

What, exactly, does the existential question ask?

I have usually answered that the existential question asks, at one and the same time, about two things: on the one hand, about the meaning of ultimate reality for us, as distinct from its structure in itself; and, on the other hand, about our authentic self-understanding. But what is it, really, to ask about the meaning of ultimate reality for us except to ask about our authentic self-understanding, assuming, at any rate, that “authentic” so used means “realistic,” and so appropriate to or authorized by ultimate reality in its meaning for us—and, ultimately, its structure in itself?

To feel the force of this question is to begin to suspect that properly religious talk about God or ultimate reality, like existential talk generally, is really talk about ourselves, about our own authentic self-understanding. Thus, for example, “God loves you” means, “You can and should understand yourself as accepted unconditionally by strictly ultimate reality.”

10 September 1999; rev. 21 September 2002