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GAINING MEANING AND PURPOSE FROM SEVEN ASPECTS OF REALITY

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METHODS AND SYSTEMATIC REFLECTIONS

GAINING MEANING AND PURPOSE FROM SEVEN ASPECTS OF REALITY

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1. SCOPE AND METHOD

At one time or another during their lifetime, most people wonder about the meaning and purpose of human life and the universe. Why, ultimately, do the physical universe and its diverse forms of life exist? What is the point of it all? Both brief and extensive efforts to find immediate and ultimate meaning in the world are probably quite natural and common among human beings today. Even when such questions are not stated explicitly, they often lie just below the surface in discussions, inquiry, and writing.

As they seek answers to these fundamental questions, people turn to certain aspects of reality, such as love in daily life, the grand evolutionary process in the universe, or the goodness and power of God. They gain a sense of meaning and purpose from one or more aspects of reality. This essay aims to classify all the major aspects of reality that provide such meaning. It presents seven possible sources of meaning and purpose in our world. In a sense, these seven aspects of reality are seven possible answers to the question, 'What's the meaning, purpose, or point of life in the universe?'

This comprehensive framework may be useful to readers who are interested in contemporary human views of meaning and purpose in the universe, and the aspects of reality on which these views focus. It may also stimulate those who are interested in moving toward a systematic overview of the relevant views held through the ages by people in various cultures. In addition, the framework can help each of us clarify our own views as we proceed with our personal search for meaning in our world.

Each section of the paper is devoted to one aspect of reality, and is written as though I am convinced that this view of reality is valid and useful. (In fact, though, like many readers, I do not believe that all seven views are accurate perceptions of reality.)

These seven views of reality are not competing in the sense that only one will emerge as right. They are not contradictory nor mutually exclusive. Accepting one view or

source of meaning does not necessarily rule out any of the others. In fact, many readers will gain meaning from several of them. Certainly I do. Other readers, however, may gain meaning and purpose from only one or two aspects of reality.

Regardless of the number of aspects from which they gain meaning, some readers may regard one of them as *ultimate* reality. My guess is that each of the seven aspects of reality will be chosen by one reader or another as ultimate. That reality then provides that reader with ultimate meaning.

In developing this paper, I went through four steps before writing this version. One step was to ask the wide range of adults in my graduate courses on potential futures and adult education to respond in writing to questions about meaning and purpose. About 50 people did so, thus providing me with raw data to stimulate my thinking. The second step was a comprehensive search for relevant literature in the following fields: astronautics, astronomy, extraterrestrial intelligence, evolution, futures studies, history, philosophy, physics, psychology, reincarnation, religion, sociology, theology, and transpersonal psychology. I also went through all past issues of *Ultimate Reality and Meaning*. In the third step, the various aspects of reality collected during the first two steps were organized into a manageable list of seven major, comprehensive, logical categories. All of this was put into a written paper for the 1985 URAM meeting. At the fourth step, 22 people responded to that draft of the paper. Although their suggestions have been very useful in producing this revised draft, it is interesting to note that none of them suggested adding any categories beyond the seven. Apparently the paper has succeeded in identifying most of the aspects of reality that provide people with significant meaning and purpose. Perhaps the readers of this journal, however, will point out certain meaningful aspects of reality that I have overlooked.

2. SEVEN ASPECTS OF REALITY

The seven aspects of reality are organized under the following headings: 1. daily life; 2. humanity's future; 3. the physical universe; 4. life throughout the universe; 5. an all-connected ever-evolving universe; 6. a supernatural being or force; 7. life after death.

2.1 *Daily Life*

Career, family, friends, leisure activities, love, or other aspects of daily life provide significant meaning and purpose for most people.

