

REVIEW OF PHILIP GOFF, *WHY? THE PURPOSE OF THE UNIVERSE*, (OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2023)

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The intelligent design (ID) movement has often been characterized as a wing of theistic apologetics, and indeed many practitioners of historical religions have used ID arguments to support classic theism. But I have long predicted a different outcome: ID arguments would win the day, but people persuaded by these arguments would turn to neo-paganism, since paganism is the default theistic view throughout history in all the world. This book confirms my prediction. Of course, most scholars would not say ID has won the day, and this author does not identify with that movement. But this book essentially presents a lengthy ID argument, followed by a call to believe in a pagan deity. The fact that its contents are now utterly mainstream, published by a respected university publisher, shows how far the intellectual world has come toward ID, as long as one does not attribute the design to the God of the Bible.

I use the term 'neo-paganism' here non-pejoratively, as a catch-all term for the movement widely growing in our society variously embodied in 'spirituality', New Age thinking, Wicca, Gaia theory, and ancient cultural religions. Paganism was once a robust intellectual movement, in the Roman Empire and in other cultural centers, and it is so again. In a nutshell, it takes seriously the observation that every ancient person would have known, that the world has something deeply transcendent and purposeful about it, and posits a god or gods that are manageable, make few counter-cultural demands, and merge with us and the rest of the universe.¹

The first two chapters, and the first half of the third chapter (roughly a third of the whole book) could have been written by a Christian apologist. Chapter 1 gives the argument

from morality, and could have been written by C.S. Lewis or Tim Keller; Chapter 2 gives the argument from design seen in the fine-tuning of the universe, and could have been written by Bill Dembski or Stephen Meyer; the first part of Chapter 3 gives the argument from consciousness, and could have been written by J.P. Moreland. In fact, this material is well written and quite logically tight, making use of the modern understanding of Bayesian analysis, among other things, and theistic apologists would do well to read this part of the book to improve their own arguments.

Notably, in Chapter 2, Goff discusses the design implied by the fine tuning of cosmology, and makes a very good case, but does not discuss the fine tuning problem in biology, which is just as compelling; he seems to accept that natural selection explains it all. In this he is not alone—many theists such as Francis Collins do the same²—but the fine tuning problems in biology such as the protein folding problem and the origin-of-life problem generate probabilities just as fantastically low as in cosmology. Much of this was already discussed in the comprehensive, canonical tome, *The Cosmological Anthropic Principle*, by Barrow and Tipler,³ back in the 1980s, and the fine-tuning problems of biology have not gotten any easier; in 2007, well-known biologist Eugene Koonin argued that many-universes cosmology was needed to explain biological fine tuning.⁴ Of course, fine tuning in biology has

2 Collins F. *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (Free Press, 2007).

3 Barrow JD, Tipler FJ. *The Cosmological Anthropic Principle* (Oxford University Press, 1986).

4 Koonin EV. *Biology Direct*. 2007;2:15; *Biology Direct*. 2007;2:21. Koonin defines 'the first paradox of origin-of-life theory' as follows: 'To attain the minimal complexity required for a biological system to start on the path of biological evolution, a system of a far greater complexity, i.e., a highly evolved one, appears to be required. How such a system could evolve, is a puzzle that defeats conventional evolutionary thinking.'

1 See Jones P. *One or Two: Seeing a World of Difference* (Main Entry Editions, 2010) for further discussion of this movement.

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also been discussed in about 100 books on ID,⁵ which Goff eschews, but later in the book, he is happy to argue for ‘a cosmic designer who cares about value’, also called a ‘value-responsive designer’.

This is his proposal: that the universe is a conscious being with purpose, intention, and morality, which sounds very much like a god, but is not the God of the Bible. He spends a chapter arguing against the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and morally pure God, mostly on the basis of the problem of evil, which is the default argument for anti-apologists, but he does a good job of giving a balanced argument, including a discussion of the significant work by Plantinga.⁶ At the end of the day, while acknowledging that we cannot know all the intentions of God, nor should we expect to, he simply asserts his own ‘intuition’ that God should not have done things this way. He defines his Cosmic Sin Intuition as, ‘It would be immoral for an all-powerful being to deliberately create a universe like ours’.

Yet Goff’s replacement sounds a lot like a capital-G god:

‘The limited designer created rational matter, perhaps from a range of alternatives she might have created, and placed it in a fine-tuned universe with the aim of rational matter eventually, in the fullness of time, evolving into complex rational organisms’.

This god can create whole universes, and fine-tune them to the trillionth degree, with the purpose of doing good. But this god is limited, unable to stop evil from occurring, and not responsible for it. This is essentially the theodicy favored by ‘mainstream’ or ‘liberal’ religion in the past century, to reject the strict truth of the Bible and adopt a more vague concept of God who is benevolent but limited, who simply cannot prevent evil.⁷ It is not surprising that in the last chapter, Goff talks of how he has found a home in liberal Anglicanism.

