

One of the most disconcerting aspects of human existence must surely be our inability to discern the difference between an as-yet unearthed answer and the fundamental lack of one.

Given sufficient time and continued improvements in technology, will we eventually be able to confirm we aren't alone in the universe? Is there a cure for cancer, or is the massive global research presence, vast amounts of public funding and a multitude of pink accessories all ultimately in vain? Is there a literal meaning to life and a Happy Ending in the mix for us all, and if so how is it brought to fruition? Unless and until complete answers to these questions are found, the undiscovered and the undiscoverable amount to the same non-result.

We don't know what we don't know; don't know what we can't know; and can't ever know the difference between the two.

Regardless, we instinctively push on, hoping for a win, often ignoring niggling doubts and shying away from gloomy scepticism like that of the 17th century Frenchman Blaise Pascal:

On contemplating our blindness and wretchedness, and on observing the whole of the silent universe, and humanity with no light abandoned to itself, lost in this nook of the universe not knowing who put us there, what we have come to achieve, what will become of us when we die, incapable of all knowledge, I become frightened, like someone taken in his sleep to a terrifying, deserted island who wakes up with no knowledge of what has happened, nor means of escape.

It's the quintessential existential dilemma, an unavoidable no-win situation. Stop believing in answers and cures, and there can be no closure on what matters. Continue on, and risk insanity as you seek out what may not actually be there. Even giving up on the search and declaring no solution in the offing, is hopeless in itself. Woody Allen may well be on the money when he said we're cast adrift in a "haphazard, morally neutral and unimaginably violent" cosmos, with God merely an intellectual construct designed to assuage our loneliness and confusion. But he, Pascal and others supporters of this ostensibly disturbing prospect, like Leo Tolstoy who believed that "the only absolute knowledge attainable by man is that life is meaningless," is unable to verify if such notions are true, since there can never be any evidence of what doesn't exist or is lacking. In an infinite universe, the statement "I know for certain extra terrestrials aren't real" is illogical. Facing the futility of trying to prove what you assert is non-existent, all the New York film maker can do is use his art to make a point of the pointlessness.

The real disquiet here, the source of some of the best, darkest comedy, including Allen's, is the apparent ludicrousness of our circumstances. Why set it up so medical science can cure some diseases, not others? A partial solution to a problem, any problem, is effectively no solution at all. Moreover, if there is no thought-based system, holy, scientific or philosophical, capable of definitively answering the Big Questions – why am I here, does God exist, what is truth, virtue, love and beauty, how can I be free – why then are we, rational animals with free will, afflicted with an avid curiosity and equipped with the profoundly unique and fascinating faculties of consciousness, reason and language? The homo sapien tool kit, allied a passionate spirit of inquiry, clearly infers a defining purpose of some kind, an errand of great import instilled by whoever or whatever created us.

It follows that having been given a special task we'd also be afforded the opportunity to accomplish it. To make the mysteries of life forever impenetrable would appear to be nonsensical, if not downright cruel, tantamount to enticing someone to read of a murder-mystery novel only to then leave the whodunit unsolved. It would be perplexingly inefficient for our creator to expend serious effort to bring the universe into existence, whether in six days as the Bible records or over billions of years of tedious evolution – take your pick, it doesn't matter – bestow upon us the ability to pursue our moral, social and economic aspirations, if nothing in the end can be really sorted and Man is left with the forlorn and despairing conclusion that he is effectively an accident, a “useless passion,” as John Paul Sartre termed it.

Don't get me wrong, to be born is to be lucky and life is for the living. The awesome beauty of existence, the unasked-for gift of sharing in the wonder of what regularly appears to be a pre-ordained harmony, is something to savour and behold, not to be intellectualised over. And to be sure, the love of a woman, even the wrong woman, is the pinnacle of such splendour. (There is no way in hell the female body is designed for reproductive purposes alone. I've no doubt her allure is part of some eloquent heavenly conspiracy, one that remains unknown, often frustratingly so, to us men.)

It's not about being unappreciative. Men would love nothing more than to show our gratitude by discharging our God-given remit, which we realise deep down is something more substantial than trying to live forever. It's difficult to avoid becoming preoccupied and cranky when faced with a plethora of mixed messages concerning our higher purpose and an engagement strategy from above that looks and smells a lot like bait-and-switch. Man seems impossibly conflicted by design, condemned to strive for the unattainable, at once

encouraged and crushed. As such, we are prone to distraction, even though, as Pascal further noted, such consolation only goes to intensifying our wretchedness. In the movie version of *The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy* (2005), the protagonist, Arthur Dent, is admiring the construction of a replica of Earth with a unfortunately-named planet designer played by Bill Nighy.

Slartibartfast: Perhaps I'm old and tired, but I think that the chances of finding out what's actually going on are so absurdly remote that the only thing to do is to say, "Hang the sense of it," and keep yourself busy. I'd much rather be happy than right any day.

Arthur: And are you?

Slartibartfast: Ah, no.

*He laughs, snorts.*

Slartibartfast: Well, that's where it all falls down, of course.

It's likely our search for meaning involves more than reason alone. The modern Western mind, despite its irreverence and grubby materialism, remains intrigued by the supernatural, perhaps hoping that an examination of the other side will shed some light on our earthly purpose.