When asked what gives meaning and purpose to their world, several people immediately mentioned the happiness or zest for living that comes from the challenge and satisfaction of their job, the closeness of their family, the giving and receiving of love, or the striving required to reach some target that really matters to them. Others gain pleasure, enjoyment, and meaning from travel, vacations, recreational activities, hobbies, and sex. When asked why the universe exists, one person replied, seriously, 'So we can all have a good time and enjoy ourselves for 70 years or so.' People also gain meaning from other aspects of their daily lives, such as a variety of significant inner experiences and insights, their search for truth and wisdom, and their place in a group or community.

One can create meaning and purpose for one's own life by caring about others, by contributing to their happiness, and by living a hard-working, moral life. Some people find meaning by living life fully in the here and now, and by enjoying the beauty of each moment. Others find significant meaning in their learning, growth, creativity, or productivity.

People also gain meaning and purpose from their sense of connectedness with nature. They enjoy and treasure the diversity of plant and animal life. They appreciate the outdoors and feel a kinship with the natural world. They garden, travel, hike, camp, watch birds, interact with pets, and admire the intricacy and harmony of nature.

2.2 *Humanity's Future*

Many people find meaning and purpose not only in daily life, but also in the broader perspective of humanity's future. In both time and space, this perspective is broader than one's daily life.

Some people gain significant meaning from feeling part of the ongoing drama of human history. This unfolding drama encompasses all cultures spread over the entire planet. It sweeps from the distant past through the present and onwards to an unknown future. Being alive at a particularly exciting and critical period in human history enhances the meaning that we gain from being involved in this great adventure. Humanity's future is an unfolding aspect of reality; the long-term future cannot be known at present. We do know that *some* sort of ultimate future will occur, though, and we can picture various possibilities ranging from nuclear holocaust to a joyful utopia. The hopes, fears, and other emotions that we experience when we contemplate these potential future realities can provide highly significant meaning and purpose for us. Some people feel a great love for humanity, sometimes experience a connectedness or merging with all humanity, and care deeply about its ultimate destination.

Some people gain additional meaning and purpose from their efforts to *contribute* to the ongoing development of humankind. Not content merely to be swept along as spectators, they actively participate in building a positive future for at least one portion of humanity. They try to align themselves with the ideas, movements, and forces that are especially likely to lead to a reasonably positive human future. They oppose destructive, harmful, evil forces.

The person's useful efforts toward a positive future for humanity can support three distinct priorities (Tough, 1986a). First, one can join with others in striving to avoid human *extinction*. Such efforts are needed because nuclear weapons are already poised to produce a holocaust followed by a 'nuclear winter' in which our civilization, culture, and gene pool could be eliminated. Second, many people work to avoid some sort of widespread, massive, permanent *deterioration* in human life. Besides warfare, the most serious threat is the rapid depletion of environmental resources by a human population that doubles every 40 years even though it already strains the Earth's carrying capacity. Third, a great many are working toward a highly *positive* future for humankind. They are trying to improve our decision-making, management, cooperation, harmony, understanding, knowledge, spiritual and psychic awareness, level of consciousness, respect for nature and wilderness, and other important aspects of life.

All three types of efforts directed toward humanity's future provide significant meaning and purpose for these people. Their efforts transcend their ordinary daily world. The long-term future of our entire species, culture, and civilization is certainly a fundamental priority of extraordinary significance.

2.3 *The Physical Universe*

Our solar system, our galaxy, and the rest of the physical universe are incredibly old and vast. This universe began about 150,000,000 centuries ago, and will probably continue into the future even longer than that. Our telescopes can see distant galaxies as they appeared millions of years ago; their light has taken that long to reach us. The number of stars in each galaxy is mind-boggling, as is the number of galaxies in the universe. Then, too, the universe contains supernova explosions, quasars, pulsars, black holes, and other amazing phenomena.

The phenomena, grandeur, vastness, and age of our universe inspire deep emotions and meaning in many people. The dedication of amateur astronomers is one indication of this. Being alive in such an old and vast cosmos certainly provides a different context for us than would some other arrangements that we might imagine: nothing beyond Earth except empty space, for example, or a universe destined to end 80 years from now.

