

Meaning Makes a Comeback



GREGG EASTERBROOK

A few decades ago, the well-informed person might have said that by the end of the twentieth century, human thought would have disproved all ideals about meaning, purpose, or larger forces in life.

Science was assumed to be in the process of generating hard evidence that life is just replicating molecules and vibrating atoms, signifying nothing; existence itself a cosmic fluke, no more than a random burst of physics. A famous 1979 remark by the Nobel Prize physicist Steven Weinberg—“The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless”—summed up the bleak view that was widely assumed to be settling in to dominate Western thought.

Literature, history, and philosophy were on similar tracks, drifting toward the “postmodern” view that there is no meaning and there are no fundamental truths—just a hodgepodge of claims that are all equally mistaken.

Instead, at the dawn of the new millennium, the concept of meaning is poised for a major comeback. Cosmologists, expected by now to possess proof that the genesis of the universe was just an aimless technical event, instead are uncovering ever more evidence that existence is shrouded in radiant mystery, and may be both infinite and eternal. Biologists, expected by now to possess proof that life is just a weird chemical accident, instead are uncovering ever more indications that the natural world is somehow prewired to make life probable. And literary thinkers, who would have expected that by now postmodern ennui would have routed all other schools of thought, instead are finding a striking revival of interest in religion, ethics, and the difference between right and wrong—the ideas associated with meaning.

Consider the emerging science of the Big Bang. Roughly twenty years ago, most scientists assumed that our universe burst forth by pure

chance and someday will die, bringing existence itself to a depressing end. This is not the sort of picture that suggests any larger influence at work.

Today, however, the leading theory of the Big Bang, called “inflation” physics, holds that cogent physical laws were at work during the genesis; that entire galaxies can spring forth from microscopic pinpoints of seemingly empty space; and that new universes will arise forever, existence never knowing any conclusion. Theories like this reflect the same sort of majesty and wonder that religious creation stories have long insisted must have been present at the outset of the cosmos. Leading-edge thinkers in Big Bang physics now seem to have more in common with theologians than with the it’s-all-pointless postmodern viewpoint. For instance, Allan Sandage, one of the world’s preeminent astronomers, recently said that what seems to have happened at the Big Bang was so magnificent, it could only be understood as “a miracle.”

Next consider the current state of the life sciences. Researchers continue to demonstrate that evolution works in organisms that already exist; no serious person any longer contests Charles Darwin’s basic insight about environment causing adaptive change. But biologists have yet to come up with the vaguest explanation of how Darwinian mechanics could have created life. Because the ancient jump from inanimate to animate seems inexplicable, some scientists such as Stephen Jay Gould have maintained that human existence is a cosmic joke, so phenomenally unlikely as to be stripped of any claim to meaning.

Recently, however, thinkers associated with a new school of science usually called “complexity theory” have begun to produce evidence that the basic rules of chemistry, thermodynamics, and even mathematics have been ordered in ways that encourage both life and consciousness.

This doesn't prove there is a Creator behind the scenes: it's possible that life-favoring physical rules arose naturally. But the emerging notion of the physical world as fundamentally favorable to living things—that nature somehow “wants” us to be—may replace gloomy assumptions of life-as-fluke with a new view that incorporates a sense of living purpose.

As science comes to embrace more buoyant views of the human prospect, literature and philosophy may turn in this direction as well. Many contemporary literary thinkers espouse such despondent views of life because they assume that since science is busily proving existence to be meaningless, intellectuals must do the same. But it's a fallacy to assume that science has disproved larger influences. Charles Townes, a Nobel Prize-winning physicist and chief inventor of the laser beam, recently noted that “to think that science already knows enough to be certain there are no mystical forces is illogical.” As the course of science shifts away from dispirited views of a senseless cosmos, toward a new vision of creation as poignantly favorable to life, then philosophy and literature will have to adjust. The recent upsurge of interest in metaphysics, or the theory of truth, is an indicator of such a transition.

One reason the boundary between science and religion is suddenly a hot topic again, after decades of being out of fashion, is that researchers are beginning to see signs of resplendence in the found world and are wondering what it all means. In the decades to come, science, which we all assumed would refute every spiritual belief, may instead emerge as a principal source of arguments that humanity is part of some larger, greater, and perhaps welcoming cosmic enterprise. New scientific evidence of resplendence may tell us that there is a God, or if not, that the purely natural cosmos is a far more auspicious place than was once

guessed. Either way, an increasingly favorable view of the human prospect is suggested, one in which meaning makes a big comeback.



Gregg Easterbrook is a senior editor of the New Republic and contributing editor to the Atlantic Monthly. His most recent book is Beside Still Waters: Searching for Meaning in an Age of Doubt.

