

# The search for meaning, and what it means

A review of  
*Surprised by Meaning:  
Science, Faith, and How  
We Make Sense of Things*  
by Alister E. McGrath  
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Science, Alister McGrath says, is all about looking for answers. Within its own sphere, it's pretty good at what it does. But there comes a point where science can't provide the answers. Science can be used by a dictator to create weapons of mass destruction as easily as it can be used by a humanitarian seeking to alleviate suffering through medicine. There is no scientific way to make the moral judgment that one use is better than another. These questions of morality and meaning are beyond the scope of science. This is where Christian faith comes in. "Christianity holds that there is a door hidden in the scheme of things that opens into another world: a new way of understanding, a new way of living, and a new way of hoping" (p. 5).



Photo: University of La Rioja

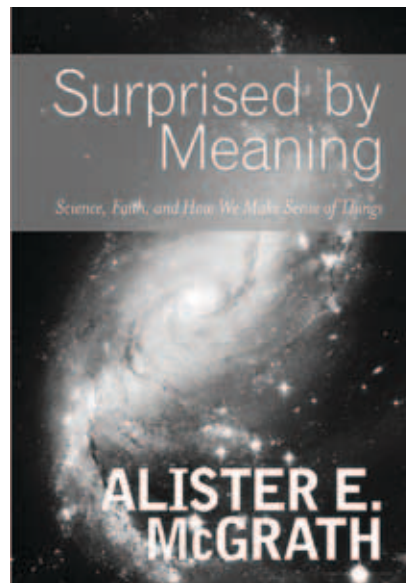
**Figure 1.** Science has been remarkably successful at explaining the physical world around us. But Alister McGrath argues that science is unable to provide answers to the fundamental questions of meaning and morals.

It is not contrary to reason, but it does transcend reason.

From this promising introduction, McGrath sets out on a journey that moves from the scientific method, to the New Atheists, to the Christian worldview and the scientific clues to the meaning of the universe. McGrath was formerly professor of historical theology at Oxford and is currently Professor of Theology, Ministry, and Education at King's College London. He has doctorates in biophysics and in theology, and has written prolifically on the history of theology and on the relationship between science and religion. In *Surprised by Meaning*, he moves easily between science, theology, and philosophy. There is much to admire in this book. But, disappointingly, McGrath presents a standard theistic evolutionist perspective at key points of his argument.

## Scientific method

McGrath spends the first several chapters of *Surprised by Meaning* describing the ways that scientists make sense of the world. Science is premised on the regularity of nature. Scientists don't believe that things just happen. They believe that



things that happen have a cause, that patterns can be discerned. They believe that nature is understandable and explainable. McGrath lists the three 'major understandings of scientific explanation':

1. Causal explanation: scientists can explain phenomenon X by demonstrating that it was caused by phenomenon Y. Conceptually, this is the easiest to grasp.
2. Best explanation: when faced with several possible explanations, scientists choose one based on its 'empirical adequacy'. It might not be possible to *prove* that this 'best explanation' is correct; warranted belief is sufficient.
3. Explanatory unification: scientists can explain phenomena by identifying connections between ideas that were previously thought unrelated (for example, the unification of electricity and magnetism by James Clerk Maxwell).

Science has been remarkably successful at explaining our world. But how far can its explanations go?

## How much can science explain?

At one time, McGrath himself believed that science provided all the explaining that he needed. As a young student preparing to attend Oxford to study chemistry, he was a committed

atheist. He believed that science left no room for superstitions like belief in God. But his first exposure to serious philosophy of science forced him to reconsider: “Was my atheism really some kind of logical fallacy based on a misunderstanding of the proper scope of science, or a misunderstanding of the nature of scientific claims?” (p. 32). He finally concluded that atheism was a ‘belief system’ rather than the ‘factual statement about reality’ he had assumed it to be.

