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## What Makes a Meaningful Universe?

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# What Makes a Meaningful Universe?

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# Overview

- Common perspective (associated with "materialism"?) –

A hard-nosed scientific look at the evidence tells us our lives are meaningless

- Is this attitude really justified by the evidence? Is scientific *evidence* (not to be confused with metaphysical *interpretations* of scientific evidence) really incompatible with a deep understanding of what “meaning” might mean?
- To explore this, turn the question around: If we could start from scratch and build a “meaningful” universe, what would it look like?
  - Would it actually look so different from what we see?

# One definition of materialism...

"The essence of materialism is to model the world as a formal system [mathematical structure with well-defined rules], which is both unambiguous and complete as a description of reality....The materialist thesis is simply: that's all there is to the world. Once we figure out the correct formal structure, patterns, boundary conditions, and interpretation, we have obtained a complete description of reality."

~ Sean Carroll (2003)

# Does Science => Meaningless Universe??

"That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes & fears, his loves and his beliefs are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms...that the whole temple of man's achievements must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built."

~ Bertrand Russel (1917)

# Milder version...

Even those who argue there IS meaning seem to assume science has made it harder to find ...

"What sense can be made of my wish to live in a genuinely meaningful way, to live a life that really matters...if my life is exhausted by my prospects as a finite material being living in a material world?"

~ Owen Flanagan (2007)

Raises the question: Would this wish to live a more meaningful life have found a more natural home if we were NOT finite material beings?

Do we even know what we *mean* by meaning?

Tentative definition to build from -

Meaning is a state in which the actions and thoughts of conscious beings are fundamentally significant in some way.

# Would we recognize a meaningful universe if we saw it? How?

What is really necessary? Permanence? A cosmic intelligence? A central location for humans? Absolute morality?....

What biases do we bring, what assumptions do we make?  
Analogy to looking for extraterrestrial life - we have to start with what's familiar.



# Essential Properties of a Meaningful Universe?

## Suggestions to start from...

- Context
- Awareness
- Mystery
- Predictability

# Context

- Something to provide a framework within which meaningful events can reside
  - Space and time?
  - Distinguishable events?
- Also seems to require a level of *complexity* sufficient to make this framework possible
  - large numbers and types of particles/states?

# Awareness

Without awareness, it's hard to imagine how the question of meaning would arise at all. Conscious, self-aware beings are the ones who embody the desire for meaning.

# Mystery/incomprehensibility

- Meaning seems to reside partly in the quest, the search for answers...not being able to completely capture it all in any model
- We feel most aware of meaning when we're in the presence of ultimate mystery... When I'm confronting ultimate paradoxes, I know there is room for meaning, a place for it to live. It's when I'm locked within the model of a particular formal system that I lose this awareness.
- Perhaps meaning comes from tension between wanting answers and not being able to reach complete answers... scientific, moral, etc.

# Predictability

- It's hard to imagine meaning in a universe without predictability.
  - How could we our choices matter if we had no way to predict their consequences?
  - The kinds of predictable patterns we see and encode in a formal system like the laws of physics may in fact be *necessary* for meaning.

# Conclusions/Discussion

- Scientific evidence conflicts with some preconceived notions of how meaning should be implemented
- But the fact that we have patterns and laws (“a material world”) is *not* evidence that there is no meaning. Could be an essential component of a universe in which there is meaning.

Maybe it should remind us... "What is demanded is not to endure the meaninglessness of life, but rather to bear our incapacity to grasp its... meaningfulness." ~ Viktor Frankl

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