

**The Universe Doesn't Care About Your 'Purpose'**  
**Excerpt from Article by Joseph Paul Carter,**  
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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 millennia, 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 laws of physics are inherently mechanistic. 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. The coffee molecules are more organized because they are moving faster and working harder to sustain a higher temperature than the surrounding air. But heat transfer results as the coffee molecules expend more energy. As energy is expended, the temperature of the coffee drops and equalizes with the air. Entropy increases since the molecules in the system are now less organized as the overall temperature becomes more uniform.

Now, imagine this on the cosmic scale. 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.

**The problem isn't that life is unfair  
– it's your broken idea of fairness**

**Excerpt from blog by Oliver Emberton, [oliveremberton.com](http://oliveremberton.com)  
(2014)**

Unless you're winning, most of life will seem hideously unfair to you.

The truth is, life is just playing by different rules.

The real rules are there. They actually make sense. But they're a bit more complicated, and a *lot* less comfortable, which is why most people never manage to learn them.

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Well-meaning intentions don't matter. An internal sense of honour and love and duty count for squat. What exactly can you and have you done for the world?

Abilities are not prized by their virtue. Whatever admiration society awards us, comes from the selfish perspectives of others. A hard working janitor is less rewarded by society than a ruthless stockbroker. A cancer researcher is rewarded less than a supermodel. Why? Because those abilities are rarer and impact more people.

We like to think that society rewards those who do the best work.

But in reality, social reward is just a network effect. Reward comes down mostly to the number of people you impact.

Write an unpublished book, you're nobody. Write Harry Potter and the world wants to know you. Save a life, you're a small-town hero, but cure cancer and you're a legend. Unfortunately, the same rule applies to *all* talents, even unsavoury ones: get naked for one person and you might just make them smile, get naked for fifty million people and you might just be Kim Kardashian.

You may hate this. It may make you sick. Reality doesn't care. You're judged by what you have the ability to do, and the volume of people you can impact. If you don't accept this, then the judgement of the world will seem very unfair indeed.

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People like to invent moral authority. It's why we have referees in sports games and judges in courtrooms: we have an innate sense of right and wrong, and we expect the world to comply. Our parents tell us this. Our teachers teach us this. Be a good boy, and have some candy.

But reality is indifferent. You studied hard, but you failed the exam. You worked hard, but you didn't get promoted. You love her, but she won't return your calls.

The problem isn't that life is unfair; it's your broken idea of fairness.

Take a proper look at that person you fancy but didn't fancy you back. That's a complete person. A person with years of experience being someone completely different to you. A real person who interacts with hundreds or thousands of other people every year.

Now what are the odds that among all that, you're automatically their first pick for love-of-their-life? Because – what – you exist? Because you feel something for them? That might matter to you, but their decision is not about you.

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Our idea of fairness isn't actually obtainable. It's really just a cloak for wishful thinking.

Can you imagine how insane life would be if it actually was 'fair' to everyone? No-one could fancy anyone who wasn't the love of their life, for fear of breaking a heart.

Companies would only fail if everyone who worked for them was evil. Relationships would only end when both partners died simultaneously. Raindrops would only fall on bad people.

Most of us get so hung up on how we think the world should work that we can't see how it does. But facing that reality might just be the key to unlocking your understanding of the world, and with it, all of your potential.

**William Barr: Death is inevitable, legacies are meaningless,  
Article by Alexandria Petri, Washington Post, May 31, 2019**

(Note to GGDM readers, the following is fiction and satire;  
it's just what the lady does, but can you deny it?<sup>1</sup>)

*"Everyone dies and I am not, you know, I don't believe in the Homeric idea that you know, immortality comes by, you know, having odes sung about you over the centuries, you know?" – William P. Barr, asked about his legacy as attorney general*

Everyone dies. This much is known.

I am a meat puppet wrapped for a brief time around a ghost, dragged from one point to another by forces beyond my control.

Afterward? I do not care what Homer says, that songs bring immortality. We are, when we are gone, only imperfectly recollected dust. One must not dwell on this.

Even before death, we die many times, little unmarked farewells, things that will simply never be seen or done by us again, words that will never be linked with our names another time, though we do not notice their departing until after they are absent: reverence, duty, honor. Our bodies grow lighter and heavier than we were accustomed. Our names carry a different weight in the public mouth. They echo at a different angle.

Imperceptibly we bid farewell to all that we are. Our faces become unrecognizable. The words we speak lose their meaning. We become our own ghosts.

The body is replaced many times before it is entirely gone. By the final replacement, we have ceased to notice. The atoms we would miss have not been there for years. We are a walking vacancy in place of a person. At first the replacement is a replenishment, and then it becomes a sapping – of our strength, our beauty, our wisdom, everything we are. But there is no way to direct it not to happen. So it does not do to mark or measure these changes. You are, and then you cease to satisfy, and then you die. There is no room for regret. Let the dead past bury its dead.

Ultimately, does anything we say or do echo even for a moment? Is any legacy more than a collection of imperfect sketches of an object already fled too far to grasp? Memory is an act that must take place in time, but the living are too greedy to remember. There is no legacy. There can be no legacy.

I have been to the desert. I have seen the ruin that is all that remains of the works of men.

The wrack is coming for us. The great oblivion encroaches daily. It will sweep away all our petty fortifications against time and make mockery of all our noblest works. We are dust. Only the cockroaches will remain. And to them our memorials will be illegible.

They will remember nothing of all these monuments of meat.

That is why I have been proud to serve as Donald Trump's attorney general.

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<sup>1</sup> Citation & Commentary: “Wade A. Carpenter, associate professor of education at Berry College, has called his books ‘scathing’ and ‘one-sided and hyperbolic, [but] not inaccurate’ and describes himself as in agreement with [John Taylor] Gatto.” – from Wikipedia article, “John Taylor Gatto,” (citing to two Educational Horizons articles by Professor Carpenter, available free in PDF online).

- ✓ Though it is satire – and satire is necessarily hyperbolic and one-sided by nature – Ms. Petri's article may be taken as axiomatically true in the above sense, even if not agreeable to most people.
- ✓ It is quite likely that the same is true of or the same accusations might be leveled against GGDM at this point. *Nolo contendere*.