

The Purpose-Driven Universe

the Rev. Edmund Robinson

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When I was a young child, I knelt beside my bed every night, and I prayed to God:
Now I lay me down to sleep
I pray the Lord my soul to keep
Thy love be with me through the night,
And keep me safe till morning light.

I felt very comforted by this prayer. I have asthma, and had a few terrifying episodes where I awoke and was unable to breathe. My mother's presence on those occasions would give me some confidence, but there was also the presence of God. Once when I was about seven, I took my first trip on an airliner, and reported to my mother afterwards that I had seen Jesus on a cloud.

I remembered these comforts of a God who held me in his care when I read a book Jacqueline gave me for Valentine's Day, called *Banquet at Delmonico's: Great Minds, the Gilded Age, and the Triumph of Darwinism in America*. The book details how the natural evolution ideas of Darwin and the social evolution ideas of Herbert Spencer were resisted by some clergy of the late Nineteenth Century, but were adopted enthusiastically by other clergy, academics, and the capitalists of the day.

We are in the period of Lent, when it is traditional to consider the darker side of life. Lent commemorates Jesus going into the desert for 40 days, where he wrestles with his demons and prays about his future ministry. Some of us read Eliot's *Ash Wednesday* here on Wednesday night, an extended passage through the dark night of the soul:

Because I do not hope to know again
The infirm glory of the positive hour
Because I do not think
Because I know I shall not know
The one veritable transitory power
Because I cannot drink

There, where trees flower, and springs flow, for there is nothing again.¹

As my child-self wanted a God to hold me in the palm of his hand, Western Culture was fond of an idea of God that said that the universe was God's creation and God had a purpose for everything in it. There was a plan, all God's critters had a place in the choir, we knew our place. We read Psalm 19, which assured us that the heavens in all their grandeur, the spacious firmament on high, attested to the presence of a God who had it all under control.

"In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,
5 which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,
and like a strong man runs its course with joy.

Before Darwin, some of a philosophical bent even built an argument about God's purpose, called the argument from design. The argument was supposed to help prove that God existed.

The argument from design was expressed by G.K. Chesterton in 1908 as follows: "So one elephant having a trunk was odd; but all elephants having trunks looked like a plot." If there is something complex and wondrous in the design of nature, it implies a designer. We call this the teleological argument, from the Greek word *Telos*, meaning end.

¹Ash Wednesday, Sec. 1

The most famous teleological arguments involve timepieces². Back in Roman times, Cicero argued that "When you see a sundial or a water-clock, you see that it tells the time by design and not by chance. How then can you imagine that the universe as a whole is devoid of purpose and intelligence, when it embraces everything, including these artifacts themselves and their artificers?" (Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, ii. 34). In the French Enlightenment, Voltaire said, "L'univers m'embarrasse, et je ne puis songer Que cet horloge existe, et n'ait point d'horloger (I'm puzzled by the world, I cannot deem, the timepiece real, its maker but a dream)

In the early Nineteenth Century, the Anglican clergyman William Paley gave the analogy of walking on the beach and finding a watch. You would know from the design of the gears, dial and hands that the device had some purpose. A watch implies a watchmaker. Right next to the watch is a seashell. It is similarly intricate in design, and seems marvelously adapted to some purpose. As we imply a designer of the watch, so we imply a designer of the seashell.

As a young man, Darwin read Paley's argument and was very impressed. But as he worked out the theory of evolution, he could see how Paley's logic broke down. In his autobiography, Darwin wrote that "The old argument of design in nature, as given by Paley, which formerly seemed to me so conclusive, fails, now that the law of natural selection has been discovered."³

The writer Daniel Dennett says evolution works by cranes and not by sky-hooks⁴. A certain type of construction crane builds a skyscraper by building one floor, then jacking itself up onto the floor it has just built in order to build the next floor. A sky hook comes down out of the sky or from some place above to build the structure. Evolution works like the crane – each stage is built on the previous stage. The fossil record shows that several different designs are tried before one takes, and the feature which might have one function in the ancestor might be adapted to a different function in the descendant. Thus the flippers which evolved to help our ancestors swim in the ocean become feet to help us move about on dry land.

But notice the word I am using here: these body parts don't have a purpose, they have a function. And the function they have in one animal may be different from the function the same structure serves in another animal. We can talk about this loosely as a purpose, but it's more exact to say function, or, in Ursula Goodenough's words, it's not a capital-P Purpose.

Let's look at our language a little more closely. When we find the watch on the beach, we are in the realm of human agency, and we can say, the watch's "purpose" is to tell time. Most humans would agree that the watch's very existence, its design and manufacture and sale, came about *in order* to allow people to measure time. The purpose of the watch precedes its existence; the measurement of time is the telos of the watch, the final cause, the end to which it is made.

