



BORN TO WONDER

exploring our deepest questions—
why are we here & why does it matter?

ALISTER MCGRATH



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Born to Wonder: Exploring Our Deepest Questions—Why Are We Here and Why Does It Matter?

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In memory of my mother



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PART 1

**WONDERING
ABOUT
OURSELVES**

BORN TO WONDER: ASKING QUESTIONS; HOPING FOR ANSWERS

*What a little vessel of strangeness we are,
sailing through this muffled silence through the autumn dark.*

JOHN BANVILLE

Life is a gift. We never asked to be born. Yet here we are, living in this strange world of space and time, trying to work out what it's all about before the darkness closes in and extinguishes us. We are adrift on a misty gray sea of ignorance, seeking a sun-kissed island of certainty on which we might hope to find clear answers to our deepest and most poignant questions. What is the point of life? Why are we here? And what is it about us that makes us want to ask these questions?

This book reflects on what it means to be a human being at a time when many are wondering whether we can ever sort out the muddle and chaos of our world. If human beings are so wonderful, why is the world such a mess? Why do

we use wonderful things for such nasty purposes? Why are we so resistant to facing up to uncomfortable truths about ourselves? These are hardly new questions. They bubble up, time and time again—especially when events challenge our easygoing assumptions about our own future, or that of the world.

During the “Roaring Twenties,” most Americans were happy to buy into the genial optimism of the age. Like the stock market, the world seemed to be heading upwards. Then the bubble burst. The Wall Street crash triggered a financial crisis in Germany, which gave Adolf Hitler the political impetus he needed to get elected. By 1934, Germany had turned Nazi. The unwelcome and unexpected rise of Fascism triggered unease in many quarters. Perhaps most importantly, it led to an overdue reexamination of some complacent, settled assumptions about human goodness and rationality.¹

Reinhold Niebuhr—a theologian noted for his criticism of the lazy and unthinking optimism of so much Western thinking—spoke of a pervasive sense of cultural unease and disenchantment in 1942, as the world collapsed into global war. “We have lived through such centuries of hope, and we are now in such a period of disillusionment.”² Yet after an all-too-short period following the Second World War, during which we dared to hope for a future that lived up to our past, that world-weariness is on the rise again.

So is it time to look at ourselves again, holding up a mirror so that we can see ourselves as we really are, rather than as we like to think we are? As I grew up in the 1960s, I was

conscious of a pervasive if understated sense of optimism that now seems to have ebbed away, like a receding tide. Back in the 1960s, culturally defining and lingering memories of the Second World War helped to confirm the belief that things were getting better and the hope that they would keep on getting better. Yet that spirit of hope now seems to have faded in the face of economic crashes and political crises, the rise of global terrorism, and the growing threat of climate change. Paradise seems to have been postponed—yet again. Perhaps, as Milan Kundera suggested, our longing for paradise is really an unattainable desire to escape from the limiting condition of being human.³

A time of crisis and disenchantment calls out for a fundamental rethinking of who we are, rather than collapsing into cynicism and despair. That's what this book tries to do. It draws on both religion and science—two of the richest and most complex elements of modern culture—to explore human nature, especially our quest for meaning in life. In particular, it tries to address what is perhaps the most unsettling question of all, routinely ignored by so many smug and complacent social commentators: *What is wrong with us?* No single human discipline or research tradition is good enough to give the rich, textured, and complicated answer that we need if we are to confront our weaknesses and shape our future, both individually and collectively. But we have to confront them and work out where we go from here. It's all about understanding ourselves and this mysterious gift of life that has been entrusted to us.

The Quest for Meaning

So what is life about? As far as we know, we're the only species on earth that asks this question and dares to hope that we might find an answer. It seems that we are born to wonder, not merely to exist.⁴ To wonder is to reflect, to turn over in our minds what is known, to expand our imaginative capacity, and to ask what greater truth and beauty might lie behind our world or beyond our settled horizons of vision. We want to know why things take their present forms and whether they point to something deeper.

The question of the meaning of life used to be seen as making philosophy intensely relevant to life.⁵ Yet as the philosopher Susan Wolf has noted, it is hardly ever asked in philosophical circles nowadays—and then only by naive young students, whose lack of sophistication causes professional philosophers to cringe with embarrassment.⁶ Many now wonder whether academic philosophy has lost touch with the questions that really matter to people and which brought philosophy into being in the first place. That was the view of Henry David Thoreau (1817–62), in his widely read classic *Walden* (1854). “There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers.”⁷

Sadly, Thoreau's words will probably ring true for all too many readers today. Philosophy seems to have become the study of other philosophers, an exercise in academic introspection and professional self-reference rather than an engagement with the deepest questions of life—questions

that are now often dismissed as intellectually incoherent or naive because they are so difficult to answer. Yet perhaps we need to heed Milan Kundera, who remarked that “it is questions with no answers that set the limit of human possibilities, describe the boundaries of human existence.”⁸ Such questions probe our limits, challenging us to take intellectual risks in transgressing the boundaries of a cold rationalism.

