

Freedom All The Way Up: God and the Meaning of Life in a Scientific Age

Introduction

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Is my life significant? Is my existence meaningful? Does the universe possess some greater purpose within which my life best finds its meaning—or do I have to construct my own meaning for my life? Whether consciously or subconsciously, these questions about our existential meaning (the meaning of our existence) are among the most fundamental questions we humans ask ourselves.

Some people find pleasure in attending to these sorts of questions, while others seek to avoid them, or at least are reluctant to consider them—fearful that we cannot answer such questions, or that there are no answers, or even that the answers are too dark to consider. In the chapters ahead we will examine these questions directly, considering them as hopeful opportunities to explore how we can most fully flourish in our humanity.

In Western culture today there are two principle responses to questions of existential meaning, *nihilism* and *constructivism*. Both are the offspring of a philosophical position known as *Materialism*, which has been the mainstream intellectual position in the Western world for about the past century-and-a-half, though with ancient roots in both Western and Asian thought. Materialism (also known as *naturalism* or *atheism*) holds that all reality is material (or physical), and so there is no ‘spiritual’ realm, no God nor gods. Consequently, Materialism contends that the universe exists without any underlying *telos*—no inherent goal or purpose—and thus no inherent meaning. In turn, the same is also true for humanity: since there is no ultimate meaning to the universe, then likewise there is no ultimate meaning for we who inhabit the universe, no meaning or purpose that is somehow ‘greater’ than us, or into which we can fit our lives to discover our ‘fullest possible meaning.’ In place, then, of any ultimate meaning, Materialism offers us either nihilism, the emotionally-dark view that there is no meaning to life, or constructivism, the view that each of us has to find a way to construct our own meaning and significance in life.

This book, however, invites readers to explore another possibility through the dual lens of Trinitarian Theism (Christian faith) and contemporary science. I will argue that an existentially-meaningful life is comprised of two intertwined elements—a sense of personal *self-worth* (or self-value), and personal *purpose* (or life-goals). In turn, self-worth and purpose are supported by two important collateral concepts—*identity* and *hope*. I contend that it makes all the difference to how we live whether we situate our goals, self-value, identity, and hope within a framework of Materialism (‘God does not exist’) or of Theism (‘a relational God does exist’). I also contend that the universe does indeed exist with a *telos* or purpose; this *telos* is *God’s* purpose for the universe (which we will identify in a moment); it is this divine purpose which provides the conditions of ‘ultimate meaning’ or ‘higher purpose’ within which to situate our lives, for our greatest flourishing both individually and collectively; and this *telos* fits well with the findings of our scientific age. Materialists often invoke such disciplines as quantum physics, cosmology, evolutionary biology, evolutionary psychology, neuroscience, anthropology, and game theory to argue against the existence of God, and thus against the existence of ultimate purpose for our lives. The argument to be made here, however, is that such disciplines fit very well with the existence of God, and with God’s creative purposes for the universe.

What, then, is this *telos*, this divine purpose for the universe? Here we will take our cue not from science itself but from the life of Jesus of Nazareth—which was a life of *agape*-love, a life of self-emptying and self-giving for the blessing of God and for the benefit of others. I will then combine this with a contemporary understanding of the sciences to propose the following interpretation of the origins and purpose of the universe:

God created the universe(s) in order to provide the space and conditions necessary for the eventual emergence of habitable bio-niches in which *agape*-capable beings would inevitably emerge to live in *agape*-love relations with God and with others. Earth is one such emergent bio-niche, and *Homo sapiens*—we humans—are an instance of such emergent *agape*-capable beings.

For reasons to be seen, I call this the '*agape/probability*' (or '*a/p*') account of why and how the universe exists—and therefore of why we humans exist. I use contemporary science to argue for the existence of God, understood particularly as the Trinitarian God of Christian faith. We will see also how this proposal opens doors to resolving many of the supposed faith/science conflicts that are so widely discussed today. Most importantly, though, we will see how the *agape/probability* account points us to 'ultimate' meaning for our lives, thereby defeating nihilism and re-shaping constructivism.