The fallacy of Paley's argument (and in fact the fallacy goes back to Cicero) is in

²The following discussion, and quotes, are taken generally from the Wikipedia article "Teleological Argument" http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teleological_argument.

³Darwin, Charles (1958), Barlow, Nora, ed., *The autobiography of Charles Darwin 1809-1882*. With the original omissions restored. Edited and with appendix and notes by his grand-daughter, London: Collins, p. 59.

⁴Dennett, Daniel, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, Simon & Schuster 1995, Chapter 3

transferring this deduction from the artificial to the natural realm. The whole notion of purpose in nature presumes the existence of a maker with intelligence and power and intent, all of which is the point to be proven. Thus the argument is perfectly circular. You cannot have a purpose without having a mind in which to hold that purpose. And the fact that some things in nature seem very cleverly designed is not evidence that there is a designer if the random processes of evolution would reach the same result. The watch has a purpose while it is still on the drawing boards before it is even made; for all we know, the seashell is never on a drawing board.

When Darwin's theory reached America, some clergy attacked it as atheistic, while others defended it. Harvard botanist Asa Gray, Darwin's principle defender, said that natural selection could just be the mechanism that a creator God chose as the organizing principle to run life forms. Darwin himself kept his religious views close to his vest, and at one point he confessed to a newspaper that they made his head hurt:

"I feel most deeply that this whole question of creation is too profound for the human intellect. A dog might as well speculate on the mind of Newton! Let each man hope and believe what he can."⁵

You may recognize the sentiment as Unitarian, and indeed Darwin had some Unitarian connections which I won't go into here.

I will accept Mr. Darwin's invitation to hope and believe what I can. What can we believe, after Darwin? Is there anything left of that God to whom I offered bedside prayers as a child? Gray might be right that God is still there, but it is harder to credit a God who can see every bit of the future if the future is dependent on random variations built on the past and present. It is hard to believe in a God who is all-powerful if the operating juice for the system seems to be random variations. We have been brought up to look upon God as a wise and beneficent parent guiding our course and the God who survives Darwin looks more like an indifferent stranger. In Eliot's terms, we cannot drink where the trees flower and the springs flow, because there is nothing.

Daniel Dennett calls Darwin's idea a "universal acid" which "eats through just about every traditional concept, and leaves in its wake a revolutionized world-view, with most of the old landmarks still recognizable, but transformed in fundamental ways."⁶

And yet. And yet. I am enough of a transcendentalist to know that what I know is not only what my five senses tell me, but what I know with my intuition, with my indwelling sense of truth. Logically, rationally, it is impossible that there should be a being who designed this all and who has any kind of plan or purpose for any of it, including me. Yet when I look at my own life, I am constantly coming up against the apparent actions of some will other than my own. I will aim to go one way, and something takes me another way. It is like trying to get somewhere in a sailboat: I'll be aiming for one spot on the shore, but the wind and tide will take me to a completely different place. And it's only after I get to this place other than the one I am aiming at that I realize it was the place I should have been trying for all along.

Take the fact that I am standing here addressing you as the settled minister in Chatham, MA. Eighteen months ago, I couldn't have found Chatham on a map. I had lived within a short drive of Cape Cod for twelve years and had visited no more than three times. It was not on my conscious radar. Yet here I am, and just as I arrive, I find that there seems to be an Edmund-shaped nest for me. Sure, I'm making that nest, I'm adapting to my environment like a

⁵Werth, Barry, *Banquet at Delmonicos: Great Minds, the Gilded Age, and the Triumph of Evolution in America* New York: Random House 2009. at 95.

⁶Dennett, Id.

good Darwinian organism, but the conditions for this nesting seem to have been here all along.

How to reconcile head and heart? How to gibe the death blow that Darwin dealt to the concept of purpose with my own sense of some larger force at work in my own life? I have a few thoughts. First, whatever dissonance we find, we do not retreat into the arms of the Intelligent Design movement. The claim of Intelligent design to be science was dealt a mortal and well-deserved blow by the court in the Dover case three years ago. It fares no better as religion, for it is based on the design argument which has been thoroughly trashed.

Somehow on my hard drive I have a wonderful satire on Intelligent Design penned by Jack and Carolyn Salmon which says in part

“[W]here there is Design, there must be a Designer and a Purpose. And there is. Consider the evidence, looking again at the human eye. Very complex and “fit” for its use. But note well: over half the population must wear glasses, and cataracts or glaucoma strike the majority of people beyond a certain age. In other words, the Design has flaws and things go wrong! The frog has a wondrous eye for locating and spearing flies with that amazing tongue -- but only if the fly is alive and moving. A frog can sit on top of a pile of freshly dead or stunned, unmoving flies and literally not see them. He’ll starve to death unless one moves across his field of vision.”

The satirical conclusion is that there is a designer and his name is Murphy, and the authors invite everyone to join the new church of Murphy.

