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The Meaning of the Natural World
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The goal of the Enlightenment, that intellectual movement of the 18th century, was to establish human reason as the highest arbiter of knowledge, as opposed to divine revelation, the Christian Church's source of truth.

Although the accuracy of this claim is still debated among philosophers and theologians, it is clear that Reason and its offspring "Science" have become important arenas of knowledge in our intellectual and cultural worlds. Indeed, wherever religion and science have offered differing explanations of the natural world, or even the cosmos, our society nearly always treats the scientific view more seriously than the religious one.

But even as religion's descriptions of the world have seemingly been beaten back before the unrelenting onslaught of science, there is one question where the roles are absolutely reversed. This is the question of meaning. Put in large-scale terms, what meaning does nature, the universe, the cosmos, hold? Placed in a smaller scale, what is the meaning of a flower's blooming in the spring?

Science can answer the questions of how a flower blooms, why a flower blooms, and even why it blooms in the spring. But it cannot assign an ultimate meaning or purpose to that event. In fact, science cannot even assign ultimate meaning to its own explanations. The Theory of Evolution, for example, gives strong explanatory power to biology, enabling it to tell us why and how new species of animals and plants develop, why some disappear, and so on. But evolution does not, even cannot, reveal its own ultimate purpose.

This inability is not restricted to biology. Astronomy, for instance, can describe the formation of black holes and develop a theory of gravitation to explain it, but trying to specify the purpose of a black hole is almost nonsensical in scientific terms. Physics can explain why water is the only compound that expands as a solid form rather than contracts, but it does not tell us what that means.

Does this mean that "Life, the Universe, and Everything" (as Douglas Adams would describe it) is meaningless? Absolutely not. Instead, meaning must come from outside of science itself.

It turns out that religions have been doing a pretty good job at answering the question of ultimate meaning. As the biologist Kenneth Miller argues in his recent book, "Finding Darwin's God" (Cliff Street Books, 2000), "Our human tendency to assign meaning and value must transcend science and, ultimately, must come from outside it. The science that results can thus be enriched and informed from its contact with the values and principles of faith. The God of Abraham does not tell us which proteins control the cell cycle. But he does give us a reason to care, a reason to cherish that understanding, and above all, a reason to prefer the light of knowledge to the darkness of ignorance."