This re-shaping of constructivism, of how we construct existential meaning for our lives, takes place through the concepts of '*imago individuality*' and '*agapic freedom*.' A fundamental desire within humans is the desire for freedom—freedom from suffering and constraints, freedom for opportunities and possibilities. There are, however, very different understandings of what freedom is really about, and how we understand the nature of freedom profoundly affects how we live. Today's globalized Western culture derives from three inter-related types of Materialism: *naturalism/atheism*, which has undergirded Western intellectual culture for the last century-and-a-half; *secular humanism*, which over the same timeframe has provided Materialists with an alternative way of life to that of Christian discipleship; and *libertarianism/consumerism*, which has undergirded contemporary popular culture for at least the past half-century. All three types of Materialism share a common stance towards life, a shared understanding of freedom as *autonomous* freedom, derived from such diverse figures through Western history as John Locke, John Stuart Mill, Albert Camus, John Rawls, and Michel Foucault. Yet I will argue that autonomous freedom actually keeps humanity much less free than its proponents recognise, or admit, and indeed has actually caused humanity much harm. In contrast to the life of autonomous freedom, I will propose that God invites humanity, indeed all *agape*-capable beings, to the life of *agapic* freedom. In effect, our desire for freedom is most fully realized not through autonomous freedom but through *agapic* freedom; moreover, unlike autonomous freedom, *agapic* freedom defeats nihilism and enables constructivism to find its rightful place (as we will see in our final chapters).

The *agape/probability* account combined with the concept of *agapic* freedom provides an overall understanding of God's approach to Creation, namely that God has built the universe with 'freedom all the way up,' from the Big Bang (or Big Bounce) to the emergence of beings with 'big brains'—that is, with sufficient neurological capacity and freedom to choose lives of *agape*-love and *agapic* freedom. In effect, this book is about how God has created the universe as a great 'freedom system,' as an incubator, nursery, and home for beings with sufficient freedom to choose a life of *agape*-love and *agapic* freedom. This proposal will connect God's creative purposes to our scientific understanding of Creation, consequently seeing that science and faith are not separate, unrelated phenomena or 'separate domains,' as many have contended, but in fact are intimately intertwined. Or, to put this in anthropological language, we will see how the *a/p* account re-enchants the cosmos for a scientific age, and thereby provides both existential and ultimate meaning for our lives.

Let's look now at how the book proceeds. Chapter 1 examines the question, 'What is existential meaning?' I begin at the neurological level, distinguishing two neural circuits that create existential meaning—our goal-directed circuits and our self-worth circuits; along with these I examine two associated elements of meaning—identity, and hope. Then I distinguish between existential (personal) meaning and ultimate (universal) meaning, after which I describe a range of reasons why Materialism rejects God and thus rejects the existence of any 'ultimate' meaning by which to orient our existential meaning. Finally I describe the two alternatives which Materialism offers to ultimate meaning: existential nihilism and existential constructivism. I contend, however, that both of these fail to provide sufficient existential meaning for humanity—but to understand this failure we need to revisit that ancient question, 'Does the universe possess purpose?'

In Chapter 2 I offer a new case for a *teleological*, or purposeful, universe. I introduce the *agape/probability* account of God’s purpose for the universe (namely, to provide the space and conditions for the inevitable emergence of *agape*-capable beings), a proposal that employs such disciplines as statistics, physics, chemistry, evolutionary biology, and neuroscience to show how the story of the emergence of the universe(s), including the emergence of stars, planets, Earth, and humanity, serves this ultimate end of bringing about *agape*-capable beings in *agape*-love relationships with God and with others. A key feature of the a/p account is its incorporation of the crucial role of randomness and probability in physics and biology, showing how both randomness and evolutionary biology can be incorporated into teleological (purposeful, goal-oriented) processes, and showing also how God’s *agape*-love design for the universe is probabilistic, not deterministic. I use, among other resources, the second law of thermodynamics, statistical mechanics, and the phenomenon of evolutionary convergence (all explained in due course).