When he encountered the writings of the ‘New Atheists’ in the mid-2000s, McGrath says that he felt a certain sense of nostalgia. They boldly claimed that science could explain it all. Their mistake, McGrath says, is the same one that he made himself as a teenager: conflating fact and interpretation. He quotes a passage from Dawkins, in which Dawkins describes genes: they “are in you and me; they created us, body and mind; and their preservation is the ultimate rationale for our existence.” McGrath comments, “This passage presents a completely defensible scientific comment—‘genes are in you and me’—with a series of equally indefensible metaphysical assertions” (p. 36). As another Oxford biologist, Denis Noble, wrote, one could just as easily turn Dawkins’ statement on its head: genes “are in you and me; we are the system that allows their code to be read; and their preservation is totally dependent on the joy that we experience in reproducing ourselves. We are the ultimate rationale for their existence” (quoted on p. 36). Science has no way of telling us whether Dawkins or Noble is correct.

McGrath says that when he realized as a young student that science has its limits, he was finally able to be intellectually honest. He was able to pursue the big questions that science cannot answer—questions about meaning, about purpose, about what holds everything together. He found his answers in Christianity. Christianity is a big-picture framework in which everything else makes sense.



Photo: (Left) Haukur Þorgeirsson, (Right) GeesJo

**Figure 2.** In *Surprised by Meaning*, Alister McGrath (left) builds on the insights of C.S. Lewis (right) to argue that mankind’s search for meaning can be satisfied by the Christian worldview.

This faith may not be provable, but it is not blind. It is reasonable because it fits with the evidence, warranted because of its ability to make sense of the world and of ourselves.

McGrath then goes on to critique the ‘god-of-the-gaps’ argument.<sup>1</sup> The God of Christianity does not need to find the gaps in scientific understanding; He is the explanation for those things that science understands. Indeed, He is the explanation for science itself.<sup>2</sup>

### Tiptoeing around design

All Christians should be able to agree with these points. But McGrath’s cautious treatment of miracles and the god-of-the-gaps argument does leave the reader wondering; does McGrath think that God ever intervenes directly in nature (or *adds* to nature, a better understanding of God’s miraculous acts)? Does McGrath think that there could be instances of God’s creative action beyond what our ‘science’ can reproduce? Creationists and design advocates would say that there are at least some areas in which standard naturalistic accounts are inadequate for understanding what we observe in nature. Irreducible complexity at the biochemical level, for instance, cannot

be explained by anything less than direct design by the Creator (or via programs He has designed). McGrath, though, shies away from dealing with any of these issues in his book. He adopts an intentionally minimalist approach by which he avoids allying himself with creationists or the Intelligent Design (ID) movement.

In the following chapters, McGrath looks at what he calls ‘clues’ in nature that suggest it was more than a mere cosmic accident. He focuses on ‘fine tuning’ arguments. For instance, the laws of physics are precisely ‘tuned’ to make life possible, when even very slight variations would have catastrophic consequences for life. There is no persuasive reason why the laws of physics are what they are and not any other configuration. This does not prove that God made them this way, but it does raise the compelling question—why are the laws set up so nicely for us? Science cannot answer this question, but a belief in the loving, relational God of Christianity makes sense of the observed phenomena. Some antitheists resort to unscientific ‘multiverse’ ideas, but this is a tacit admission that our laws are so well designed that they are unexplainable by chance in a *single* universe.

Again, McGrath treads very carefully so as not to challenge scientific orthodoxy. He assumes the standard evolutionary model of the big bang, cosmological evolution, and common descent by biological evolution. When he comes to biological evolution, he faces his biggest challenge. On the one hand, McGrath recognizes that a truly chance, directionless process does not fit well at all with Christianity. On the other hand, he is unwilling to join the Darwin dissenters in the ID or creationist camps. He casts his lot with Simon Conway Morris, who has used examples of ‘convergent evolution’ to argue that evolution was running in a particular direction with highly probable outcomes.<sup>3</sup> In contemporary evolutionary theory, ‘convergence’ is where the same physical feature evolves separately on unrelated species. Repeated examples of convergence are evidence that there are “stable regions in biological space” (the words McGrath uses to explain Conway Morris’s research, p. 79). The upshot of all this, according to McGrath, is that evolution is much less random than many people suppose. Contrary to Stephen Jay Gould, things wouldn’t turn out so differently if one were to replay the tape on evolution.