In addition, some people experience a deep sense of awe, amazement, wonder, humility, meaning, or purpose when they contemplate the major *mysteries* of the physical universe. We simply do not have definitive answers to some of the most significant questions of all. In the creation of this universe, what happened in the very first instant? What conditions, events, intentions, or design preceded that instant? Does some sort of ultimate purpose, cosmic intelligence, teleological pull, or fundamental undiscovered explanation lie behind the existence and evolution of the universe? Were other universes created about the same time as this one, or eons before it, and what are they like? Was Earth the only planet with conditions favourable for the development of intelligent life or has this occurred on millions of other planets? What fundamental facts about the universe have we not yet discovered? What is the future and the ultimate destination of the physical universe, of human life, and of all other life? The magnitude of these mysteries – the amount that we simply do not know – is awesome and incredible.

2.4 *Life Throughout the Universe*

Humankind is part of a universe-wide struggle for life to begin, develop, and flourish. Highly advanced species and civilizations probably exist in our galaxy and many other parts of the universe. Developed at least 100,000 years beyond our level, such civilizations may feature comprehensive knowledge and wisdom as well as superb technology, and may be cooperating in achieving cosmic purposes and projects.

This aspect of reality provides meaning for some people. They treasure such a possibility. It enhances their sense of purpose in the whole universe. They realize some advanced extraterrestrials may already be observing us unobtrusively, and may interact with us in the near future (Tough, 1986b). Diverse, intelligent life may develop and

flourish for millions of years in various parts of the cosmos. For some people, this possibility – this adventure, context, perspective – is a significant source of meaning and purpose in the universe.

This meaning and purpose is further enhanced by the possibility of a galactic or cosmic *project*. Now or eventually we may be part of a grand project: the development of advanced harmonious life throughout the universe. Such life may be characterized by understanding, intelligence, wisdom, compassion, love, joy, knowledge, effectiveness, spiritual or mystical experiences, and a high level of awareness and consciousness (Tough, 1986b).

Such a project may already be underway in our galaxy and other galaxies. Indeed, our efforts to develop a more competent, compassionate, and cooperative human culture here on earth may well fit into some grand galactic project of which we are only vaguely aware. We may deliberately join such a project with other advanced species sometime during the next few centuries.

The future of our universe is somewhat open rather than completely predetermined. If we let our imagination run free and look far ahead into the very distant future, many possibilities come to mind for grand cosmic projects. Perhaps the forces for good and life will triumph over evil, deterioration, decay, and entropy. Maybe the evolutionary and deliberate flow of events will result in a highly positive and harmonious future for advanced beings throughout the cosmos. Some incredibly advanced beings may evolve into powerful, pervasive, all-knowing, compassionate masters of the universe who will plan and influence the broad directions of life, as imagined by Arthur C. Clarke (1982, chapter 51). A very wise and altruistic Cosmic Council of Thoughtful Species may have marvellous plans for the long-term future of life in the cosmos.

Perhaps we will transform the physical universe in ways that can barely be imagined at this stage. We may even find a way to forestall the end of the universe itself, billions of years from now. If not, then the final project in this universe may develop some way to avoid the end of all life and knowledge by transferring it to the subsequent universe or to a parallel universe (Michaud, 1982). Indeed, we might even join in some cosmic or divine project to design a better universe for the next creation. Perhaps, one way or another, the possibility exists for life, evolution, intelligence, knowledge, and compassion to continue forever. If not, well, billions of years still seems like quite a meaningful vista stretching before us.

2.5 An All-connected Ever-evolving Universe

Some people gain meaning and purpose from perceiving the universe as totally interconnected and as fundamentally evolving.

In one sense, everything in the universe is in fact interconnected. It all fits together. Various objects and phenomena are interrelated and interdependent; they interact and interlock. From one perspective, at least, the universe is characterized by unity and wholeness. Some individuals grasp or glimpse this interconnectedness intellectually. Some feel connected with the whole cosmos through an experience of the melting of all boundaries and separateness (often called cosmic consciousness, a mystical experience, or a transpersonal experience).