Yet while Wolf ruefully notes that discussion of whether life has any meaning now seems to have been “banished from philosophy,” it most certainly has not been marginalized in the everyday lives of ordinary people, who seek meaning, value, and purpose in order to make sense of their lives and meaningfully inhabit our strange and puzzling world. Professional philosophy has not discredited the validity of trying to find meaning in life; it has just embargoed it.⁹

Happily, there is no shortage of others anxious to engage with this ultimate question and take it seriously. Psychology—an empirical research discipline which is far more attentive to human needs and concerns than philosophy now seems to be—has highlighted how important the question of meaning is to our well-being.¹⁰ Human beings seem to yearn for a “big picture” which helps us feel that we are part of something greater than ourselves.¹¹ That’s just the way we function as human beings.

To explore this further, let’s see how the human quest for meaning in life links up with another fundamental human experience—a sense of wonder at the beauty of our world.

Wonder and the Meaning of Life

From time to time, we find ourselves overwhelmed by a sense of awe or mystery, often when confronted with the beauty or majesty of nature, which seems for a moment to intimate a grander vision of reality, perhaps lying beyond the horizons of our experience. Many experience a sense of wonder and joy at the fact that there is anything at all; others when they are struck by the full significance of the astonishing fact that we are alive and able to behold this strange world in which we find ourselves. It is as if, for only a moment, a veil is removed and we catch a half-glimpsed sight of a promised land, waiting to be mapped and explored.

G. K. Chesterton spoke of the “object of the artistic and spiritual life” being to “dig for this submerged sunrise of wonder.”¹² Captured by this vision, we long to know more.¹³ It can become a gateway to science, art, literature, and religion¹⁴—in short, to everything that gives value and meaning to human life. A sense that there is indeed some such big picture becomes a driving force for creative exploration, in whose slipstream arise the great human quests for knowledge and wisdom.¹⁵

We cannot overlook the power of this sense of wonder to excite the poetic imagination, which throws down the gauntlet to what often turn out to be narrowly dogmatic and excessively cerebral accounts of our world, inviting us to consider that there is more to reality than an impoverished rationalist philosophy might allow.¹⁶ Nor can we fail to recognize the capacity of a sense of “rapturous amazement”

(Albert Einstein) to motivate and empower the natural sciences. Richard Dawkins and I disagree about many questions in life, but we both know and delight in the beauty and vastness of the world around us.¹⁷ Yet the immensity of our universe conquers our minds and forces us to engage with it on its own terms. Why? Because it is too vast for the “all too limited human mind” (Dawkins) to take it in fully.¹⁸

As Aristotle pointed out more than two thousand years ago, our experience of wonder serves as an invitation to set out on a journey of discovery of our world, in which our mental horizons are expanded and our eyes opened.¹⁹ The natural sciences are ultimately an act of intellectual homage to our universe as we try to grasp its mysteries with the tools we have at our disposal. Yet all too soon we find that the conceptual systems we forge as intermediaries for this act of comprehension strain to cope with these overwhelming realities, like old wineskins struggling to cope with new wine. Our sense of wonder expresses both a delight in the grandeur and glory of our universe and a recognition of the inadequacy of our capacity to take it in fully. As we shall see, science and religion, in their different ways, invite us to raise our eyes from the world of what we see around us, and try to imagine a deeper vision of reality which underlies and explains what we observe.²⁰

How Does Science Fit into This?

I opened this chapter with a quote from the Irish writer John Banville, whose early writings show a clear appreciation of

the “rage for order” that underlies the human quest for meaning. Banville notes how scientists such as Copernicus and Kepler sought to impose order on the world, and then tried to live in accordance with the framework of meaning they believed it disclosed. “I saw a certain kind of pathetic beauty in their obsessive search for a way to be in the world, in their existentialist search for something that would be authentic.”²¹

Yet the plausibility of that vision faded in the twentieth century, confronted with the fragility and provisionality of human knowledge. The cultural investment in science as a tool of discernment of meaning or value proved to be a misjudgment. As its failure became more widely appreciated after the Second World War, Western culture experienced a transition from “Cartesian certainty to Wittgensteinian despair,” in which the early hope of finding the Enlightenment’s Holy Grail, the crystalline clarity of rationalist certainties, gradually gave way to a realization of the irreducible complexity of the world.²²

Banville chronicles this slow and seemingly irreversible transition from rational certainty to existential despair and cynicism with a graceful prose that sweetens his bitter diagnosis of our situation. What one generation took to be rational certainties were found by another to be cultural constructions. It is a problem that rationalist writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries ignored or suppressed, hoping that the rhetoric of their “glib and shallow rationalism” (C. S. Lewis) would distract people from its striking lack of traction on reality.²³ While those rational certainties live

on in the curious backwater of the “New Atheism,” everyone else is trying to figure out how to cope with the predicament in which we find ourselves. Not even the sciences can deliver secure answers to the questions we ask about meaning, value, and purpose.