Amongst Christians there will be some controversial elements to the *agape/probability* account. One such element will be its acceptance of human evolution. The academic disciplines in which I am trained do not include biology, and so I, like any non-biologist interested in these issues, have to make the best judgements I can from the evidence that is publically available—and as I look at the paleontological and genetic evidence, I find the case for human evolution overwhelmingly persuasive. This is essentially the same reason that virtually no one today, not even the most conservative biblical literalists, accepts the Ancient Near Eastern cosmology and geography portrayed by numerous biblical writers—simply because the evidence for the modern scientific account of cosmology and geography is so overwhelmingly persuasive. Ancient cosmology and geography, described by numerous texts in both Ancient Near Eastern literature and in the Bible, includes the following beliefs, among others: that the earth does not move because it is established on firm foundations; that the sun revolves around the earth; that the universe has three physical tiers (the firmament-dome above the earth, the waters above the firmament, the earthly realm itself), along with a spiritual tier (the underworld); that the world is a flat circle; and that the circumferential perimeter of this circular world is the sea.¹ None of this is believed by any Theist I have ever met, not even the most literal interpreter of the Bible. Why? Because they have accepted the modern scientific account of the Earth’s structure, the Earth’s orbit, and the composition of the universe. That is, the modern scientific account is overwhelmingly persuasive.

In effect, I employ the view of medieval theologians that there are two books of God’s revelation, the Book of Scripture and the Book of Nature, and we are to use them to mutually interpret each other. One implication of this is that I accept Lamoureux’s proposal that in reading the Bible we need to distinguish between the divine message and the ‘incidental vessel’—the incidental vessel being the cultural or conceptual categories of the day through which divine eternal truth is communicated in culturally-meaningful ways. These categories are incidental because cultures and their ideas change, and so eternal divine truths will need to be conveyed through different cultural concepts and categories in different cultural contexts. Thus the ‘science’ of the biblical period (that is, Ancient Near Eastern cosmology, geography, and biology) is the incidental vessel God used to convey certain eternal truths in the period during which the Bible was written, and so we need not feel bound to that cosmology, geography, or biology in our own day. Of course, the same ‘incidental vessel’ principle applies to us in our own age. No doubt a few hundred years from now people will find our cultural concepts, including some of our scientific beliefs, terribly quaint and naïve; yet these are the categories we have available to us today, and so these are the concepts available for God to use in communicating eternal truths within our own period of cultural and intellectual history.

In light of such considerations, I adopt a position known as *evolutionary Theism*, which argues that evolution has been God’s amazing means of bringing about the existence of life, including human life. Many people today assume that Christianity, especially evangelical Christianity, has been consistently opposed to evolutionary science, as classically illustrated by the ‘Scopes Monkey Trial’ of 1925. Yet even in the 1800s there were

1 For the biblical references, see Denis Lamoureux, *I Love Jesus & I Accept Evolution* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009). See also Lamoureux’s website: www.ualberta.ca/~dlamoure/.

important evangelical thinkers, such as Henry Drummond and B.B. Warfield, who saw no conflict between evolution and evangelical Theism. Indeed, Drummond's work *The Ascent of Man* (1893) provided a very influential account in its day for integrating evangelical Christian faith and evolution. Importantly for discussions today, Drummond's main objective in *The Ascent of Man* was to add the evolutionary origins of humanity's ethical inclinations to the evolutionary picture, in contrast to the omission of such discussion in Darwin's *The Descent of Man*. Supporters of evolutionary Theism today are associated with a number of doctrinally-conservative Christian organizations, such as the BioLogos Foundation in the USA and Christians in Science in the UK. The present book will support evolutionary Theism by arguing that the emergence of *agape*-capability is a core element of God's evolutionary plan for the universe.

