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INTENDED AND UNINTENDED LIFE¹

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Some people feel threatened by the thought that human life might have arisen by chance. For example, the philosopher of religion William Lane Craig argues that, without God:

[M]an and the universe would then be simple accidents of chance, thrust into existence for no reason. Without God the universe is the result of a cosmic accident, a chance explosion. There is no reason for which it exists. As for man, he is a freak of nature – a blind product of matter plus time plus chance. . . . We are victims of a kind of genetic and environmental roulette. . . . If God does not exist, then you are just a miscarriage of nature, thrust into a purposeless universe to live a purposeless life.²

What does it mean to say that life arose “by chance”? Should we feel threatened if life originated by chance? Regarding whether one’s individual life can be meaningful and worth living, does it matter how life originated? These are the questions that I will address in this article.

Before proceeding to address these questions, a distinction should be made between whether human life has a purpose and whether one’s individual life is purposeful. Human life could have been

¹ I would like to thank an anonymous referee and Thaddeus Metz for providing helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

² William Lane Craig, “The Absurdity of Life Without God,” *The Meaning of Life*, E. D. Klemke (ed.), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 45.

created for a purpose, yet an individual's life could be devoid of purposes or meaning. Conversely, human life could have been unintended, yet an individual's life could be purposeful. Christians believe that God has a plan for the universe and that one's life is meaningful to the extent that one helps God carry out this plan. Theists may acknowledge that each of us, as individuals, can find meaning in life through certain actions, experiences, or relationships. However, they contend that, without God, human life would not have an "objective" meaning or "ultimate" significance.

In the following sections, I will first provide an overview of contemporary research regarding the origin of life, including discussing three possible scenarios by which life might have arisen. I will then attempt to demonstrate that, in regards to whether one's individual life can be meaningful, it does not matter whether life was intended or arose by chance.

AN OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH ON THE ORIGIN OF LIFE

Evolution via genetic mutation with natural selection would explain the diversity of life on Earth. But what is the explanation for how life originated? Iris Fry has conducted a detailed review of the field.³ She notes that the majority of origin-of-life researchers reject the view that life arose by chance. They believe, as does Fry, that the probability that a single cell or even a primitive polypeptide could have arisen by chance is so low that it is implausible.

The word "chance" has various meanings. In rejecting the view that life arose by chance, the scientists are not denying that there might be indeterministic processes operating in quantum physics. Rather, the scientists are denying that, at the macroscopic level, a chance collision of simple molecules in a primordial soup could have generated a structure capable of reproduction. Most scientists do not believe that the requirements for life "fell together just by a fluke, like so many dice tumbling out of a bag and

³ Iris Fry, *The Emergence of Life on Earth: A Historical and Scientific Overview* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

landing all sixes,” as Roger White indicates.⁴

Although the majority of the researchers do not believe that life arose by chance, they also do not believe that life was created by intelligent design. The researchers and Fry support the following view, as expressed by Fry: “Rather it involved the working of physical and chemical mechanisms responsible for the self-organization of matter into living systems. Such mechanisms, given the appropriate environmental conditions, could have produced similar results elsewhere in the universe.”⁵ Some scientists, such as Stuart Kauffman, believe that the existence of life was unplanned, but inevitable, given the apparent self-organizing capabilities of matter.

For the purposes of the following discussion, I will classify the preceding views as follows:

1. Life arose by chance and thus was unintended.
2. The emergence of life was highly likely or inevitable, but unintended.
3. Life was created by God or another intelligent designer.

I will not argue for one of these views. The point that I will attempt to make is that, in regards to whether one’s life can be meaningful, it does not matter which of these three views is correct.

SHOULD WE FEEL THREATENED IF LIFE WAS NOT INEVITABLE?

Kauffman, a molecular biologist who does not believe in a supernatural God, writes:

Random variation, selection sifting. . . . Here lies the brooding sense of accident, of historical contingency, of design by elimination. At least physics . . . implied a deep order, an inevitability. Biology has come to seem a science of the accidental, the ad hoc, and we just

⁴ Roger White is puzzled why scientists are so reluctant to believe that life could have originated by chance. See White, “Does Origins of Life Research Rest on a Mistake?” *Noûs* 41, no. 3 (2007), 453.

⁵ Fry, 7.

one of the fruits of this ad hocery. Were the tape played over . . . the forms of organisms would surely differ dramatically. We humans . . . need never have occurred.⁶

What is it about “chance” that some people find threatening? If chance was involved in the emergence of life, this suggests that life was *unintended* and that it was *not inevitable* that life would develop.

