



What If God Is Just Not That Into You?

Tim Mulgan asks whether the universe could have a non-human-centred purpose

Why is there something rather than nothing? Why does this particular cosmos exist? Is there a purpose to the universe? Why does the world contain so much suffering, injustice, and evil? Are there objective values or is morality merely subjective?

For the last two thousand years, the Western philosophical marketplace has been dominated by two package deals, each promising to answer these foundational questions. The first package is theism. Theists believe in a benevolent God—a personal creator who cares about the fate of individual human beings. The universe exists because God chose to create it. God either brings values into existence along with everything else, or else God responds to independently existing values. Either God sees that the universe would be good or God's creation makes it good. Evil exists because it is necessary for some greater good, such as an orderly cosmos, human moral freedom, or freely chosen relationships with God.

The second standard package is atheism. Atheists reject all Gods, supernatural entities, and supernatural explanations. The existence of the universe is simply a brute fact. Science tells us how the cosmos works, but there is no reason why it exists, nor is there any reason why there is anything at all. Human beings are the products of blind, purposeless evolutionary processes. Human and animal suffering occurs because those processes are indifferent to the welfare of individual creatures. Good, evil, value, and morality are either purely natural human phenomena that contributed to our ancestors' collective survival, or they are illusions on a par with witches, demons, or gods.

Despite their familiarity, theism and atheism are not the only logical possibilities. Theists posit one very particular supernatural being, while atheists reject all supernatural explanations. Other alternatives are imaginable.



One alternative position is *axiarchism*. Theism posits a *personal* creator, who either responds to metaphysically independent values or creates values along with everything else. Some recent philosophers, notably John Leslie, Derek Parfit, and Nicholas Rescher, instead offer *axiarchic* explanations for the existence and nature of the actual world. This world is actual *because it is good for this possibility to be actualized*.

Axiarchism posits a *direct* link between goodness and actuality. There is no person who *recognizes* the potential goodness of a possible world and then chooses to realize it. Instead, the goodness of this possible world *is* what makes it actual. Out of all the possible worlds, this one is actual because it is the best. But nothing causes this to happen. So what *is* going on? Does this even make sense?

To make sense of their view, axiarchists draw analogies with other more familiar positions. The most striking analogy comes from theism itself. The theist claim that God made the world meets the obvious rejoinder: ‘Then who made God?’. At this point, theists must offer some explanation for God’s existence. One perennially popular answer is that while the physical universe exists because it was created by God, God exists because God’s existence is (*perfectly*) *good*. Ontological arguments—which claim that God cannot fail to exist because God is perfect and a perfect being must exist necessarily—can also be given an axiarchic reading. Why does the best possible God exist? Why is there a being than which none greater can be thought? Because that is what is best.

In my book *Purpose in the Universe*, I defend another alternative to both theism and atheism. I call it *ananthropocentric purposivism* (AP for short). There is a cosmic purpose, a reason for existence, a source of transcendent objective values. But human beings are irrelevant to that purpose. Our existence is a cosmic accident. The universe is about something, but it is not about us. I call my view *ananthropocentric purposivism*, rather than *ananthropocentric theism*, because I want to leave open the possibility of a non-human-centred cosmic purpose without a personal God. Perhaps our belief in a personal God is just another unjustified anthropocentrism. AP is open to both theist and axiarchist interpretations. However, for the sake of simplicity, I focus here on theist AP—the claim that the universe was created by a God who does not care for us.

I defend AP by borrowing arguments from both theism and atheism. Theist philosophers argue that we need God to explain why there is something rather than nothing, why the universe is friendly to the emergence of life, why people have religious experiences, or why moral norms are binding. These features of the actual world are all both unlikely and strikingly valuable. They therefore cannot easily be dismissed as brute facts. Nor can science hope to provide any naturalistic explanation. (Science can explain how the actual world works, but not why it is as it is.) AP argues that even if they succeed, these powerful theist arguments can only prove that some God exists. They provide no evidence of God’s benevolence.

On the other side, atheists insist that several features of the actual world prove that it was not created by God. These include the prevalence of evil, suffering, and injustice, and also the scale of the physical universe. We would expect the God of traditional theism to create a world without suffering and evil, and one where human beings occupied a central place rather than inhabiting a very small corner of the universe. Atheists also object to the metaphysical hypotheses that theists typically must introduce to reconcile the existence of evil with the benevolence of God—such as libertarian freewill and personal immortality. AP argues that, even if they succeed, these powerful theist arguments only rule out a benevolent God. They provide no evidence against non-benevolent Gods. Perhaps evil teaches us not that God doesn’t exist, but that God isn’t interested in us.

AP will appeal to those who find both theism and atheism unsatisfactory—who are not persuaded either by theist explanations of evil or by atheist suggestions that the existence of this world is a brute fact.



One striking feature of this debate, as in other areas of philosophy, is that two thousand years of philosophical arguments seldom results in anyone changing their mind. Theists and atheists both find their own arguments compelling. One charitable explanation for this impasse is that our universe is *religiously ambiguous*. It is open to equally reasonable but radically different interpretations. Theism, atheism, axiarchism, and AP are all credible options. Faced with this choice, any belief involves a leap of faith. I argue that we should be especially wary of self-aggrandizing leaps—of comforting conclusions that tell us either that we matter or that nothing does. AP is the most unsettling option—we don't matter, but something else does. The very fact that AP is so unsettling should make us question our natural tendency to leap instead to more comforting views.

Perhaps the deepest challenge for AP is existential. How can the purposes of an indifferent (albeit morally perfect) God matter to us? Isn't AP equivalent *in practice* to atheism? AP obviously lacks many of religion's more obvious moral resources. But AP nonetheless has moral resources that atheism lacks. In [my book](#), I present a dialogue where seven imaginary characters explain the impact of AP on their lives. (I have to make these people up, because I haven't succeeded in converting anyone yet!) Suppose you convert to AP from some particular theist religion such as Christianity. You will lose your *reciprocal* relationship with God, your sense of God's purpose *for you*, and so on. But your ethical position is still different from an atheist's in three ways.

First, the very fact that there *is* a cosmic purpose (either because a perfect God created this universe for a reason or because axiarchic requirements underpin its existence) gives you an extra reason to study, contemplate, or explore that purpose by any available means. Activities as diverse as cosmology, evolutionary biology, mysticism, metaphysics, and meta-ethics gain a vital new meaning.

Second, while you cannot enjoy a *reciprocal* relationship with an anthropocentric God, one-sided connections are still possible. We may not matter to God, but God could still matter to us. A perfect, non-benevolent God might be an appropriate object of admiration, imitation, contemplation, or perhaps even worship.

Third, insofar as you have specific information about the *content* of the cosmic values, you can re-prioritize possible activities, projects, goals, desires, or pleasures—giving greater weight to those that better resemble (however dimly) God's creative values or the axiarchic requirements. If God created this universe *because* it contains complex phenomena united by simple mathematical laws, then knowledge of this fact would give you a new reason to rank complex, ordered, imaginative creativity above frivolous pleasures. Everyday moral life is all about balancing competing goods. So even a small change in comparative importance could make a significant difference.

Theism promises a reciprocal relationship with a personal God. AP cannot promise this. Axiarchism promises a world governed by human-friendly values. AP cannot guarantee this. Atheism promises a universe where we create our own values. AP cannot deliver that either. But if we came to believe in AP, we could still study, contemplate, or explore whatever it is that truly matters in the universe. We could try to mirror the cosmic values in our own lives. Even if we don't matter to the universe, it might still matter to us.

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