

To Mean or Not to Mean:

The Beautiful Art of Teleology within our cosmos

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“To be, or not to be”. Shakespeare’s most profound question asks us whether existence itself is worth living. Yet perhaps a similarly immortal question should be “*To mean, or not to mean?*”

We, humanity, have always been haunted by the ideas of a purpose. We consistently ask why stars burn, why has life emerged from seemingly lifeless chemistry, why suffering exists and ultimately why we are here. These are not just questions of science, nor are they purely just theological. These questions belong to a deeper philosophical principle known as teleology; the study of ends, goals, and purpose.

Teleology asks a deceptively simple question: what is something for?

For millennia this question has shaped our very understanding of reality. Aristotle argued that everything possesses what is called a telos, which is its natural end or fulfilment. An acorn’s telos is to become an oak tree. The knife possesses a telos to cut. We flourish through concepts of reason and virtue. So, is purpose woven into the fabric of existence itself?

The scientific revolutions challenged this picture. Isaac Newton had shown that planets do not require some sort of divine intervention to orbit the sun and that they obey mathematics and its many laws. Charles Darwin equally demonstrated that life’s complexity arose through natural selection spanning immense time rather than from design. Modern science has become extraordinarily successful in explaining how things occur, rather than why, leaving open to theories such as chaos theory.

Yet purpose refused to disappear.

Biology had abandoned the concepts of teleology as explanations, yet its language remains unavoidable. Hearts, for example, are *for* pumping blood and our eyes are *for* seeing, birds migrate *to* survive. We, as humans, speak in language of function because to us purpose is one of the most intuitive

ways we organise the world. Love is one of the most sought-after resources of the modern world. We look at it as a principle fuel for happiness. Yet, biologically, love is a complex cocktail of hormones, chemical reactions and the biological need to reproduce. Just as attraction simply boils down to cherry picking traits we would want in our offspring. Paintings such as *Starry Night* by Leonardo da Vinci are simply paint. You could argue we are too engrained in evolutionary teleology to accept there maybe not a meaning in anything except the things we grant the luxury of meaning to. Biologically speaking, our bodies are simply rentals that are universally customised by our genes. Evolution may explain these functions without invoking a conscious design of sorts, yet the appearance of a purpose exists.

So, this raises an extraordinary possibility. Perhaps teleology has never been solely about the universe and all its reasons. Perhaps it has always been about us.

Unlike gravity or evolution, meaning cannot be measured with neither a telescope nor a microscope. It emerges through what we have coined as a consciousness. Rocks do not wonder why they exist; galaxies do not debate their destinies. But we do. As far as we know, humans are the only creatures capable of asking the question of a meaning in life.

This has created a compelling paradox. If the universe does not possess an intrinsic purpose, then how have beings capable of creating a purpose emerged from it? Meaning itself has become one of the universe's most remarkable products. Let us look at the Table-Chair Problem. Humans engineered the table to be able to hold items, just as we have built chairs for the purpose of sitting. Yet if we sit on a table, does its purpose not change to fulfil that of the chair? Just as if we place objects on the chair, does it not fulfil the sole purpose of a table? This must mean, should purpose exist, it is a fluid-like state that change depending on our environment.

Existentialist philosophers have embraced this conclusion. If there is no predetermined destiny or purpose, then freedom becomes our greatest

responsibility. Meaning does not lurk within the hidden depths of the cosmos like buried treasure; it is built through other purpose-designed ideas such as love, curiosity, creativity, sacrifice, and the relationships we build within every entity in the universe.

From an astrobiological perspective, this question becomes even more profound. If intelligent life exists elsewhere among the stars, which it does, would another civilisation independently invent teleology? Would alien minds ask why they exist, just like we do? Or is humanity's search for a meaning and a purpose itself an evolutionary adaptation; a cognitive strategy that encourages cooperation, resilience, and long-term survival?

Perhaps, teleology is neither an illusion nor an objective universal law. Perhaps it is an emergent property of sufficiently complex minds. We know the universe did not intend us just as it did not intend others. We are merely products of coincidence. Yet through us, the universe has become capable of intention. Arguably, this could be the most beautiful purpose of all.

Teddy Crick

Founder & Policy Lead, Free Space Initiative