In discussing the advances in science and the resulting feeling of alienation that some people have experienced, John Cottingham, a philosopher and theist, writes: “the modern scientific universe . . . is one which has no relationship at all to our human concerns, our moral and spiritual values, or the direction of our lives. It is just ‘out there’ – silent, enigmatic. The fear is not about size, but about alienation; shut up, trapped like a speck in a immeasurable cosmos that encloses us but is utterly indifferent to us”⁷

As mentioned, Kauffman believes that molecules have the capability to self-organize into living entities. He is heartened by the thought that this purported self-organizing capability may have made the emergence of life inevitable. He writes: “If we are, in ways we do not yet see, natural expressions of matter and energy coupled together in nonequilibrium systems, if life in its abundance were bound to arise, not as an incalculably improbable accident, but as an expected fulfillment of the natural order, then we truly are at home in the universe.”⁸

Kauffman’s comments imply that we would be alienated from, or not “at home” in, the universe if life arose by chance. Even if life arose by chance, the universe contained the *potential* to create human life, as demonstrated by our existence. Furthermore, human life is comprised, and nourished and sustained by, materials from the universe and is *a part* of the universe. This is true regardless of whether life arose by chance or was inevitable. Therefore, there is as much reason for us to feel “at home” in the universe if life arose by chance, as there would be if life were inevitable.

⁶ Stuart Kauffman, *At Home in the Universe: The Search for the Laws of Self-Organization and Complexity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 7.

⁷ John Cottingham, *The Meaning of Life* (London: Routledge, 2003), 35.

⁸ Kauffman, 20.

We need not feel threatened if human life was not inevitable. If the Big Bang theory of creation is correct, as Kauffman seems to believe, and the creation of the universe was not inevitable, then the creation of human life would not have been inevitable either. Whether life would have arisen would have depended on whether the universe came into existence. Even if God exists and he created the universe and humanity, it would not have been inevitable that human life would occur. God could have decided not to bring the universe and humanity into existence.

SHOULD WE FEEL THREATENED IF LIFE WAS UNINTENDED?

As argued, we need not feel threatened if the emergence of life was not inevitable. Should we feel threatened if human life was unintended? In discussing the origin of life, it is easy to lose sight of how each of us came to exist in this world. Your birth into this world was solely dependent on the *actions of human beings* (i.e., your parents). It is ironic that people care about whether life in general was intended, but may not have ever wondered whether their *own existence* was intended by their parents. In the literature, human beings and the first life-form are subsumed under the term “life,” which leads the discussion to center on the question of whether life was intended. No distinction has been made between whether we, as individuals, were intended by our parents and whether the creation of the first life-form was intended. One reason that it is important to make this distinction is because one’s own existence may have been unintended by one’s parents and yet the first life-form could have been intended. Alternatively, the first life-form could have been unintended whereas one’s own existence may have been intended by one’s parents. The remaining two possibilities are that both one’s own existence and the first organism were intended or that neither of them were intended.

“Parental intent,” as I will call it, will refer to whether parents intended to have the child they brought into existence. The issues surrounding parental intent are pertinent to the question of whether divine intent is a necessary condition for one’s life to be meaningful for the following reason. If it does not matter to us whether or not our parents - the most immediate cause of our existence – intended to

create us, as I suspect, then why should it matter whether there was some remote intent behind the creation of the first unicellular organism(s) billions of years ago? Before exploring this question, I will provide a little background on the subject of unintended births.

It is estimated that nearly half (49%) of all births in the United States in 2001 were the result of an unintended pregnancy.⁹ Unintended pregnancies include those that were “mistimed,” meaning that the woman wanted to become pregnant at some point, but not when it occurred. They also include pregnancies that were “unwanted,” meaning that the woman did not want to become pregnant at any time. Because unintended pregnancies may lead to abortions, and to negative health and social outcomes for the children who are brought into existence, educational efforts are made by the Institute of Medicine and other organizations to prevent unintended pregnancies.¹⁰ However, the Institute of Medicine also acknowledges that “an unintended pregnancy can result in a much anticipated birth and a cherished child.”¹¹

I suspect that many people live their lives without ever wondering whether their own birth and existence were intended by their parents. There is likely another group of people who at times may have wondered whether they were intentionally created, but it has not caused them enough concern to seek out

⁹ L. Finer & S. Henshaw, “Disparities in Rates of Unintended Pregnancy in the United States, 1994 and 2001,” *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health* 38, no. 2 (2006), 90-96.

¹⁰ Some intended and unintended newborns are brought into this world under deplorable conditions, such as extreme poverty, which can result in suffering by the new people. For further discussion and an examination of proposed solutions to this problem, see Brooke Alan Trisel, “How Best to Prevent Future Persons From Suffering: A Reply to Benatar,” *South African Journal of Philosophy* 31, no. 1 (2012), 79-93.