Conway Morris’s take on evolutionary theory is somewhat less revolutionary than it sounds. Ironically, more than a decade ago, it was none other than Richard Dawkins who argued (against Gould) that evolution was progressive, heading in a particular direction.<sup>4</sup> Still, it helps McGrath deal with one of the problems with fitting Christianity together with the standard evolutionary model. Unfortunately, he never deals with the other problems with reconciling the two. These include where sin came from (were Adam and Eve real people?) and whether death came before sin (were there lots of extinctions and much human death long before Adam lived?), to say nothing of the exegesis of Genesis itself, and all the New Testament passages that take Genesis history for granted.

### The meaning of the search for meaning

The final three chapters, thankfully, are for the most part free from arguments based on fitting Darwinism and Christianity together. They turn, instead, to an argument drawn from C.S. Lewis. In these chapters, McGrath considers human beings. He succinctly explains the Bible’s two central principles for understanding men and women: we are made in God’s image, but we are fallen.<sup>5</sup> Our fallen, sinful condition is amply evidenced by human history, with its too-numerous examples of war, hatred, evil, and cruelty. And yet we seem to have built-in desires for justice, peace, and a better world. Could these desires be clues to the possibility of something better than our fallen world? That, McGrath suggests, is the most reasonable interpretation. It is the grand narrative of Christianity “that makes sense of the deep human longing for beauty, significance, and meaning” (p. 98). Indeed, the ultimate purpose of man is to know God and enjoy Him forever—and until we find Him, we will always have an unfulfilled yearning that cannot be satisfied.

The basic message of *Surprised by Meaning* is that Christianity is the worldview that makes sense of it all:

“The Christian faith offers a framework of meaning which is deeply embedded in the order of things and ultimately originates from and expresses the character of God. The world may indeed seem meaningless and pointless. What is needed, however, is a lens or a conceptual framework which brings things into focus ... Christianity provides a framework of meaning which illuminates the shadowlands of reality, brings our observations of the world into focus, and weaves the threads of our experience into a pattern. C.S. Lewis summed it up well ... : ‘I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it, I see everything else’” (pp. 103–104).

This argument is sound, and it finds in McGrath an eloquent and erudite exponent. It is unfortunate that a central portion of the book is so heavily reliant on arguments assuming the accuracy of the big bang and of Darwinian evolution. McGrath professes to adhere to a biblical theological framework of creation, Fall, redemption, and restoration. He also professes to adhere to a scientific framework of Darwinism and geological uniformitarianism. But taken seriously, the latter guts most of the content out of the former. The meaning and message of creation is distorted and the Fall is rendered irrelevant, leaving the nature of redemption and restoration in question. McGrath, sadly, ignores this fundamental tension within his worldview.

### References

1. For further analysis, see Weinberger, L., Whose god? The theological response to the god-of-the-gaps, *J. Creation* 22(1):120–127, 2008.
2. This argument was also made forcefully in Lennox, J.C., *God’s Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* Lion Books, Oxford, 2007 (and see review by Weinberger, L., Grand undertaking, *J. Creation* 23(3):35–38, 2009). For a sociologist’s version of the argument, see Stark, R., *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-hunts and the End of Slavery*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2003 (reviewed by Williams, A., The biblical origins of science, *J. Creation* 18(2):49–52, 2004); Stark, R., *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success*, Random House, New York, 2005 (reviewed by Weinberger, L., Christianity as progress, *J. Creation* 20(3):26–28, 2006).
3. Conway Morris, S., *Life’s Solution: Inevitable Humans in a Lonely Universe*, Cambridge University Press, 2003. See also review by ReMine, W., Evidence for Message Theory, *J. Creation* 20(2):29–35, 2006.
4. Dawkins, C.R., Human chauvinism: A review of *Full House* by Stephen Jay Gould, *Evolution* 51(3):1015–1020, 1997.
5. McGrath does not explain how the Fall fits with the evolutionary timeline that he uncritically accepts elsewhere.