

Does the Universe have a Purpose?

Yes.

John Haught

The fact that we can ask such a question at all suggests an affirmative answer. The impassioned search for meaning, perhaps our species' most distinctive trait, is not a longing that lifts us out of the universe, or that takes place outside of nature. We are, after all, as much a part of nature as roaches and rivers. So too is our thirst for meaning.

If we accept evolution, as indeed we must, our longing for meaning is nature—in the same sense that birdsong and the howling of wolves are nature.

But if our minds are nothing more than the accidental outcome of a mindless evolutionary process, why should we trust them at all? A Darwinian account of the mind's critical capacities—explanatory though such a narrative might be—is not enough to justify the confidence we spontaneously place in our cognitive powers.

Darwin himself would agree. He agonized over whether the theory of natural selection, taken by itself, might not undermine the actual trust we have in our mind's capacity to understand and know reality. "With me the horrid doubt always arises," he admitted to a friend, "whether the convictions of man's mind, which has been developed from the mind of the lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy. Would any one trust in the convictions of a monkey's mind, if there are any convictions in such a mind?"

Darwin had no good answer to this question, but that does not mean it is unanswerable. We can embrace evolutionary science without losing confidence in our minds. For it is not by looking back at what our minds evolved from, I suggest, but only by looking forward at what our minds are now anticipating that we can validate our cognitive confidence and vindicate our trust in cosmic purpose.

But just what are our minds anticipating? What are they reaching for? If, along with me, you are asking this question, you are already closing in on the answer. Your mind is engaged at his very moment in nothing less than the search for truth. And simply by reaching toward truth both you and your mind's natural root system—the universe—are ennobled. As they are being taken captive by the most undeniable of values, truth itself, they are already participating in its empowering though always elusive presence. It is because this transcendent value has already taken hold of you, and in you the whole universe, that you can have faith in your critical intelligence and also trust that the universe has a purpose.

Purpose, after all, means quite simply the bringing about of something undeniably and permanently good. Is that what is going on in the cosmos?

As long as you are drawn toward truth, so also is the natural world that gave birth to your mind. The two, after all, are inseparable. As long as the search for truth persists, not only can you trust your mind, you can also trust the universe that has germinated such an exquisite means of opening itself to what is timelessly worth treasuring.

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