¹¹ Sarah Brown and Leon Eisenberg (eds.), *The Best Intentions: Unintended Pregnancy and the Well-Being of Children and Families* (Washington: National Academy Press, 1995), 22-23.

an answer to their question. A third group of people may have been concerned enough to discuss this matter with their parents. If they were told that they were unintended, but loved nonetheless, they may have initially felt a little humbled, but I seriously doubt that this information precipitated an existential crisis or prevented them from leading a meaningful life. Instead of feeling distraught by knowing that they were not intentionally created, it likely prompted them to reflect on how fortunate they were that events happened as they did such that it provided them with the opportunity to experience life and this world even though it was not planned and will not last forever. Of course, if a person was told that they were unintended, unwanted, and unloved, then this information would likely cause psychological distress and may even lead this person to believe that his or her life is not worth living.

What seems to matter to people is not whether they were created as a result of intent, but whether they were accepted, nurtured, and loved after they arrived into the world. If there is support for this hypothesis, which could be tested, and it does not matter to us whether there was parental intent behind the creation of our own existence, then it also should not matter whether there was remote intent behind the creation of the first organism(s).

In response, one might argue that it does matter whether one's own existence was intended by one's parents and, therefore, that there is no inconsistency in maintaining that divine intent is a necessary condition for life to be meaningful. There does not, however, appear to be support for this argument. Albert Einstein is often mentioned as someone who led a meaningful life.¹² In judging whether his life was meaningful, no one would ever ask "Was his existence intended?" Whether or not a person's existence was intended is *irrelevant* to whether this person's life is meaningful.

Having been unintended by one's parents does not detract from the meaning in one's life. Furthermore, being intended does not add meaning to one's life. In some situations, being created for a

¹² See, for example, Susan Wolf, "Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 14 (1997), 209.

purpose could even *constrain* the meaning in a person's life, such as if a child was created to provide assistance on a farm, or in a different family-operated business, and was not permitted to pursue his or her own purposes in life.

One might agree that parental intent does not matter and yet maintain that divine intent is necessary for human life to be "truly" meaningful. For example, one who believes that a personal God created the first life-form, established the process of evolution, and then let it proceed on its own without any further intervention, could respond that divine intent is necessary for life to be "truly" meaningful because it reflects the intent of a *necessary being* whereas parental intent does not. As long as human life, in general, was intended by God, then human life would purportedly have an "objective meaning" regardless of whether the existence of a particular individual was intended by his or her parents or God. Along these lines, one might argue that it does matter whether the first organism(s) were intended because all life on Earth may have descended from this life-form. Therefore, if the first life-form were intended, this would show, one might argue, that humankind was also intended by God.

Even if it could somehow be shown that the first life-form was the product of intent, this would only demonstrate that *this particular* life-form was intended. It would not, however, establish that all subsequent life, including the development of human life, was also intended by God.

Let us suppose that God came forth and sought to answer our questions. In response to the question of whether humanity was intended, suppose that God responds: "I created the first life-form and the process of evolution because I was curious to see what life-forms would evolve. Although I did not intend to create humanity, all forms of life are good and worthy of love." If God responded in this manner, I doubt that finding out that humanity was unintended would lead theists to conclude that life is not "truly" meaningful. I think that theists would be comforted that God came forth to answer their questions and that he affirmed that all forms of life are good. If so, then this suggests that what theists are ultimately seeking is not for human life to have been intended, but to receive an affirmation of the

goodness of life from God. This desire to receive such an affirmation is reflected in Genesis 1.31 (NRSV), where it indicates: “God saw everything that he had made and indeed, it was very good.”

Is there a need to receive an affirmation of the goodness of human life from a superior being? If there is no superior being to provide us with this affirmation, it does not mean that our lives are bad or not truly meaningful. Rather, it simply means that our judgments about our lives cannot be confirmed. However, if *we conclude*, using objective criteria, that our lives are good and that one’s life can be meaningful, the lack of a confirmation from a superior being does not, in any way, undermine or invalidate this judgment.

WOULD BEING ASSIGNED A PURPOSE BE DEGRADING?

In the following well-known and influential passage, Kurt Baier had argued that having been created for a purpose by a god would be degrading to human beings:

We do not disparage a dog when we say that it has no purpose, is not a sheep dog or a watch dog. . . . Man is in a different category, however. To attribute to a human being a purpose in that sense is not neutral, let alone complementary: it is offensive. It is degrading for a man to be regarded as merely serving a purpose. If, at a garden party, I ask a man in livery, ‘What is your purpose?’ I am insulting him. I might as well have asked, ‘What are you *for*?’ Such questions reduce him to the level of a gadget, a domestic animal, or perhaps a slave. I imply that *we* allot to *him* . . . the aims which he is to pursue; that *his* wishes . . . are to count for little or nothing.”¹³

In response, Thaddeus Metz has argued that it would not necessarily be disrespectful for God to