A second controversial element of the a/p account (in addition to accepting the evolutionary origins of humanity) is its claim that the evolutionary emergence of *agape*-capable beings in our universe is 'inevitable.' The inevitability to which I am referring here is not, however, determinist or predestinarian; it is, rather, a matter of non-determinist 'asymptotic probability,' which will be explained in due course. Furthermore, the a/p account provides not only an alternative to Materialism but also an alternative to the so-called Intelligent Design (ID) argument.² Many scientists, including theologically conservative scientists, are unpersuaded by the ID account of how God has created: for while the ID argument accepts evolution, nonetheless it is widely seen as poor science, for, unlike the ID account, the wider scientific community understands increasing biological complexity to be self-generating, not requiring divine intervention. The a/p account accepts that increasing biological complexity can indeed be self-generating and argues that this is actually part of God's creative plan. A further feature of the a/p account is that it moves the claim for divine design away from unlikely proposals that have been made in the past (such as the complexities of the eye, or, in a recent proposal, the flexibility of primate hands) to the underlying fundamental realities of our universe—the math, physics, and chemistry of Creation.

After describing, in Chapter 2, the science and math behind the *agape*/probability interpretation of the universe, Chapter 3 then employs the a/p account to respond to a variety of Materialism's standard challenges to the existence of God. In particular, I respond to the following: that the universe has no beginning; that the possibility of a multiverse renders God unnecessary; that humans are insignificant on a cosmic scale; that the reality of much suffering negates the possible existence of a loving God; that belief in God is merely a psychological projection or evolutionary adaptation; and that the principle of Okham's razor makes God improbable. I respond by using the a/p account to show that these challenges do not undermine Theism. Then I identify a number of challenges that the a/p account puts to Materialism, including: the problem of responsibility; the neuroscience of atheism; the concept of 'spiritual commissurotomy;' the analogy of the cosmological constant; and the nature of interpretation. Nonetheless, I withhold my strongest critique of Materialism until our final chapter.

Chapters 2 and 3 have established a scientifically-coherent teleological account of our universe, namely, as God's means by which to bring about the existence of *agape*-capable beings. Chapters 4 and 5 then proceed to investigate what *agape*-love is all about. In Chapter 4 I examine *agape*-love through its original narrative source in the Christian scriptures. I examine God's *agape*-love for humanity and for Creation by examining 'the

2 Arguments for an intelligent designer of the universe ('God') have been around for more than two millennia, and there are many such arguments; however, in recent years a particular argument has gained prominence, confusingly known as 'the Intelligent Design (ID) argument,' as if there were not already a variety of intelligent design arguments. This is the argument, advanced by figures such as Michael Behe, Philip E. Johnson, and William Dembski, that biology displays 'irreducible complexity': that random mutation and natural selection are not adequate to explain how complexity has arisen in biological organisms, and thus an Intelligent Designer, who intervenes in nature, must be the cause of such biological complexity by direct intervention in biological processes. Because of the similarity of terms, it is often assumed that arguments for an intelligent cosmic designer ('God') are the same as the Intelligent Design argument. Given the confusing similarity in terminology, this is a natural assumption, but wrong nonetheless, for one can accept as persuasive various arguments for an intelligent designer of the universe while remaining unpersuaded by that particular form of intelligent designer argument called the Intelligent Design argument. As Lamoureux points out, the ID argument would be better called 'the Interventionist Design' argument, to distinguish it from the many other intelligent designer arguments (including the a/p account).

