

The Universe Doesn't Care About Your 'Purpose'

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The author's grandparents with their new '72 Ford Thunderbird.

Keys in hand, I took a deep breath. I flipped the ignition and the memories of my Papa rushed back, just as the familiar rumble of his Thunderbird kicked in.

After a series of painful events in late 2016, I struggled to

understand how almost everything around me went wrong so suddenly. If anything, I felt aimless. That is, until the moment I inherited my grandfather's 1972 Ford Thunderbird. Immediately, it reminded me of the best memories of him — birthday fishing trips, playing with his model trains, learning to make animal balloons (he was a Shriner clown), and my brother and I lounging in his hammock by the shore of Lake Murray, S.C. Kitschy as it sounds, restoring his T-Bird gave me a new sense of purpose.

Purpose is a universal human need. Without it, we feel bereft of meaning and happiness.

A [recent ethnographic study](#) draws a strong correlation between purposefulness and happiness. Purpose seems beneficial to [overcoming substance abuse](#), [healing from tragedy and loss](#), and [achieving economic success](#).

Businesses and organizations champion goals as ways to unify employees and customers under the banners of [brand strategy, community, and well-being](#). America, in fact, is founded on the idea of purpose: life, liberty and the *pursuit* of happiness. One election cycle after another, Americans rally around candidates personifying deeply rooted ideals of what our country is *supposed* to be.

But, where does purpose come from? What is it? For over two millenniums, discerning our purpose in the universe has been a primary task of philosophers.

Aristotle believed that the universe is saturated with it, that everything has an intrinsic drive. Our word purpose comes from the Greek telos, a goal that stipulates what and how something needs to be. For Aristotle, the universe and everything in it has an essential directive. Any deviation from it belies truth and reality. Teleology concerns order, stability and accomplishment. The goal of my grandfather's T-Bird, for example, is to function successfully as a form of transportation. From cars, trees, animals, all the way to the cosmos itself, Aristotle argued, each thing has an inherent principle that guides the course of its existence.

What about human beings? In his Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle tells us that our purpose is happiness or eudaemonia, "well-spiritedness." Happiness is an ordered and prudent life. Good habits, a sound mind and a virtuous disposition are some of the steps that lead us there. For Aristotle, nothing is more fundamental for us.

In many ways, we still think like Aristotle. Most everyone strives for happiness. Today, the standing dogma is that purposelessness and disorder are nihilistic. Whether you're mulling a major life change or healing from trauma, being told that there's no purpose in life might be particularly devastating. The chances are better that you're looking for an ultimate explanation. Or you could simply be searching for that something or someone *meant* for you — God, a soul

mate or a calling of sorts.

I'm certainly no Aristotelian. Not because I reject happiness. Rather, as a materialist, I think there's nothing intrinsic about the goals and purposes we seek to achieve it. Modern science explicitly jettisons this sort of teleological thinking from our knowledge of the universe. From particle physics to cosmology, we see that the universe operates well without purpose.

The second law of thermodynamics, for instance, states that entropy is always increasing. Entropy is the degree of disorder in a system, for example our universe. Physical disorder is all about equilibrium — everything resting randomly and uniformly. Leave your hot coffee on the desk and it will cool to ambient temperature. Just as the temperature of the coffee and air equalizes, the Earth, our solar system, galaxies and even supermassive black holes will break down to the quantum level, where everything cools to a uniform state. This process is known as [the arrow of time](#). Eventually everything ends in heat death. The universe certainly started with a bang, but it likely ends with a fizzle.

What's the purpose in that, though?

There isn't one. At least not fundamentally. Entropy is antagonistic to intrinsic purpose. It's about disorder. Aristotle's world and pretty much the dominant

understanding of the physical universe until the Copernican Revolution is all about inherent order and permanence. But the universe as we understand it tells us nothing about the goal or meaning of existence, let alone our own. In the grand scheme of things, you and I are enormously insignificant.

But not *entirely* insignificant.

For starters, we are important *to each other*. Meaning begins and ends with how we talk about our own lives, such as our myths and stories. [Sean Carroll](#), a prominent cosmologist and theoretical physicist at the California Institute of Technology, makes this case in his recent book "The Big Picture." Fashioning himself the "poetic naturalist," Carroll argues that meaning and purpose "aren't built into the architecture of the universe; they emerge as ways of talking about our human-scale environment." Even materialists can't deny the fact that purposes somehow exist to give us meaning and happiness.

Anthropologists like Dean Falk [recently suggested](#) that goal-directed behavior is also evolutionarily advantageous. This doesn't imply that evolution itself has a purpose, of course. (Though [some have argued otherwise](#).) What it does suggest is that as purposeless as human evolution is, we generally benefit as a species from a *belief* in it.

The 20th-century German philosopher and intellectualist

[Hans Blumenberg](#), in "Work on Myth," provides a way to explain this curious concomitance of teleology and evolution with what he calls the "phantom body" of the development of civilization: "The organic system resulting from the mechanism of evolution becomes 'man' by evading the pressure of that mechanism by setting against it something like a phantom body. This is the sphere of his culture, his institutions — and also his myths."

Purpose springs from our longing for permanence in an ever-changing universe. It is a reaction to the universe's indifference to us. We create stories about the world and ourselves as contours, "phantom bodies," of the inevitability of loss and change. Myths appear timeless; they have what Blumenberg calls an iconic constancy. Stories pass through generations, often becoming traditions, customs, even laws and institutions that order and give meaning to our lives. Purpose grows out of the durability of human lore. Our stories serve as directives for the ways we need the world to exist.

An indifferent universe also offers us a powerful and compelling case for living justly and contentedly because it allows us to anchor our attention *here*. It teaches us that *this* life matters and that we alone are responsible for it. Love, friendship and forgiveness are for our benefit. Oppression, war and conflict are self-inflicted. When we ask what's the

purpose of the [recent gassing of Syrian children in the Idlib Province](#) or the [torture and killings of Chechnyan homosexual men](#), we ought not simply look to God or the universe for explanations but to ourselves, to the entrenched mythologies that drive such actions — then reject them when the institutions they inform amount to acts of horror.

The purposes and goals we create are phantom bodies — vestiges of and memorials to the people, places and things we stand to lose and strive to keep. Purpose indexes the world's impermanence, namely our own. Sure, my grandfather's T-Bird will function well as transportation once I'm finished. But, that goal only makes sense as an enduring reminder of the stories and memories of him. Purpose is about loss, or at least the circumvention of it. And there's nothing wrong with that. We create purposes to establish happy endings in a universe where endings are simply that — endings.

I will never see my Papa again. One day I will die. So will you. The T-Bird will decay along with everything in the universe as the fundamental particles we're made of return to the inert state in which everything began. Entropy demands it.

So, take a moment to think about the mythologies informing your purpose. I'll reflect on mine, too. The universe, however, won't. And that might be the most meaningful distinction of all.

