

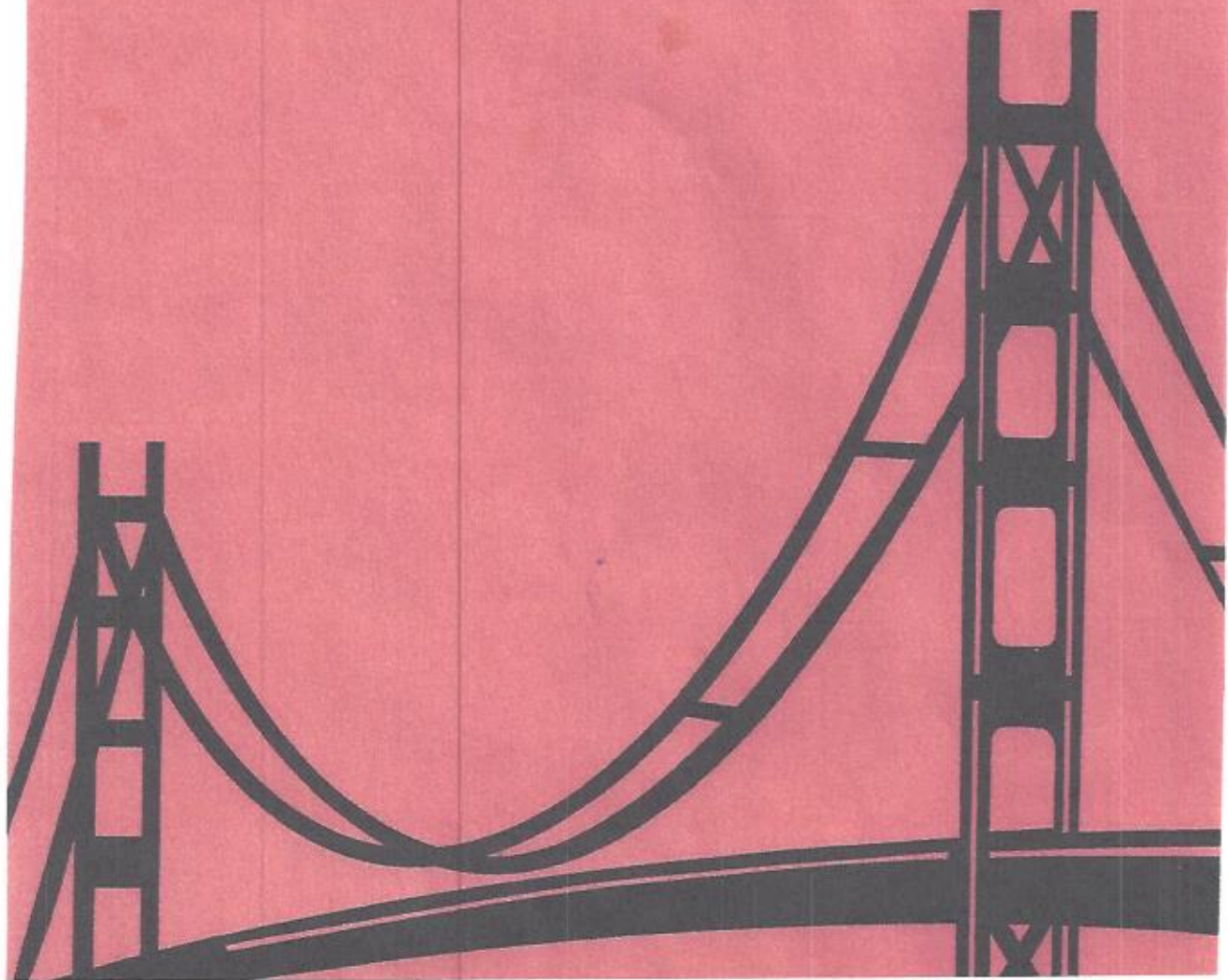
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**Does God Have a Plan for the Big History of the Cosmos?**

**TED PETERS**

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# THEOLOGY AND SCIENCE



## Does God Have a Plan for the Big History of the Cosmos?

TED PETERS

Can you make a silk purse out of a sow's ear? Can you make a gourmet dinner out of a McDonald's hamburger? Can you make a World Series winner out of the Chicago Cubs? Can you make a meaningful story out of what you see in a microscope or a telescope? The answer to most of these questions is "no." (There's always hope for the Cubs.)

