

Why? The Purpose of the Universe

Philip Goff

Oxford University Press (Nov 9, 2023)

Hardcover \$18.95 (208pp)

978-0-19-888376-0

Philosopher Philip Goff's new book *Why?* makes a succinct, ambitious case for a new, secular view of cosmic purpose.

Why? opens with an ancient question: "What's the point of living?" It then considers the vacuity of most answers to that challenge. A truly meaningful life, Goff maintains, depends on the existence of a purpose outside of oneself. Declaring that the universe does have an intelligible purpose, he moves through a procession of clues pointing to the objective existence of "goal-directedness." Most convincing is the so-called "fine-tuning" of the universe's physical constants: only a few decimal points' change in the strong nuclear force, or the weight of electrons, would make the conditions for life impossible.

With arguments tailored for lay audiences, the book addresses subjects including "pan-agentialism"—or the idea that reality has been caused by a libertarian force. Though it includes warnings and apologies for the difficulty of its arguments that prove superfluous, it tackles major objections to its more adventurous claims well; "Digging Deeper" codas to each chapter anticipate skeptics' questions.

An "either/or" dynamic operates throughout: either the universe is intentionally fine-tuned for conscious life, or life is an incomprehensible fluke. Goff makes much of the fact that "consciousness and behavior tend to align in a rationally appropriate way"—a non-problem for biologists that is inflated, here, into an existential mystery. Still, his arguments rest on solid ground: secular thinkers do typically give short shrift to arguments about fine-tuning, and Goff tackles this subject while keeping standard religious explanations at arm's length. The book's pleasant and ambiguous conclusion—that we people can entertain the idea of cosmic purpose without knowing just what it entails—is thrilling.

The philosophical text *Why?* poses a thoughtful challenge for an intellectual climate averse to conversations about meaning and purpose at the cosmic scale.

ISAAC RANDEL (November / December 2023)

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