

# Does the Universe have a Purpose?



David Gelernter

**Yes.** Consider this question: Do the Earth and mankind have a purpose? If so, then the universe does too, ipso facto. If not, the universe might still have (some other) purpose; but I don't have to face that contingency, because I believe we do have one...

Namely, to defeat and rise above our animal natures; to create goodness, beauty, and holiness where only physics and animal life once existed; to create what might be (if we succeed) the only tiny pinprick of goodness in the universe—which is otherwise (so far as we know) morally null and void. If no other such project exists anywhere in the cosmos, our victory would change the nature of the universe. If there are similar projects elsewhere, more power to them; but our own task remains unchanged.

But why rise above and not blend into nature? Equivalently, from a Western viewpoint: why did the Judeo-Christian tradition replace the pagan idea of gods made in man's image with a revolutionary inversion, man made in God's? Why should we be goaded not to be ourselves but to be better than ourselves?

Why seek goodness?

Because most humans desire good-ness. For most (not all!) humans, this urge is easily ignored in the short term, but nearly impossible to uproot over the long haul.

Males (and females) desire sex, too; but if a male had somehow grown up without seeing a woman, this desire would (probably) remain vague and unformed. Humans desire goodness; but until the Judeo-Christian revelation this desire was, at least for Western humanity, vague and unformed. Humans desire goodness; but until the Judeo-Christian revelation this desire was, at least for Western humanity, vague and unformed. For Western man, Judeo-Christian ethics

felt right; felt obligatory; made some internal tuning fork hum. (By Judeo-Christian ethics I mean, basically, the Ten Commandments and the Holiness Code of Leviticus 19. Recall that, when he's called upon to summarize his message, Jesus quotes two verses from the Hebrew Bible.)

All urges are not created equal. Most humans need sex, but in rare cases don't, and others choose to suppress the urge. The goodness-and-sanctity urge is (likewise) absent in some, suppressed in others; subliminally present in most.

When we seek goodness and sanctity, we defy nature. The basic rule of Judeo-Christian ethics is, the strong must support the weak. The basic rule of nature is, the strong live and the weak die.

But if you do achieve your ultimate human purpose—to become good, to transcend your animal nature; to imitate God and thereby help transform God from an internal subjective idea to an external, objective fact—what have you achieved? Is there any hope of ultimate success? Of gathering together enough pinpricks of goodness to create a swell that will sweep suffering away and leave sanctity and joy (like glittering sea foam on the beach) behind? Of realizing God on earth?

Not necessarily.

In Genesis, God warns us not to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The Talmud reports a famous dispute between two leading rabbinical schools: would man have been better off had he never been created?

The decision: yes.

But as Job teaches us, we must play the hand we are dealt.

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