Albert Einstein explored this point in a landmark lecture at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1939. Einstein insisted that the natural sciences were outstanding in their sphere of competence. Yet he cautioned that “the scientific method can teach us nothing else beyond how facts are related to, and conditioned by, each other.” Human beings need more than what a “purely rational conception of our existence” is able to offer. Yet opening up such fundamental questions of meaning and value does not cause us to lapse into some kind of superstitious irrationality. “Objective knowledge provides us with powerful instruments for the achievements of certain ends, but the ultimate goal itself and the longing to reach it must come from another source.” For Einstein, the fundamental beliefs which are “necessary and determinant for our conduct and judgments” cannot be developed or sustained in a “solid scientific way.”²⁴ Einstein was emphatic that this was not a criticism of science. It was simply an informed and necessary recognition of its limits.

Einstein’s point is echoed in a striking statement of Sir Peter Medawar (1915–87), a leading British biologist who championed the public engagement of science: “Only humans find their way by a light that illuminates more than the patch of ground they stand on.”²⁵ Medawar’s remarks

point to the importance of transcendence in the human quest for meaning—the desire to see ourselves as part of a bigger picture, which goes beyond our immediate needs and concerns. Human beings seem to be driven to find something deeper than what can be found through an examination of the empirical world. There is a large body of research literature which suggests that we cope better with our complex and messy world if we feel that we can discern meaning and value within our own lives and in the greater order of things around us.²⁶

There are, of course, some who argue that science, and science alone, can tell us everything we need to know about the meaning of the universe and life. This position is often known as “scientism,” which is generally understood as “a totalizing attitude that regards science as the ultimate standard and arbiter of all interesting questions.”²⁷ Some scientists do indeed think that the part of reality that their methods can engage with constitutes the whole of reality; some philosophers have been unwise enough to try and “assimilate philosophy to the aims, or at least the manners, of the sciences.”²⁸

Yet most of the scientists I know would disagree, holding that science fills in part of the “big picture” of reality—but only part. We need to draw on other sources of wisdom to enrich the highly focused account of reality that science provides. Science is a reliable source of knowledge about our universe, based on what we experience. Yet there is no good reason to suppose that science can offer a complete account

of reality. It clearly needs supplementation. So what other resources might amplify our vision of reality?

How Does Religion Fit into This?

Science is unquestionably a core resource in the human quest for understanding and wisdom. Yet there is another, routinely dismissed by those who limit reality to what reason and science can prove. The sense of awe and wonder at nature which motivates science also turns out to be a gateway to what we so inadequately describe as “religion.” For the psychologist William James, religion was basically about “faith in the existence of an unseen order of some kind in which the riddles of the natural order may be found and explained.”²⁹ Yet James provides us with nothing more than a helpful starting point for reflection here. After all, one of the great themes of classic Greek philosophy was that there was an *archē*, a fundamental principle of order and coherence within our world and our minds.³⁰ Though not necessarily expressed in what we might nowadays call religious terms, this same idea lies at the heart of Christianity, as it does of so many other religious traditions.

Susan Wolf rightly notes that religion is now one of the most important sources of meaning and value in our culture.³¹ As human beings, we need something that will hold together our minds and our hearts, our reason and our experience, and not improperly restrict us to the imaginatively dull and impoverished world of rationalism. As the Cambridge

physicist Alexander Wood perceptively observed, “our first demand of religion” is that it should “illumine life and make it a whole.”³²

This point was made with particular clarity by Salman Rushdie in his 1990 Herbert Memorial Lecture at Cambridge University. Down the ages, he argues, religion has met three types of needs which have failed to be satisfied by secular, rationalist materialism.³³ First, it enables us to articulate our sense of awe and wonder, partly by helping us grasp the immensity of life and partly by affirming that we are special. Second, it provides “answers to the unanswerable,” engaging the deep questions that so often trouble and perplex us. And finally, it offers us a moral framework, within which we can live out the good life. For Rushdie, religion or the “idea of God” provides us with a “repository of our awestruck wonderment at life, and an answer to the great questions of existence.” Any attempt to describe or define human beings “in terms that exclude their spiritual needs”³⁴ will only end in failure.

