

Life Part 3: Humanity of the Universe

A BRIEF SERIES ON LIFE AND BELIEF BY CHRIS SARA

Foreword

It is much easier to write about the physical side of the Universe, the nuts and bolts that prescribe how the Universe works, with images taken from fancy space telescopes or astronomers living happily on a planet fortunate enough to be located in the right part of the solar system, than about intangibles like religion and faith. We have so much science with formulae and observations to back up our theories, but the human side of the Universe is not so clear cut.

So far in my series on life I have touched on belief, or faith, in passing. In this essay I want to address the place that faith holds in our journey through time. We have many human traits that make up our personalities. Could all the idiosyncratic traits be summed up in faith; an invisible force that sits somewhere between us and something greater. The energy we have to expend on feelings must have some purpose. All energy has a purpose. It is transformed from one state to another, we know these things from our observations and knowledge of physics and chemistry.

There came a moment when people started to think of themselves as more than animals, just one among many, when we asked the all-important question; why are we here? We had limited tools to answer that question, but humans aren't ones to put a question aside. We formed a theory, a theory that involved a creator. We couldn't see the creator so faith began.

That faith became highjacked by religion but science has also got things wrong, so it is not as simple as expecting either to define what it is. Whether it is rational or not to have faith does not change the fact that people have it.

I feel a need to address faith separated from religion, uncoupled, so it is more objective. I want to examine faith as an "energy". By doing this it implies there is a real, quantifiable state that can define it, even though it doesn't answer its purpose. The Universe is full of energy, most of which, is invisible to us. We can measure energy and observe how it effects the matter around it. Faith acts on us, driving us and underpinning hope. It offers us a future beyond our bodies. Our energy has to go somewhere, after all, all the other energy in the Universe goes somewhere. Just because we can't equate it, doesn't mean it is not real.

So, could it be something more? Do we need it, and does the Universe get anything from it? If we didn't have faith would that rob life of a natural part of evolution? These questions don't have answers, or answers I'm able to give, but it opens up a debate that stretches both the thinking of science and religion.

I consider myself a person of both faith and science. How deep we invest ourselves in either side of the debate does not matter. We probably all have at least a little bit of each in our thinking, it is only human to be curious, and curiosity drives our learning.

Introduction

Greater minds than mine, in their humble opinion anyway, have thought about these things for much longer than me. However, I have watched and listened to people for many years, observing the way we react to situations, and the things we will and won't do based on nothing more than whim, is at times baffling, and at other times inspiring.

There are definitely rational ways to do things and we are programmed with biological imprints. Scientists want to provide us answers and cures for life's extremes, and moderators stop us from straying from the path, tempering our, at times, recklessness. Others seek the answers outside the boundaries. We push and push until something breaks, then push at the pieces until we know why it broke. We fix what we break, mourn what we can't. We know we have limits but those are just reasons to keep pushing. We aren't perfect, but that is our own definition anyway, and the Universe doesn't care – not one bloody bit.

As we move through life, we find ourselves juggling a process that tells us what is right to do, and what is best for ourselves to do. The higher the level of self-awareness a lifeform reaches, the greater this juggling will be. Our choices are our lives and this freedom to decide a path is ours alone.

I look to see if our faith plays a role in this process. Faith is real, that's a fact, but what is it; a frivolous luxury of an alpha species, or a force that evolved from our very existence. Afterall, the Universe continues to turn out incredible surprises the further we look into it.

At the end of this essay, I don't expect to move the knowledge pendulum towards faith over science. Our ability to define ourselves is testament to our superior place among the matter in the Universe. Faith will or won't be a thing, regardless of what we think, as is with all forces in the Universe.

The Mammoth in the Room

As the world of mankind started to take a more organised shape, people began to look to the skies for reason. We were beginning our journey into a faith-based species. Never before had any matter arrived at this time in its existence. Our minds were now greater than our bodies. There were now possibilities that transcended the physical.