Premonition and conjuring were bread and butter for our most brilliant writer, the storyline of his most influential literary work revolving around a Danish prince being harassed by an apparition who demands revenge for his murder. Despite the Age of Reason seeing us discard much unfounded fear and superstition, contemporary popular culture continues to be shaped by anything but a dry, judicious take on reality. Fantasy is a staple of high-rating TV and blockbuster cinema. The monumental success of acronym-titled forensic crime shows is matched only by "anti-science" contributions featuring vampires, shape-shifters, guardian angels and various types of spiritual communion with the departed. The *Harry Potter* catalogue of teenage wizard books and movies made JK Rowling extremely wealthy, while, in 1989, millions of ordinary folk fronted up to watch an Iowa farmer plough under part of his cornfields after hearing a voice imploring him to "Build it and he will come". The heart and soul of one of the most successful film franchises of all time – *Star Wars* – is a mystical, ubiquitous power that binds us to the universe and beyond. Then there's *Ghost* (1990), *The Sixth Sense* (1999), *City Of Angels* (1998) – and its superior original, *Der Himmel über*

*Berlin* (1987) – *Ghost Town* (2008) and Jimmy Stewart with his six foot invisible rabbit in *Harvey* (1950).

*I ♥ Hucksterbees* (2006) is a more subtle example of the genre. Albert Markovski, a congenial fellow with annoying hair played by Jason Schwartzman, hires a couple of “existential detectives” to clue him up on why it is he keeps bumping into a distinctive black man. Is it coincidence or a sign? Is there such a thing as coincidence? He finishes up being told, after shagging Isabelle Huppert in a beastly manner, that nothing is random, everything and everyone is interconnected, yet at the same time life is cruel, lonely and meaningless.

Albert’s line of questioning has a strong theistic subtext. He believes, or suspects, he is part of a much bigger picture, one that is pieced together by something he can’t see but accepts is there, influencing the world. Acting on a deeply felt sense of purpose, he wishes to contribute to this plan rather than drift along as a passenger. Albert wants to ensure his personal sub-plot (which is likely a sub-sub-sub-sub-plot) accords with the celestial mechanics, since this is the only way he, as an individual part, can truly belong, secure in the knowledge his endeavour fits in a meaningful way with time and space.

Most of us, if we’re honest and can put aside the spectre of religious indoctrination, would acknowledge at least the possibility of a dominion beyond the senses and mind, impelled by hidden forces intent on directing us, whether personally or as a group, toward a mutual goal of some kind, a higher purpose that our hearts long to complete. Since caveman days, Man has set his gaze on the stars hoping to make sense of the human condition, hankering for sufficient wisdom to relieve us of the often unbearable burden of existence.

You and I began with the Big Bang, because all substance in the universe is an organic unity. When we look up at the sky, we are trying to find the way back to ourselves.

Jostein Gaarder’s prose is persuasive. Who hasn’t felt at times involved in Something More than life itself or unwittingly concluded that everything “happens for a reason”? We experience an inexplicable euphoria when our decisions and actions click into place, as if in sync with the cosmos.

You have been contemplating starting up a fruit business. You attend a wedding and meet an old Italian bloke who is resigned to selling his grocery store, as his children are only

interested in other, sexier vocations. A mutual friend brokers a deal, with Giuseppe ecstatic at being able to stay on to impart his invaluable industry know-how.

Conversely, we're left distressed or angry if things don't "go to plan" or we struggle to determine what to do next in our lives, believing it important it be the "right" move.

And at who do you think all this is directed? Your mother, wife? Perhaps the government is responsible (politicians want you think so, taking credit for the good and promising to solve the bad)? Do you feel your personal destiny is linked to something else? Where do you believe our sense of how the world "ought" to be emanates from? There is a moral compass in us all but who put it there, why and where is it pointing? Have you ever asked yourself exactly what it is you are referring to when you say Mother Nature or the universe did this or that?

Every year, millions of university and high school graduates around the world sing along to Green Day's *Good Riddance (Time of Your Life)*, "Time grabs you by the wrist/Directs you where to go". Who do they, and lead singer Billie Joe Armstrong, think is doing the grabbing and directing?

Time, luck, fate, karma, life: they're all different tags for the same guiding hand. It can be an awkward issue – I still find the word God difficult to utter and tense up when I enter a home that gives pride of place to the Bible – not something we readily delve into. Popular culture provides a safe buffer, an opportunity to hedge and dismiss it as an affectation. It's only a movie for God's sake! While a free-wheeling examination of Albert's elemental motives, as with legitimacy of The Force and Costner's recklessness in the *Field Of Dreams*, may not be something we're keen to discuss openly in public, these metaphysical themes must still be relevant to the average person, even when the situation involves unabashed escapism. Harrison Ford, Bruce Willis, Meg Ryan, Ricky Gervais and Dustin Hoffman don't get paid huge sums to act out scenarios that are outside our system of belief.

Spin it however you like, there is much about Western secular society that suggests a profound subterranean belief in a grand design, a Divine Plot, that is overseen by an intervening deity, God-the-Author.

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