This book takes a cue from Rushdie’s insight. Any comprehensive and reliable account of humanity has to take into consideration the innate tendency towards religion or spirituality that seems to be an intrinsic aspect of human nature. This does not validate religion or belief in God as *right*; it does, however, indicate that these are both *natural* and *human*. In other words, they are part of what it means to be human and must therefore be addressed as an integral aspect of human nature. This fact is now widely conceded.

Recognizing this fact helps us to make sense of what seem, at least at first sight, to be some remarkable inconsistencies—such as the leading New Atheist writer Sam Harris’s interest in Eastern mysticism. Yet Harris, like many other atheist writers, has simply recognized the importance of this aspect of human nature—what we might loosely call the “quest for the spiritual,” whether this is framed in theist or atheist terms.³⁵ It’s part of being human, irrespective of where that quest leads us in terms of our thinking about God or religion.

Religion: An Important Idea—an Unhelpful Term

Many are wondering if we need to find a new word for what we traditionally call “religion.” Growing academic and cultural interest in the phenomenon of religion has made it painfully clear that there is a real problem of defining what this actually is.³⁶ The word “religion” was extracted from classic Roman culture, within which its meaning was as limited as it was clear, and imposed by modern Western scholars upon a variety of human phenomena, thus creating the false impression that the term designated some global or universal phenomenon. Individual religions certainly exist, yet the global notion of “religion” is a social construction generated by a human desire to impose firm conceptual distinctions on a complex world. The phenomenon is real enough; the problem lies in the words we use to describe it.

So how do we get round this problem? The simplest answer lies in rejecting what we might call “essentialist”

theories of religion, such as the simplistic cognitive approach found in the “New Atheism,” which sees religion as a set of unproven beliefs.³⁷ In this view, there is a global reality called “religion,” and every individual religion is a specific instance or example of this universal, possessing the same essential property or properties. Despite their obvious differences and divergences, we can nevertheless discern some features that seem to be common across religious traditions. One of these core themes is the development of a “big picture” of reality, which provides a framework for the discernment of truth, beauty, and goodness. The philosopher Keith Yandell offers a good account of this aspect of religion: “A religion is a conceptual system that provides an interpretation of the world and the place of human beings in it, bases an account of how life should be lived given that interpretation, and expresses this interpretation and lifestyle in a set of rituals, institutions and practices.”³⁸

Now it could easily be objected that such systems of meaning are found beyond the category of religion—for example, in Marxism or the metaphysically inflated “universal Darwinism” of Richard Dawkins.³⁹ As the philosopher Mary Midgley pointed out, this helps us understand why Marxism and Darwinism—the “two great secular faiths of our day”—display so many “religious-looking features.”⁴⁰ Nevertheless, while this feature may not be a *distinguishing* feature of religion, setting it apart from everything else, it can certainly be argued to be *characteristic* of it. Religion is a placeholder for the deeper human quest for meaning,

made auspiciously vibrant through the delight of a dawning realization that there is indeed an object of our yearning—something beyond us which somehow corresponds to our deepest intuitions and feelings.

Yet this recognition of the capacity of religion to create and sustain systems of meaning naturally raises a question. Is there some way in which science and faith can weave their narratives into something greater, with an enhanced or enriched capacity to make sense of our world and our lives?

Weaving a Richer Vision of Reality

The leading sociobiologist Edward O. Wilson (born 1929) has long argued for the need for *consilience*—the ability to weave together multiple threads of knowledge in a synthesis which is able to disclose a more satisfying and empowering view of reality. “We are drowning in information, while starving for wisdom. The world henceforth will be run by synthesizers, people able to put together the right information at the right time, think critically about it, and make important choices wisely.”⁴¹

If Wilson is right, and we are indeed “starving for wisdom,” how can we become wise about the great questions of life, rather than merely informed about how our universe seems to function? We seem to be like people who know how a piano works but can’t actually use it to play a melody. As Wilson rightly observes, we need to *synthesize*—to weave together insights, uncovering a deeper and richer vision of

humanity which can guide and inform our life in the present and our hopes for the future.⁴² To do this, we need to build on the core notion of a “narrative of enrichment,” such as that which I set out and defend in detail in my earlier work *Inventing the Universe* (2015).⁴³

That’s our agenda in this book. It is steeped in the rich traditions of enquiry and reflection we find in both the natural sciences and Christian theology, while encouraging expansion of this vision of reality through every appropriate means. It aims to open up some of the deepest and most pressing issues about human identity, welcoming scientific insights on the one hand, while aiming to develop a “big picture” of human nature which transcends the limits of the natural sciences on the other. It does not deny any of the valid outcomes of scientific research, except the simplistic idea that these offer us a complete account of reality.

So let’s begin by pondering a bit more this strange world we are born to wonder about. One part of that world which inspires great wonder is perhaps its strangest and most puzzling occupant—the human being. Let’s turn to reflect on the puzzle of human identity.