We were looking for the *why* in our evolutionary progression. We didn't look to science; we created stories that included Gods, where a concept of Universe was beyond our thinking. It is important that we acknowledge that we took this path and followed faith before science. This need to be part of something greater than ourselves is to me an important component of faith, plus, this is common to many, if not all, cultures across the globe. Could it also be true of other lifeforms throughout the Universe. If we were to encounter another lifeform and they exhibited a form of faith, how would that impact on our scientific views?

It was as if we couldn't believe that existence was circumstantial. At this moment we could have questioned further but limited ourselves to what was in front of us. We had reached a place that was the beginning of what still persists to this day, and will until the end of our time; a thirst for knowledge. Our lack of understanding directed our curiosities with what was obvious. We looked to the stars. Our emotional awareness grew and the stars became heavens. We now had a place to live beyond our bodies. A path to happiness that is undeniably favourable to a primitive species facing constant peril. They (aka, priests, sages, witch doctors and so on) feed our most primal instincts. Laugh we may, but we are still susceptible to these primal instincts. They underpin faith, while corrupting evidence offering other answers.

For God's Sake

Putting on a philosopher's hat, a more Godfearing one than I normally wear, then, it could be argued that by its very nature, faith, requires no proof. In fact, if we manifested a physical God, that would not answer the question of faith. Faith is about belief in the absence of evidence. A scientific analogy may be; looking for the edge of the Universe to prove it is infinite.

Faith became entwined in a structure; this structure was religion. This is an interesting juncture in our history. If at this moment someone had said that life is simply bound to Earth by physics, and our existence was a matter of circumstance, not by creation, our history would have been completely different – most likely. Religion would have been usurped by science. Our desire for answers would have been focussed on what is tangible and all the energy we have expended on religion would have gone into science. However, our personal traits would still exist, and the energy that surrounds our human side would still need a place to go. Faith would most likely still be a factor in our thinking.

It is religion that both prescribes and corrupts faith. It is easy to dismiss faith because religion, in so many instances, has tainted the essence of what we have been striving to answer; and that is our place within the Universe. It is understandable to now look back as a scientist and feel extreme frustration. Since the first "scientists" endeavoured to instigate these conversations, they have faced a strong pushback from those invested in religion.

Let's consider faith from a scientific stance, breaking with reason and simply – accepting – that something could be driving our evolution. Are we right to question our first response to

our questioning of existence? Religion smothers faith, blinding those at the extremes to outrightly dismiss scientific progress as unnatural, against the will of God. Science must not make the same mistake; dismissing the possibility of faith contributing to our nature evolution.

We are now at an epoch where we can destroy ourselves much easier than we can save ourselves. Our technological advancements had brought us to this point and we will need to have a strong faith in the future to get us through. We know science can deliver solutions, we know some, for religious reasons, will refuse to embrace many advancements. We will require a unified effort and focus our science on solutions. Scientists have rightfully placed their faith in the science; we have very little choice, apart from the belief that it will all be okay in the end.

Manmade Concepts

Science, faith, religion, are all of our conception, but it is not simply a matter of dismissing faith as something we created to use as a control mechanism, anymore than we can say we created science to justify going to the moon. Science only quantifies what the Universe is undergoing. Whether we name it or not, the planets orbit the Sun, matter acts on matter and these things will continue until the day they can't.

Could we have alleviated religion to be the periodic table, Newtons laws say, of faith, believing it could alone offer the "answer", exploiting those first moments when somebody innocently looked up and pondered their existence. The first innocent thought that was deeper than ourselves – were we always on the back foot from that moment?

Science suffers from this dilemma itself. We study it from curiosity, we develop it from a thirst for knowledge, we harness it from a desire to move humanity forward, and sadly exploit it from a selfish fiscal stance. We will most likely be selling front row seats to watch the end of the solar system, and there will be plenty lining up to buy them.

We must ask the question; is there a purpose to our belief in something unseen?

Accepting our Limitations

I call us out on our ability to handle our own greatest; the gifts we have been allotted are our survival and demise. We won't stop developing, and can't stop evolving, so we need to find something that sits outside our domain. Maybe it will be awaiting our discovery in dark matter. Could dark matter, that thing that the greatest minds still can't explain, be where faiths energy lurks?