¹³ Kurt Baier, “The Meaning of Life,” *The Meaning of Life*, E. D. Klemke (ed.), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 120.

have assigned human beings a purpose.¹⁴ God could assign us a purpose in such a way that it would be respectful. I believe that this is correct. However, as I argue in a companion article in this issue,¹⁵ God has not clearly informed us of his purpose or our role in carrying out this purpose. Furthermore, despite the conflicting interpretations of the Bible over the last 2000 years, God has not sought to clarify his purpose or our role, which raises doubt whether there is such a purpose. If God exists and he created humanity as a means to fulfilling a purpose, but then chose not to clarify his purpose or our role, leaving people in a state of doubt, then this would be disrespectful to human beings.

A HIGHLY IMPROBABLE OUTCOME

We need not feel threatened if life arose by chance. There are many natural occurrences that people value, not because they were intended and it was inevitable that they would occur, but for the opposite reasons. They are valued, in part, because it was highly improbable that they would occur, which makes them special. One such occurrence that comes to mind is the natural emergence of rainbows. Thoreau states it eloquently when he writes: “Once it chanced that I stood in the very abutment of a rainbow’s arch, which filled the lower stratum of the atmosphere, tinging the grass and leaves around, and dazzling me as if I looked through colored crystal.”¹⁶

Suppose that a mayor of a city, using a projector, decided to display a rainbow above the city at all times. The rainbow did not arise by chance and was designed by an intelligent being for a purpose.

¹⁴ Thaddeus Metz, “Could God’s Purpose be the Source of Life’s Meaning?” *Religious Studies* 36 (2000), 293-313. His discussion can be found on pp. 297-300.

¹⁵ Brooke Alan Trisel, “God’s Silence as an Epistemological Concern,” *The Philosophical Forum* 43, no. 4 (2012).

¹⁶ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, Stephen Fender (ed.), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 182.

However, this rainbow would be valued much less by people than a naturally occurring, unintended rainbow. If intelligent life arose by chance and is extremely rare, this is not a reason to disparage life, as Craig does when he refers to human beings as “victims” of a roulette and a “miscarriage of nature.” Rather, it is a reason to appreciate and value our existence. Life is not a “miscarriage of nature,” but it is “at home” in the universe, as argued earlier.

It was once thought that animal life might be widespread throughout the universe. As Peter Ward and Donald Brownlee write:

Ever since Danish astronomer Nicholas Copernicus plucked it from the center of the Universe and put it in orbit around the sun, Earth has been periodically trivialized. We have gone from the center of the Universe to a small planet orbiting a small, undistinguished star in an unremarkable region of the Milky Way galaxy – a view now formalized by the so-called Principle of Mediocrity, which holds that we are not the one planet with life but one of many. Various estimates for the number of other intelligent civilizations range from none to 10 trillion.¹⁷

Ward and Brownlee hypothesize that microbial life is common throughout the universe, but that animal life is exceedingly rare in the universe, perhaps existing only on Earth. A highly improbable set of conditions and sequence of events resulted in the development of intelligent life, they argue, including that Earth was a suitable distance from the sun to allow liquid to exist on the surface of the planet.

Andrew Watson has refined a stochastic model to derive probability estimates for passing through critical steps in the evolution of complex life.¹⁸ Watson argues that if complex life evolved early in the habitable period, then this would suggest that the evolution from simple to complex life was likely to

¹⁷ Peter D. Ward & Donald Brownlee, *Rare Earth: Why Complex Life is Uncommon in the Universe* (New York: Copernicus, 2000), xxiii-xxiv.

¹⁸ Andrew J. Watson, “Implications of an Anthropic Model of Evolution for Emergence of Complex Life and Intelligence,” *Astrobiology* 8 (November 1, 2008), 175-185.

occur. However, he writes: “it is now believed that we evolved late in the habitable period; this suggests that our evolution is a comparatively unlikely occurrence.”¹⁹ Watson indicates that his analysis lends theoretical support to the “Rare Earth” hypothesis of Ward and Brownlee. He concludes: “there is no need to postulate any directionality to evolution; and, in general, the kind of outcome seen on Earth may be vanishingly unlikely.”²⁰

As adults going about a daily routine, it is easy to lose that sense of wonder that we had as young children. One way to reclaim that sense of wonder is by reflecting on the improbability of human life. Science may reveal that intelligent life is extremely rare in this universe and is perhaps unique. If we take into account what scientists are learning about humanity’s place in the universe, we see that the evolution of human life was much more improbable than the rainbows that dazzle us with their spontaneous arising, beauty, and fleeting nature. It is liberating and inspiring to think that one’s own life, and life in general, may have been highly improbable and unintended outcomes.

¹⁹ Ibid., 177.

²⁰ Ibid., 183.