wavelengths' of God's *agape*-love as described in the Bible—the attitudes and practices which result from God's pure *agape*-love being refracted through the prisms of physical reality and *agapic* lives. Central to this is God's act of incarnation as Emmanuel—God with us in the person of Y'shua ben Yosef, Jesus Josephson of Nazareth. We then examine humanity's *agape*-love for God, for others, and for Creation. Chapter 5 then analyzes this narrative description of *agape*-love (from Chapter 4) to provide an analytical description of *agape*-love. This analysis identifies five essential elements to *agape*-love: positive valuation of another (by attachment or by status); responsive awareness (empathic awareness of the desires or needs of the other); self-emptying (*kenosis*); self-giving (as justice or as gift); and cost-and-risk. I then go on to describe how *agape*-love is connected to the Biblical idea that humanity has been created in the *imago Dei*, in 'the image of God.' I conclude by discussing how human evolution fits with the *imago Dei* concept.

Now that we have in place this understanding of the nature of *agape*-love, and the relation of *agape*-love and *agape*-capable beings to God's creative process as we understand it through science, Chapter 6 then places this within an overall philosophy or way of life, thereby returning our discussion to the level of existential meaning. This way I call '*agapic* freedom,' and I contend that *agapic* freedom is the way of life to which God invites humanity. I begin with the theme of freedom in Jesus' ministry, then I describe the place of individuality, of self-love, and of choice within *agapic* freedom, contrasting this with autonomous freedom. I also discuss the nature of 'freeing constraints,' along with 'freedoms for' and 'freedoms from,' within *agapic* freedom. This includes a discussion of freedom from the limitations of autonomous freedom, as well as freedom from current social constraints against belief in God. To illustrate the latter, I provide three stories of people who led fulfilling lives of autonomous freedom as Materialists, but who nonetheless eventually chose instead the way of *agapic* freedom. (These three are Dorothy Day, Simone Weil, and Holly Ordway.)

In Chapter 7 I address the place of culture and intellectual life within the life of *agapic* freedom. First, I examine what sorts of implications follow from *agapic* freedom for society and for culture in general. Then I examine implications of *agapic* freedom for a particular cultural realm, namely, intellectual life in the natural sciences, the social sciences, the humanities, and the professions. This provides a model for intellectual life which I call *agapic dianoia*.

With these various discussions in place, Chapter 8 returns us to our original issue, namely the meaning of life. Here we return to our four core themes of self-worth, purpose, identity, and hope, looking at these in light of God's *agape*-love purposes for Creation. This brings me to my strongest critique of Materialism, for I contend that Materialism (including in its most positive humanist forms) opens the door—actually four doors—to existential nihilism, thereby undermining human well-being at its deepest existential levels. Consequently, the problem of nihilism is a greater problem for Materialism than the problem of suffering is for Theism. In contrast, I contend that the same four 'doors' (self-worth, purpose, identity, and hope) find their greatest meaning and fulfillment in the *agape*-love of God. I conclude the book with a prayer from the late Scottish theologian John Baillie. By this point we will have seen, through the *agape*/probability account and its associated concepts of freedom-all-the-way-up, *imago*-individuality, *agapic* freedom, and *agapic dianoia*, not only that God and science belong together but that God's *agapic* vision for creation provides the basis for humanity's fullest meaning and flourishing—in our scientific age and in every human age.

Now for some housekeeping. First, a comment is in order to explain my unusual use of both footnotes and endnotes. I anticipate—or at least hope!—that both general readers and specialists will read this book. For additional comments that may prove of interest to general readers, I use footnotes, while for specialists and scholars I provide additional comments by way of endnotes. I also provide most references and sources in the endnotes. As well, in order to keep the book shorter, I have omitted some discussions that I had intended otherwise to be in the book, in particular discussions about the nature of altruism (a controversial topic in evolutionary psychology that is important for my case for *agape*-love), God's action in the world (particularly why God does not give overwhelming evidence of the sort sought by Bertrand Russell), and a review of Sean Carroll's book *The Big Picture: On the Origins of Life, Meaning, and the Universe Itself*. In due course these will be available through the author's blog at barrigar.wordpress.com.

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