A book called *Alternate Realities* has described two modes of being that emphasize connectedness throughout the cosmos. One of these modes is described thus:

All objects and events are part of the fabric of the total of being and cannot be meaningfully separated from it. The most important aspect of any object or event is that it is a part of the total ONE Boundaries, edges, and borders do not exist. All things primarily *are* each other, since they are *primarily* one. (LeShan, 1976, p. 92)

The other mode is somewhat different:

Objects, events, and the self ... are seen as separate, but flowing into a larger One and with no clear boundary from it All objects, entities, and events are perceived as related to the total One of the cosmos in this way. Each entity is separate enough to be able to be aware of its own wishes ... and connected enough to be able to sometimes communicate these wishes to the total One. (LeShan, 1976, pp. 98–99).

Viewed from the time perspective of billions of years, the universe has clearly been evolving. Presumably it will continue to do so for many billions of years. The ongoing unfolding and development of life and the physical universe, heading toward some ultimate destination or other, provides significant meaning for some people. One possible answer to the question of why, ultimately, this universe exists is this: so that life in the universe can thrive at present and can evolve toward higher and higher forms. That evolution is presumably toward enlightenment, wisdom, love, higher consciousness, or some other advanced level. The evolutionary perspective can be glimpsed in several recent books, such as Ferguson (1980), Hubbard (1982), and McWaters (1981).

As people reflect on what we know about the universe and about life on Earth, they are struck by the significance of a pervasive urge to survive, develop, evolve, flourish, and spread. This evolutionary drive, teleological principle, or creative life force can be seen in the diversity of plant and animal life on our planet, in the emergence of consciousness and intelligence in humans, and in the development of various cultures and civilizations. In order to flow with this evolutionary cosmic force, we should do all we can to foster the development and spread of higher forms of compassion, wisdom, culture, and life—not only on Earth, but also throughout the galaxy. Perhaps our ultimate purpose is to be a happy and successful part of this grand cosmic process of evolution.

Psychologist Charles Tart, comparing the assumptions of Western scientific culture and the Eastern religions ('spiritual psychologies'), has noted the following:

The spiritual psychologies generally assume a purpose for the universe, covering such alternatives as ... the universe itself being some kind of living entity or being which is expressing itself, or the universe as a whole having a purpose and ... evolving toward a higher level of consciousness and action ... Most of the spiritual psychologies not only assume purpose for the universe but, seeing it as alive and evolving, give the universe the same properties as life in general. A consequence of this is that man's relationship to a living, interconnected, and evolving universe is quite different than if he assumes the universe is dead and purposeless. (Tart, 1975, pp. 66–67).

2.6 A Supernatural Being or Force

We turn now to an aspect of reality that is usually called God, Yahweh, the Holy Spirit, the deity, the supreme being, the creator and ruler of the universe, Allah, Brahma, or

Universal Mind. The title of this section is taken from a definition of religions provided by Stark and Bainbridge: 'Religions involve some conception of a supernatural being, world, or force, and the notion that the supernatural is active, that events and conditions here on earth are influenced by the supernatural' (Stark and Bainbridge, 1985, p. 5).

This same book points out that 'since time immemorial, humans have desired to know the meaning of existence. Why are we here? What is the purpose of life? Where will it all end?' For life to have deep meaning, one must turn to (or assume or imagine) the existence of an active supernatural being, world, or force. 'For life to have a great design, for there to be intention behind history, one must posit the existence of a designer or intender of such power, duration, and scale as to be outside or beyond the natural world of our senses' (Stark and Bainbridge, 1985, p. 7).

God is conceived, perceived, and experienced in different ways by different people. The wide range of conceptions of God or religious reality is clear in such books as Küng (1980), MacQuarrie (1981), Melton (1978), and Tracy (1975). For some people, God created this universe and its natural laws but is no longer active in it. For others, there still exists today an aware intelligence that guides, influences, observes, judges, cares about, and/or provides goals for this universe. Some people experience a personal, loving, compassionate God who interacts personally with them and responds in their life. Others conceive of God as overseeing the future of all humanity but not focusing at all on specific individuals or groups. Some people think of a pool of consciousness or Mind that has always existed; others think of a variety or hierarchy of spirits and angelic beings.