“Who but Our Revered Lord Murphy could so thoroughly, and so subtly, provide for the working out of His Will, so well expressed in the Great Maxim: Whatever can go wrong, will.”

My second thought is to recognize that we ourselves have evolved consciousness, and part of that consciousness is the capacity to have purpose. Humans can entertain purpose of the most sophisticated and complex sorts – think about President Obama’s budget: 140 pages of numbers exhibiting a complete sea change in national priorities, purpose writ large and detailed at the same time. So the collapse of a purpose in nature does not mean the collapse of purpose in our own lives. In fact, we have the capacity to construct purpose, to construct God if necessary, if we are willing to buck the Bible’s command against making idols. Eliot, our poet, after renouncing hope to find the God of tradition, says with some bitterness:

“Consequently, I rejoice, having to construct something upon which to rejoice.”⁷

My third thought is, we still have our nookie. While there may be no evidence of purpose in the inanimate stars, planets, rocks and mountains, life forms exhibit some kind of aboutness, and it is about making more life forms. We can take the sexual instincts nature has given us to encourage the survival of our own lineage and universalize them outward to a sustaining love which cares about the long-term survival of the race. There is no more important purpose for our individual or collective lives than to be to insure the success of the human experiment. To fight the age-old battles against war, poverty and disease, or the more recent battles to abolish nuclear weapons, stop global warming and pollution, develop sustainable ecologies and economies to the end that humankind shall, in Faulkner’s words, not only endure but prevail – this is the great work that can provide purpose aplenty for every human on the planet, regardless of how anyone thinks of God or how we got here.

And four, we have connections. The tree of life which Darwin sets up shows our

⁷“Ash Wednesday,” Sec. 1

connection to all other living things, and the science of which it is a part shows our connection to non-living things as well. We all share most of our DNA with the monkey, the shark, the cockroach. The atoms in our bodies come from the heart of stars. All of nature has combined to make us who we are, and we can return the compliment by appreciating this fact.

In our Seventh Principle, we covenant to affirm and promote the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. When I contemplate the reality of my connections to all that exists, and my kinship at the genetic level with all other life forms, the question of Capital-P Purpose seems to fade into insignificance. Truly, “what is the purpose of it all?” may be simply the wrong question. What you really want to know is, to paraphrase Mary Oliver, “what is my place in the family of things?” Maybe it’s because I haven’t read Rick Warren’s book, but I feel that I want my life to be driven by gratitude for existence and a sense of connection, not by some higher purpose.

This morning, Joan told the story of the Everything Seed, which grew everything that has been or will be in the universe from a tiny seed. We sang a song about our lives unfolding from a seed, carved in the palm of God’s hand. Maybe the proponents of an argument from design look in the wrong place for God. They look for evidence of purpose like a watchmaker. But my image of God is less a manufacturer than a farmer. If my life has a purpose, it is the purpose that is in the seed from the beginning, and the course of my life is to watch it unfold and to grow. And even if there is no purpose driving the universe, these purposes can still drive my life. Amen.

Q: (Edmund) Is there any evidence of a purpose, an end to which everything is evolving? Or does evolution have no purpose? [facetious response from someone in audience, inaudible, great laughter]

A:(Ursula) So, purpose was one of the items on my list of meta-interpretive questions. And I think like all interpretive questions, this winds up being something that different people will have different interpretations. Darwin said there was no more purpose than the blowing of the wind; he came out and said it.

Q: (Gene Pickett): What did you say?

A: That Darwin said that all this variation and stuff had no more purpose than the blowing of the wind.

Q: (Gene Pickett) Blowing of the wind.

A: Blowing of the wind. 'The answer, my friend, is blowing in the wind.' But you know, you can look at whole story and build purpose into it all over the place. I have a Roman Catholic friend, she works in a lab as a technician, she was one of the first readers of my book, she bought it for her priest and everybody in her church, and I said, Robin, how in the world are you – it's not theistic, and she said, 'Oh, Ursula, there's God on every page of your book; every time I look into the microscope I see God.' Alright? Now..

Q: (Gene Pickett) But for life forms to realize their potential, for instance, is this not a purpose?

A: Yes, so, but I think Edmund's question had a capital-P Purpose, so, yeah, all critters, purpose, in fact, going back to the question that was asked before of the difference between non-life and life, the most salient one is really that life-forms are purposive, they're about something. OK? You can't say that a mountain has a purpose and a snowflake has a purpose. It's there, but it's not trying to do anything else.

Q: (Gene Pickett) But the purpose of a flower is to bloom, is that not...?

A: Oh, the purpose of a flower is to ... make nookie. (Laughter) No, flowers are reproductive organs, and the purpose of the rest of the plant is to get the flower going. That's one way of looking at life.

Q: (Gene Pickett) Do you think that answers the question?

A: No, because I think that Edmund wanted a capital-P purpose; if you're looking for lower-p purpose, I can give you a gazillion examples, like your pancreas and your forearm.