My question is this: Is a natural scientist qualified to tell a meaningful story about the history of our cosmos? If the scientist looks at nature through lenses which make the scientist's eyes blind to purpose, meaning, direction, then how can scientific data provide a plot for a meaningful story? Now, the scientist could cheat. He or she could arbitrarily impose a meaning on the facts. But, if there is no visible *telos* inherent in the facts, then the cheating might be too obvious.

Growing up as a Christian I simply took for granted that God, the creator of the world, has a purpose for the world. God gives the universe its meaning, its purpose, its direction, its future. Within this purpose for the cosmos, you and I as persons find our meaning. Meaning is, of course, dependent upon context. Our momentary meaning is dependent on our memory and our expectation, on our history. Our immediate historical context finds its meaning in the larger context of Earth's history; and Earth's history finds its meaning in the context of cosmic history. Our personal meaning is dependent on the meaning of the whole. If there is no meaning of the whole history of the universe, then your and my individual lives become meaningless. Or, to put it a bit more precisely, what meaning we ascribe to our own biographical stories is ephemeral, subject to dissolution into the meaninglessness of the wider universe.

This is what I mean by *telos*. The Greek word, *telos*, translates into English as 'end'. By *end*, we intend two overlapping connotations: purpose and conclusion. The conclusion or *finis* of the cosmic story will determine the meaning of every purposeful event within that story. The single cosmic story provides the comprehensive context within which you and I discern the *telos* of our lives.

So, if the scientist's gaze misses seeing *telos*, and if the scientist gets tapped for the job of telling our universe's story, then that story will turn out meaningless.

Ouch! This is my response to theorists who describe a universe without meaning, without *telos*, without teleology. If our cosmos is without purpose or direction, then



our individual lives become, as Shakespeare speculated, "full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing." Ouch!

### Shall we give up our traditional religious belief that nature has a *telos*?

Shall theologians give up our traditional religious belief that nature has a *telos*? This is what Kenan Osborne and Ki Wook Min advise in their exciting new book, *Science and Religion: Fifty Years after Vatican II*. When these two scholars look carefully at nature, they do not see purpose, direction, or meaning. Among the natural phenomena they examine, the quantum world within the atom draws special attention. The quantum world belongs both to the microcosm, what's within the atom, and to the macrocosm, the Big Bang origin of the physical universe. A direct examination of nature at this fundamental physical level reveals nothing that looks like *telos*. So, what's a theologian to do? Give up the idea of a divine plan for the cosmos, they recommend.

What they actually say cuts deeply into theological flesh. "Within the microcosm and the macrocosm of today's scientific worldview, no overarching plan has as yet been established. All of this challenges the three religions [Judaism, Christianity, Islam] vis-à-vis their divine plans for creation in a very negative way. Consequently, the leaders and scholars of the three religions need to acknowledge the findings of contemporary science by disclaiming their religious presentations of a divine plan for all finite reality."<sup>1</sup> Ouch!

Recognizing how this might cause any self-respecting theologian's ears to droop and tail fold between his or her legs, Osborne and Min throw a little bone to cheer the theologian up. "Perhaps, the religious issue of a divine plan should not begin today with the origin of the universe but only with the origin of human life."<sup>2</sup> If the theologian cannot have the whole vat, then just a little stein of evolutionary beer might slake our thirst for teleology. The hermeneutical problem, of course, is that the meaning of life is set within its own much larger context, namely, the meaning of the much more comprehensive lifeless history of the universe.

### Big history: A scientific story

Something new is bubbling up within undergraduate university curricula: *Big History*. If you thought World History was big, imagine dropping a glass of beer into a giant brewing vat. The history of nature is really big—perhaps 13.8 billion years so far—and this reduces human history to but a mere steinful drawn from that brewing vat. Human history is determined by nature's history, by and large; and the new field of Big History will show how this is the case. If natural history has no *telos*, then human history ... well, ... will it have a *telos*?

Funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Big History Project is experimenting with a replacement for the common or core curricula—History of Western Civilization—abandoned in higher education during the cultural revolts of the 1960s. Today's college educators tell us that Big History is "the attempt to

construct a unified account of the past at all scales from those of human history to those of cosmology; the modern scientific equivalent of traditional origin stories" in myth and religion.<sup>3</sup> "This offers a powerful way of understanding the place of our own species, *Homo sapiens*, within the universe."<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, the big historians rightly recognize that meaning is contextual, that the meaning of human history is affected by its wider context within nature. Yet, on the other hand, if methodologically science brackets out questions of meaning in its research, then the Big History thesis fails. If big historians attempt to scientize what we previously knew as history, will it require the expunging of purpose, direction, or meaning?

Here's the agenda: Big History attempts to provide a scientized story of origin to replace the now anachronistic and outdated stories we have inherited from religious traditions. Let's get rid of those myths told us by pre-scientific traditions and replace them with a new story of origin! Let's ask our big historians to construct a new story relying upon scientific knowledge! But, the Trojan horse is that scientific knowledge disavows the existence of purpose or direction or meaning in natural processes. The scientized story will be plotless, dramaless, meaningless. Science is not at fault here; this is all science can do with its particular gaze. Will this eviscerate the meaning-filled stories of origin we have inherited from ancient myths and religions?

First, Big History puts traditional religious stories of origin out of a job. Then, Big History's own storytellers fill in the void by constructing a new story, their own scientized story. But, if the scientific worldview methodologically eschews teleology, will this new story become a story without meaning? Regrettably, a story without meaning, is not a story at all.

**God has a purpose for nature, even if scientists cannot see purpose within nature.**

When Martinez Hewlett and I wrote our three books on the evolution controversy, we wrestled and wrestled with this problem. We recognized what might seem to be obvious to most people, namely, purpose and direction and meaning all belong to subjectivity. The scientific gaze at either Big Bang cosmology or Darwinian evolution excludes subjectivity at the level of method. Scientific research restricts itself to collecting objective facts, empirical data, and speculative hypotheses. The scientific gaze assumes that all natural phenomena can be looked at without reference to the very human subjectivity which houses teleology. It should come as no surprise that a scientific tracing of evolutionary history would disregard claims of teleology as a subjectivist nuisance.

How did Marty and I deal with this challenge? We accepted the assumption that teleology depends on subjectivity. But, rather than appeal to human subjectivity we appealed to divine subjectivity. The purpose of the universe's story lies within the subjectivity of God. "We will not attempt to locate purpose or direction or even value *within* nature. Instead, as Christians, we affirm a divine purpose *for* nature."<sup>5</sup> Rather than ask a scientist to look through a microscope or telescope and see the purpose within the objects of inquiry, we turn to God's promise of a

*telos*, a *finis* and a meaning for all things. Without the gaze of faith, the subjectivity of God might not become a factor in our interpretation of nature's past and future.

### Conclusion

TV Cosmos host Neil deGrasse Tyson sums up the story as Big History might say it: "In 5-billion yrs the Sun will expand & engulf our orbit as the charred ember that was once Earth vaporizes. Have a nice day."<sup>6</sup>

Ouch!

### Endnotes

- 1 Kenan B. Osborne and Ki Wook Min, *Science and Religion Fifty Years After Vatican II* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014), 176.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 177.
- 3 David Christian, Cynthia Stokes Brown, and Craig Benjamin, *Big History Between Nothing and Everything* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2014), 307.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 4.
- 5 Ted Peters and Martinez Hewlett, *Can You Believe in God and Evolution? A Guide for the Perplexed* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008), 120.
- 6 "50 Awesome Quotes by Neil deGrasse Tyson," <http://twistedstifter.com/2012/01/best-neil-degrasse-tyson-quotes/>.