One's particular conception of the supernatural being or force will affect the particular meaning gained from it, of course. First, for example, let us look at God as Creator. This universe, including its natural laws and processes, came into existence approximately 15,000,000,000 years ago. As these natural forces interacted over eons of time, various forms of life developed. When originally setting all of this in motion, God (or some other sort of transcendent Creator) acted because of certain intentions, hopes, goals, purposes, plans, designs, or motivations. The creation of this universe with its natural laws and evolutionary processes was much more than blind chance or an accident; it was not merely the result of random fluctuations in a field of nothingness. This fact or belief provides meaning and purpose, regardless of whether the Creator is still active in our universe or following our history with great interest.

Scientists studying the moment of creation have recently been seriously considering some fascinating hypotheses. In particular, it now seems quite possible that many universes have been created, although we cannot yet see any way of gaining information about the others. It is possible that the Creator had different purposes for creating different universes. Such a possibility was powerfully spelled out by a British writer about 50 years ago (Stapledon [1937] 1972, Chapters 14, 15). Rather than worrying much about those other universes, however, our main responsibility is to try to discover, understand, and follow the Creator's purposes for our own.

It is at least as important for us to try to understand and follow the *present* purposes that God has for us. God's present purposes, as well as God's reasons for creating this universe in the first place, can be sought through individual or collective prayer, through reading early and modern religious texts, through worship services or religious study

groups, through direct religious or mystical or psychedelic experiences, or through some other spiritual or transpersonal path.

Regardless of how they gain their insights into God's purposes, many people find their lives permanently transformed as a result. Everything takes on a fresh meaning. An inspiring vision of the future opens up. New goals and paths become salient, and the person gains an ultimate foundation or authority for choosing them. Because God cares about the ultimate outcome of human history (and the ongoing development and ultimate destination of other advanced species), we gain a clear base for believing that life in the universe really matters: humanity's long-term future is clearly very important.

Even if God's purposes are unknowable, the very fact of God's existence provides some people with meaning and purpose. We can feel reassured that there is some fundamental purpose or point to the existence of the universe.

2.7 Life After Death

For many people, the continuation of consciousness, life, or the soul after the physical death of the body is a highly significant aspect of reality. The meaning and purpose of one's present lifetime is powerfully altered by one's knowledge of this reality. Much of this meaning would be lost if the person suddenly believed that all awareness, consciousness, and individuality end permanently at death or a few minutes later.

Some people gain meaning and purpose from looking ahead to the possibility of gradually evolving to higher planes of existence through many more lifetimes. Toronto writer and psychic researcher Ian Currie has suggested the following:

Each of us begins as an extremely rudimentary psychic entity, capable of only a very simple physical embodiment. Through repeated embodiments, the psyche grows steadily more complex and ascends the chain of matter ... We are 'gods in training,' and that training takes us through every form of existence – from mineral to plant, from plant to animal, from animal to human, from human to divine. (Currie, 1978, p. 260)

After a great deal of experience on various planes beyond the human, souls may eventually become ready to exist as pure thought, without matter or form, perhaps ultimately joining with God.

3. REALITY AND MEANING

Some people deny or reject at least one of the seven aspects of reality that have been outlined in this paper. Some believe strongly that naturally evolved extraterrestrial beings with intelligence and culture do not exist in our galaxy. Some do not believe in the existence of any supernatural being or force, such as God. Some cannot conceive of life after bodily death for anyone except possibly a few exceptionally holy, saintly, enlightened, or lucky individuals. Some people deny the possibility of any future for humanity other than catastrophe, apocalypse, or nuclear holocaust. Buddhist and certain other spiritually oriented people may deny the reality of daily life, as usually perceived. In short, not one of the seven aspects of reality is universally accepted as valid and real.

