

The End of Man is God

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Abstract

In the novel All the King's Men written by Robert Warren Penn, the narrator Jack Burden makes the statement "The end of man is knowledge, but there is one thing he can't know. He can't know whether knowledge will save him or kill him.... for the end of man is to know" (14). This statement suggests that people's desire to have knowledge would mean ending their life. Later in the narration, Jack applies this statement to the existence of God and how God is the cause of man's end. The dialog clearly argues Jack's belief at the time that God is death, that God is potentially the end of all knowledge and life, and that becoming one with God is in fact the end of man.

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Jack recalls a discussion that he had with the Scholarly Attorney. During the conversation, Jack explains his argument that the quest for knowledge is essentially the purpose of life and that once complete knowledge is attained death occurs. Jack is essentially preaching his beliefs. He offers two arguments to suggest that God is death and the end of all existence. He ends the dialog by presenting a picture to illustrate the importance of denying God.

The conversation starts with the Attorney saying, "God is Fullness of Being" (226). Jack responds,

You've got the wrong end of the stick. For Life is Motion - For Life is Motion toward Knowledge. If God is Complete Knowledge then He is Complete Non-Motion, which is Non-Life, which is Death. Therefore, if there is such a God of Fullness of Being, we would worship Death, the Father. (226)

The Attorney responds to Jack by quoting scripture, "I am the Resurrection and the Life" (226).

Jack responds:

You've got the wrong end of the stick.... For Life is a fire burning along a piece of string – or is it a fuse to a powder keg which we call God? – and the string is what we don't know, our ignorance, and the trail of ash, which, if a gust of wind does not come, keeps the structure of the string, is History, man's knowledge, then man's knowledge will be equal to God's Knowledge and there won't be any fire, which is life. Or if the string leads to a powder keg, then there will be a terrific blast of fire, and even the trail of ash will be blown completely away. (226)

Jack then uses a metaphor to explain how eternal life is possible only if a person denies God:

I'll draw you another picture. It is a picture of a man trying to paint a picture of a sunset. But before he can dip his brush, the color always changes and the shape. Let us give a name to the picture which he is trying to paint: Knowledge. Therefore if the object which a man looks at changes constantly so that Knowledge of it is constantly untrue and is therefore Non-Knowledge, then Eternal Motion is possible. And Eternal Life. Therefore we can believe in Eternal Life only if we deny God, Who is Complete Knowledge. (227)

Jack opens the first two dialogs with the phrase “You've got the wrong end of the stick” suggesting that the old man is thinking backwards. In the first exchange, Jack explains how he believes God is actually death, not life. The attorney states “God is Fullness of Being.” One definition for “being” according to the Oxford dictionary is “existence.” Therefore, the attorney is stating, “God is fullness of existence.” The Oxford Dictionary defines “existence” as “the state or fact of being real or living.” Jack states that the attorney has the wrong end of the stick because Jack knows that “Being” means living, and according to Jack, complete knowledge is “Non-Motion, which is Non-Life, which is Death.” Jack suggests existence is the quest to gain

knowledge, “For Life is Motion toward Knowledge.” As long as a person can gain more knowledge, life or “motion” will continue. Once a person has gained all knowledge, then life ceases because it is “Complete Non-Motion.” In order to have complete knowledge, a person must have knowledge of the past, present, and future. If God is fullness of existence, then God must have complete knowledge; therefore “God is Fullness of Death,” “death” being the opposite end of the stick from “being.”

The other use of the phrase “You’ve got the wrong end of the stick” in response to “I am the Resurrection and the Life” takes God’s potential destruction even further. Jack argues that God is the eventual destruction of all knowledge. Jack states, “For Life is a fire burning along a piece of string... and the string is what we don’t know... and the trail of ash... is history.” Jack argues that the string is the knowledge that man does not yet have; however, if the string ends, then man will have achieved complete knowledge and equality to God. Complete knowledge is Non-Motion or Non-Life so God cannot refer to himself as the “Life” since he is in fact “death.” In fact, Jack is suggesting that coming to be one with God could potentially destroy all history and knowledge, “then there will be a terrific blast of fire, and even the trail of ash will be blown completely away.” Therefore, God is not only death, but the end of all knowledge including history or the “trail of ash.” This again is the opposite end of the stick from “Life.”

A thorough analysis of the phrase “The end of man is knowledge,” suggests the statement is true. A common belief among Christians is that God is eternal life and upon death, a Christian becomes one with God. If Christians believe that they become one with God upon death, then essentially a Christian gains the complete knowledge of God. Jack believes that God’s complete knowledge makes him death, so “we would worship Death, the Father.” According to Jack, a person achieves eternal death, not life, since God is Death.

The most important word in the phrase “The end of man is knowledge” is “man.” Jesus Christ, who is God *and* the Son of God, *became* man. It is only logical to assume then that God is not a man, but something spiritual in nature. Man is an earthly, physical existence, not a spiritual existence like God. Man can touch, smell, hear, taste, and see the physical world around him. However, the man does not go to heaven or continue to exist beyond the physical realm of the earth. When a person dies, his physical existence ceases and returns to the earth. According to Christians, the soul will continue to exist either in heaven with God or in hell with Satan.

Since the goal of Christians is to go to heaven and receive eternal life, then according to Jack’s philosophy, Christians do in fact desire complete knowledge through God, therefore ending their physical existence as “man.” If a person wants to become one with God and gain complete knowledge, then he does in fact have to die an earthly death and allow the soul to rise up to God. If “God” is substituted for “knowledge,” then the phrase becomes “The end of man is God.” By substituting “death” for “end,” the phrase becomes “The death of man is God.” Substituting “physical existence” for “man,” then the phrase is “The death of physical existence is God.” This statement is in fact a truth because becoming one with God means physical death. So the statement “The end of man is knowledge” can be argued to be true.

The dialog between Jack and the Scholarly Attorney regarding God being complete knowledge clearly demonstrates Jack’s belief at the time that God is death, that God is potentially the end of all knowledge and life, and that coming to know God is in fact the end of man. As an historian whose goal is to obtain knowledge, Jack fails to recognize the irony behind his critique of God.