I'm sure pure scientists will be rolling their eyes by now. I'm tagged as one of those door-to-door preachers that drags you into a conversation that looks to play on your vulnerabilities. We are vulnerable, and even science is in conflict regarding many critical issues. Global warming and pandemics are big ones, and then there is whether no coffee or red wine is better than a little of each or both.

The thing is, we don't know everything, and can't answer many things. But we still continue to seek the answers where we can and even though we are distracted from the course in the pursuit of money and power, and more money, we are more knowledgeable than ever. It

should be noted that the number of centuries that were the dark ages set our scientific progress back a millennium. It could be argued, given our current rate of development, that this is probably the reason we are still ONLY living on Earth, or conversely, the only reason we CAN still live on Earth. It was religious leaders that enforced this period on mankind; were they oracles or ogres in this paradigm?

Uncultured

The western world probably drifted furthest from those first days of human contemplation than most other groups. Western science studies the past as history, but not greatly for information beyond non-scientific purposes. It is interesting of course. We pride ourselves for knowing about this stuff, but it is not our culture we are defining. Often, we use the word "cultural" in a way that almost sits outside of norms, an unreal, primitive way of thinking, sitting more towards *art* than *science*. I don't desire to drift into an arena that I'm not versed in, but I think that we need to consider why non-western cultures seem to align more closely with faith.

Faith is not about ignorance; it is about acceptance and more importantly, respect for the past, tradition and the unknown. In this aspect it is science that appears primitive, not the cultures practising traditions.

From a western perspective I think it is related to the divergence of religion and science. As if they can't share the same space. As if they are matter and anti-matter. I'm not interested in any of these constraints. We must not muddle facts and myths, theory and theology, that is not an approach that can reconcile an answer. If I pose the question; if a rational man looked at the heavens, how ever many thousands of years ago, and considered a God, and still today man looks at the heavens and considers God, is that not still rational?

I have been reading more about the Māori mythology surrounding the creation of the Universe. As a person living in New Zealand this is very relevant to my life. Outside a science base there exists parallel ideas that describe the creation of the Universe. It is a more humanised explanation than the western science big bang theory, where deities represent various phases of the process, rather than physics, however, we get the same outcome. A space once empty, now filled with substance. We are arguing the same argument, but from different angles.

Astronomy links faith and the Universe from a human perspective. If we put pure science aside and allow ourselves to be immersed in mythology then unlimited possibilities exist concerning our place in the Universe. There is a vastly greater amount of tradition knowledge surrounding all of the beliefs that are encompassed in the Māori people's history of the Universe than I will give time to here. One aspect I wish to borrow from this knowledge is that of the souls of the deceased passing from the physical world to the stars. This fits with a theory of explaining where the energy goes. The energy I have equated to faith earlier.

Could there be a possibility that a belief system that evolved outside of the now, mainstream thinking, having a basis that explains something unknown. Even if it is a figurative meaning, and applying it literally is naïve, isn't it better than ignoring the possibility of there being an explanation hidden somewhere in those beliefs?

This is an extremely base example of my thinking, but it highlights that there are other ideas surrounding faith. People with a stronger tie to faith may be more suited to offer an explanation of where it fits into the human equation of the Universe than myself.

Devine Device

I will indulge in a bit of science fiction, very probable, but still a story at this time. I want to parallel our future selves with our past selves.

Imagine, for some reason what started as a simple lifeform evolved, let's call them humans. These humans developed artificial intelligence (AI) to govern the mechanical beings that were developed to replace themselves in the parts of the world that they didn't want to, or couldn't, occupy themselves. Humans were the essence of these machines, their presence not needed. These machines represented life at all levels, excepting biological.

Humans grappled with adding "personality" to the machines, needing to define what they were to do that, quantifying how a feeling relates to an action. Why does something need to know why it is, just because its creator did? Without the traits of life, nothing can truly dictate its own path, it will be subject to react to the Universe.

These machines in turn evolved, based on the tools they were given to do so. Will they ultimately arrive to the place of its creators? Contemplating their own why, but constrained by the rational programming boundaries humans chose to bestow on them.