Even though a person experiences or knows about the existence of certain reality, he or she may gain little meaning or purpose from it. A person may be aware of daily life,

potential futures for humanity, the physical universe, or other aspects of reality and yet gain little sense of meaning. The person may feel dispirited and depressed: life has no meaning. We see, then, that we are looking at a two-step process. First, the person must perceive or deeply believe that certain aspects of reality exist. Second, the person's mind or emotions must somehow create significant meaning from this reality. The reality is 'out there' but meaning and purpose are then added by us individually and collectively.

It is also possible for people to gain a great deal of highly significant meaning from their belief in some reality that actually does not exist. Our meaning is gained from our *beliefs* about reality, not necessarily directly from the reality itself. With the possible exceptions of God and advanced extraterrestrials, no aspect of reality directly tells us the meaning and purpose of the universe; instead, we have to interpret or create the meaning ourselves.

A particular aspect of reality from which some people gain significant meaning can create just the opposite sense – a sense of reduced meaning or total meaninglessness – for others. Hepburn (1982) has discussed this sort of reaction to the vastness and age of the universe. The same phenomenon could occur as people contemplate highly advanced nonhuman life flourishing throughout our galaxy: human life might, to some people, feel diminished and less meaningful within this perspective.

The universe simply exists as it is. We do not know *why* it exists, nor even whether there is a reason for its existence. Each of us can *wish* that the universe itself, or certain aspects of it, would provide more meaning, a different meaning, or a clearer meaning than we do in fact gain. On the one hand, for good mental health, it may be best to simply accept the reality and meanings that do exist, instead of wishing for something more. There is no point wishing for a meaning or authoritative answer that does not in fact exist. On the other hand, we may be quite correct in our wishing. Perhaps some sort of 'why' or other meaning, or some ultimately desirable destination, or some guiding intelligence is somehow built into the grand scheme of things but most of us have overlooked or neglected it. We may be wishing for something that really is there, but not yet discovered or noticed.

4. PERSONAL USEFULNESS OF THE FRAMEWORK

No one thinks of making a cake, casserole, or stew from a single ingredient. Usually a combination of carefully chosen ingredients, mixed together in just the right way, produces the best result.

The same principle may work in our human efforts to find meaning and purpose in our world. We may gain meaning and purpose from several of the seven aspects of reality presented here, and consider them true and useful. Just as a good cook rejects certain ingredients, too, we may reject some views of reality because we judge them highly unlikely to be correct.

Some people may gain meaning and purpose from just one of the views. They either reject the rest as incorrect or else simply do not think about them. To use the food analogy once more, a single apple, a bowl of rice, or a glass of milk can be quite tasty and nourishing: multiple ingredients are not always necessary.

The seven aspects of reality could easily be turned into a test or instrument for helping individuals understand themselves better. All that is needed is a simple chart with one row devoted to each aspect of reality, described in the left-hand column. The remaining columns would be labelled thus: (1) What do I believe is the probability that this aspect of reality actually exists? (2) From this aspect of reality, what sorts of meaning do I gain (including awe, reverence, mystery, worship, inspiration, basic answers, peacefulness, happiness, joie de vivre, exhilaration, life goals, a sense of purpose, etc.)? (3) How much does this aspect of reality contribute to the sense of meaning or purpose in my life or in the universe? (4) If I were to take this aspect of reality very seriously, and for a moment ignore all other aspects, to what would I devote the rest of my life? (5) Considering the entire chart, what changes should I make in my priorities, work, or life?

Each person's preferred views of reality help that person wrestle with the ultimate questions of the universe. These views can also help the person feel clear, certain, and reassured about the purpose and meaning of the world. One's views also have major implications for one's goals, projects, mission in life, happiness, understanding, and self-image.

In addition, our views of reality will affect the priorities and projects that we consider particularly important for governments and other organizations to pursue vigorously. We will choose better priorities as we become more thoughtful about the seven aspects of reality and their significant meanings.

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