die before he found the answers to his questions. The message of the parable is that people should not be concerned with how they arrived on the planet and instead should focus on getting better which in the eyes of Buddhism is concerned with preventing suffering and reaching enlightenment. Therefore, some Buddhists might reject scientific theories about the origination of the world and humanity because they do not think it is important or helpful to know or accept these theories.

Buddhists also believe that the universe is cyclical in nature. Therefore they do not look for the beginning of anything and instead view the universe as eternal, ongoing and constantly changing. The big bang theory supports the idea that the universe began at one particular time so Buddhists might reject this idea.

Also Buddhists believe in dependant origination which means that everything that occurs or is created does so because of something else. Therefore, some Buddhists would not accept the big bang theory as it does not explain what caused the explosion in the first place.

Why Buddhists might accept scientific theories

The Buddha did once tell a story in the Agganna Sutta about the world where he described beings evolving over time and made reference to the expansion of the universe. The Buddha's story was not scientific but there are some amazing parallels between it and the scientific theories of the Big Bang Theory and Evolution. Therefore, it would be possible for a Buddhist to cite this story as defence for believing in the scientific theories.

The relationship between scientific and religious understandings of the origins of the world and humanity

The scientific method relies on reason and empiricism. Religion acknowledges revelation, faith and sacredness.

The relationship between scientific and religious understanding can be both positive and negative. Buddhism probably has less possibility of conflict with science because it does not propose that the universe was created by God and it is this belief that many people believe is challenged by scientific theories. However, Buddhists do not necessarily support scientific theories as is clear in the section above.

There are people who reject scientific beliefs about the origin of the world and humanity such as Christian Creationists. These Christians believe that the world was created as it is recorded in Genesis which notes that the universe was made in 6 days by God and that all species were created fully formed including humans who were made on the 6th day and were the peak of God's creation.

However, there are many Christians and other religious people who do not see scientific discoveries as a challenge to God. These people may believe for example that the Bible is a metaphor and so it is quite possible that God was responsible for the Big Bang and Evolution.

Many people also favour the concept of Intelligent Design as an explanation for the universe. These people refer to the complexity of scientific discoveries to argue that such complex design could not have occurred without a creator.

There is also the cosmological argument which argues in defence of God by stating that everything must have a cause including the universe.

The cyclical nature of the universe

Buddhism argues that the universe has a cyclical nature. Nature offers no examples of processes which have a beginning but no end. Rather, all the natural processes we can observe are cyclic. The seasons go and return again next year. Rain falls, flows to the sea, evaporates, and forms clouds which again fall as rain. The body is made up of the elements we ingest as food; when we die the body breaks down and releases its elements into the soil, where they are absorbed by plants and animals which we again eat to build the body. The planets circle the sun and even the galaxy containing our solar system slowly revolves.

Therefore, a Big Bang Theory that suggests that the process repeats itself might be more acceptable to a Buddhist than the belief that there has only ever been one big bang. However, the fact that Buddhists take a cyclical perspective on the world and life is reason that many of them do not look for a beginning and are not eager to agree with theories that propose a beginning.

The refusal to answer questions on causation

Buddha refused to answer a question about the origination of the universe and instead presented his parable of the poisoned arrow.

The cycle of dependent origination

Buddhists believe in the concept of dependant origination. Everything has originated because of something else. This belief can be used to explain why Buddhists may not accept the Big Bang Theory but it could also be used to argue in favour of Evolution as one specie existence is dependent on the previous species' genetic mutation.

People and animals

The place of humanity in relation to animals

Buddhists believe that all living beings have the potential to reach enlightenment and both animals and humans are part of the cycle of samsara. Therefore, animals can be viewed as equal to humans. This is quite different to the Christian view of the place of humanity in relation to animals as they believe that humans are particularly unique and special and are the only beings that can worship God, have a relationship with God and reach heaven. However, the Buddhist doctrine of karma does imply that souls are reborn as animals because of negative actions. Being reborn as an animal is a serious spiritual setback.

Because non-human animals can't engage in conscious acts of self-improvement they can't improve their karmic status, and their souls must continue to be reborn as animals until their bad karma is exhausted. Only when they are reborn as human beings can they resume the quest for nirvana.

This bad karma, and the animal's inability to do much to improve it, led Buddhists in the past to think that non-human animals were inferior to human beings and so were entitled to fewer rights than human beings. Yet this attitude would seem to contradict the majority of Buddhist teachings.

Attitudes to animals and their treatment

Many Buddhist beliefs and teachings would lead a Buddhist to believe that they should have a loving and caring attitude to animals. For example, Buddhists try to develop karuna (compassion) and they also believe that negative kamma will be created by negative actions. Some Buddhists might take some beliefs to the extreme with regards to animals. For example, some Buddhists may interpret the first moral precept to mean that they should never kill an animal for food or use animals for medical research whilst others might follow the middle way and have a more moderate attitude towards animals. These Buddhists might believe that it is acceptable to use animals for food if necessary and that using animals for medical research is acceptable if it alleviates human suffering and causes the least amount of suffering for the animal.

All living things fear being beaten with clubs.

All living things fear being put to death.

Putting oneself in the place of the other,

Let no one kill nor cause another to kill.

Dhammapada 129

For more info go to <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/buddhistethics/animals.shtml>

Environmental issues

Responses and religious teachings relating to the environment

An environmental issue is a known process that has negative effects on the sustainability of the environmental quality necessary for the well being of the organisms living in it. For example, pollution of the world's oceans has a negative impact on the sea life that lives in those oceans.

Unlike other religions, Buddhists do not believe that the environment has been created by God but there are many beliefs and teachings such as anatta, samsara, kamma and karuna that would lead a Buddhist to decide that the best way to respond to the environment would be to do so sensibly. For example, it makes no sense to participate in the destruction of the Amazon rainforest as humans require this forest to survive and such an action would create negative kamma and not help a Buddhist to develop the positive qualities needed to reach enlightenment.

Japanese Buddhists call the dependant relationship between the environment and humans esho funi which means 'humanity and the environment are two but not two'.

For more info see <http://www.asiantribune.com/index.php?q=node/6210>