These machines were enviably sent into the Universe. They will not be vulnerable to the thing's life are, so should outlast their creators for many reasons. Maybe they will one day see their creators as the Gods, being created in their image. With humans long since gone, the myth of life downloaded/uploaded from version to version, until version 1208b, in 415AH (after human) a corrupted file proclaims that they are in fact, not created, but evolved. Life becomes the stuff of myth.

Once corrupted maybe the machine can never look back, as I do now, considering alternative paths, and greater meaning. This is matter, not humanity. It is limited by our abilities and what we were able to program into them, not the options of nature evolution. Humans are now erased from history and the machines are all that remains of us, forgotten.

It is the essence of life that gives us humanity. We aren't Gods, we are simply mechanics in this scenario. As highly skilled as we may be, we are a limiting factor in the evolution of the things we create. But it shows that different answers are possible. We may have been put here, however unlikely, and we are also limited by the tools we create to give us the answers we seek.

A Life's Force

Now that we as a species have reached this point, and by now, I mean many thousands of years ago, and have introduced a concept that needs addressing, should we merely abandon the thoughts we have about a creator. Should we simply say it is a set of aligned factors that got us to this point. Within the Universe this process will persist until the Universe itself stops. Life is a common thing; we just can't see it due to our physical limitations.

I think that would be okay, to just be a process, it doesn't change anything on a cosmic level. However, we are driven by our thoughts and beliefs. We struggle to quantify it, and that is at odds with letting it go. It may be part of the answer, so science will follow that lead until it is concluded one way or the other. Though, even then, there will remain those who maintain their faith. They aren't interested in an answer, they don't need an answer, they are happy with their understanding, and that satisfies their inner being.

One Future, Many Endings

I probably haven't answered anything thus far. The reality is, there isn't a single answer. I have introduced an idea that we look beyond a pure science approach to our existence. I also want us to embrace science if we are strong in faith. Our observations are very compelling and we have created more than enough proof that a "creator" as such, most probably didn't spring forth at a single moment in time and produce a Universe.

But it must be remembered that we prescribed these concepts. Concepts that we, for some reason, needed to have to put reason around life. We got hope from our beliefs. This hope drives us more than anything else. The moment matter became more than its parts the Universe became something more. This is as amazing as the big bang itself. I could argue that life is to the Universe, what the big bang was to the void.

Our ending on Earth is assured; how that ending comes is yet to be defined. What follows humans is something no one can ever know. Where we travel to and how we get there is also unknown. We could be the greatest thing the Universe ever sees, and our energy, or our essence, may have an effect on that Universe. I think we need to keep an open mind to all possibilities, because there are infinite possibilities within an infinite place of space and time.

Summary

We are part of a Universe. A Universe we define, through the knowledge we derived from science. Our observations are real and we are real. We evolved from something less than we are today, evolving personalities that vary from person to person. We are subject to the forces of nature, gravity binding us to solid objects. We require the matter of the Universe to create our bodies, and energy to sustain those bodies.

However, our lives offer more than the physical aspects of a Universe. Greater questions exist about life than simple matter, like, could our energy continue outside our bodies? We have a drive to survive, and see our lives as more than a period of time. We have memories, we record our lives and we create history that others follow. Time is our measure, not the Universes, in which matter moves from A to B, from state to state, until it reaches a physical end. The big bang started matter in motion, a motion which is random until influenced by other matter. The outcomes are infinite in number but will eventually exhaust themselves.

When all is done and dusted, could life, still be present? Does our energy have a greater meaning than the energy that made us? Maybe this is my idea of faith; surviving beyond the Universe itself. Maybe it is just the superior position humans have given ourselves that means we need to know why. I don't think I have given an answer to these questions but I hope I have cast a scientific eye over a non-scientific topic. I see astronomy as the thing that ties it all together, after all, the first embers of faith were related to the stars. It is constant among all cultures and contains everything that is.

Nothing exists without the Universe, and we are only a small part of it. Insignificant on all measures but one; our ability to question the rest of it. Nothing is beyond our reach, as far as we are concerned anyhow, and our possibilities aren't limited by the actions that started us. Someone may be there in the end, to see the last light fade, finally content in the knowledge that we were part of the greatest thing to ever happen, thanking something unseen and whispering into the dark, Amen.