

Does the Universe have a Purpose?



Jane Goodall

Certainly.

But first let me explain. A common scientific view is that evolution occurs simply because matter obeys some unseen law whereby a simple organism will, if it evolves at all, become a more complex one. Evolution is thus a blind process without purpose and science will one day uncover the simple mechanical rules underlying every seeming mystery. Our own lives, therefore, are equally without purpose. There is no place here for the spirit, the immortal soul.

Many people find this hard or impossible to accept. Even that great scientist Albert Einstein sustained a mystical outlook on life that was, he said, constantly renewed from the wonder and humility that filled him when he gazed at the stars. I wonder, can our finite minds ever truly understand such things as eternity and infinity? My own thinking requires a beginning and an ending, an alpha and omega. “In the beginning was the Word,” says the Bible. Yes, of course—the big bang. But it is impossible to imagine “nothingness” before that cosmic eruption.

We are intellectual and conscious beings and it seems we have a deep-seated need to understand the world around us and our place in it. And why things happen as they do. From prehistoric times human cultures, seeking to explain the inexplicable, have believed in, worshiped, made sacrifices to, and feared their gods—known by many names, including God, Allah, Jehovah, Tao, Brahman, and the Creator. And all the gods, goddesses, spirits and demons of classical mythologies of the animist religions. People have believed in divine retribution, the forces of good and evil, and often, continuation of spirit after death.

Of course science typically scoffs at any belief in a god, tells us that we have a “God gene” and that the tendency towards religious belief is simply part of our biological make up, as inevitable as the universal human smile. Yet even if this were so, we would still need to ask why? Why should we be programmed to believe in a god? Why are laws of physics designed to make life ever more complex? And where did they come from?

When I was a child, born into a Christian family, I accepted the reality of an unseen God without question. And now that I have lived almost three quarters of a century I still believe in a great spiritual power. I have described elsewhere the experience I had when I first visited Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. When, as I gazed at the great rose window, glowing in the morning sun, the air was suddenly filled with the glorious sound of an organ playing Bach’s Toccata and Fugue in D Minor. It filled me with joy, brought tears to my eyes. How could I believe that blind chance had led to that moment in time—the cathedral, the collective faith of those who had prayed and worshiped within, the genius of Bach, the emergence of a conscious mind that could, as mine did then, question the purpose of life on Earth. Was all the wonder and beauty simply the result of purposeless gyrations of bits of cosmic dust at the beginning of time? If not, then there must be some extra-cosmic power, the creator of the big bang. A purpose in the universe. Perhaps, one day, that purpose will be revealed.

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