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. 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.

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. 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.

**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.
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.\(^5\)

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 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


5. McGrath does not explain how the Fall fits with the evolutionary timeline that he uncritically accepts elsewhere.