5 Three tomes by Stephen Meyer give a good survey of ID literature: *Signature in the Cell: DNA and the Evidence for Intelligent Design*, (HarperOne, 2010); *Darwin’s Doubt: The Explosive Origin of Animal Life and the Case for Intelligent Design*, (HarperOne, 2014); *Return of the God Hypothesis: Three Scientific Discoveries That Reveal the Mind Behind the Universe*, (HarperOne, 20123).

6 Plantinga A. *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Eerdmans, 1989). My own work on this topic takes a similar approach to that of Plantinga, but emphasizes the crucial importance of an afterlife, i.e., final judgment, in making sense of the problem of evil—any suffering that is *finite* in duration can in principle be outweighed by an *infinite* reward. See <https://www.cityreformed.org/papers/thinking-about-the-problem-of-evil>.

7 An example of this is Kushner HS. *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (Anchor, 1981).

A good fraction of Goff’s book argues for this view as a version of panpsychism. At first, he argues for a fractured panpsychism, in which every electron and every quantum particle has an independent, choice-making consciousness, in the context of Bohmian pilot-wave theory. On this, I can comment as a quantum physicist, that it is ‘not even wrong’. In my recent book,⁸ I present a lengthy discussion of several points related to this. First, modern quantum field theory tells us that ‘particles’ are simply excitations (vibration resonances) of the underlying quantum fields, and do not have a well-defined existence. Second, the Bohmian pilot wave model has multiple basic problems. It requires *two* types of particles for every wave, namely the particles of quantum field theory, and another set of ‘Bohmian’ particles, with completely different predictions for these two types of particles. (For example, in an atom, the quantum electron moves, and the Bohmian electron does not move at all!) This strikes most physicists as kludgy and a violation of Ockham’s razor. Also, as discussed in my book, the math simply does not work out for a Bohmian interpretation of many types of waves.

Goff does not stick with particle-based panpsychism; however, he acknowledges the field theoretical view that fields, not particles, are at the base of our physical theory, and proposes that the field itself is conscious, which allows him to move to a universal god equated to the wave function of the universe:

‘The wave function [of the universe] is a conscious entity that is aware of the complete future consequences of the options available to it, and acts by choosing the best one’.

In this proposal, Goff is not alone in proposing a way to have purpose without a full God. Other versions have been proposed by various authors over the years, including Denton⁹ and Nagel,¹⁰ both of whom are happy to cite ID literature, and the latter of whom Goff discusses at length.

The fundamental problem that all these views have is that purpose, or teleology, by definition requires an awareness of the end state, and action to bring that state about. Those who want a ‘force’ or ‘law’ of teleology are intrinsically saying they want purpose without a purpose; a purposer that does not actually know the end state. Goff in his review of this approach

8 Snoke DW. *Interpreting Quantum Mechanics: Modern Foundations* (Cambridge University Press, 2024).

9 Denton M. *Evolution: A Theory in Crisis* (Adler and Adler, 1986); *The Miracle of Man: The Fine Tuning of Nature for Human Existence* (Discovery Institute, 2022).

10 Nagel T. *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

cites the possibility of 'emergence', that is, spontaneous increase of purposefulness from tiny, micropurposes or forces. But as I have reviewed elsewhere,¹¹ the physics of emergence was greatly oversold and was based on a 'trick', namely making a 1-bit machine from a physical system with one bit of information already embedded in it. In the past decade or so, most physics departments have abandoned efforts to explain life via emergence, and biophysicists have turned to reverse engineering real, living systems instead. Our experience is that micropurposes arise in systems with a larger macropurpose (e.g., bacteria arise in a fine-tuned universe), and not that micropurposes become macropurposes without any need for fine-tuning or direction from outside them.

Goff, however, does not land on spontaneous emergence of consciousness and purpose like Denton and Nagel; he moves to arguing for a consciousness intrinsic to the ground of all reality, fully aware of the end state and able to create whole universes to bring that about. In this case, we are really at a God, and the problem of evil once again arises—if the wave function of the universe is 'aware of the complete future consequences of the options available to it', why not refuse to create at all, if evil must occur? There seems to be no middle ground: an unaware ultimate purpose is no real purpose at all, and an aware ultimate purpose is a God and all that entails.

11 Snoke DW. Spontaneous appearance of life and the second law of thermodynamics. *Biocosmos*. 2022;2:1.

And so, in the end, the debate is the same as in ancient days; not 'Is there a God?' but 'What is God like?' Goff presents the history of the argument as though Darwin and Hume made it implausible to believe in God, but new data and reasoning has changed that in the past fifty years. It is more accurate to say that Darwin, Hume, and others made it plausible to not believe in God, but there never was a full explanation of life, consciousness, and all that, even in their day. The modernist program presented a view of upward progress that would soon answer all these questions, but that answer was always just around the corner, and never obtained. One might say that materialism is the explanation of the future, and always will be.

The ancients had access to most of the compelling arguments for cosmic purpose: watching a beautiful sunset, being aware of our own consciousness and sense of purpose, knowing that some things are evil, seeing the stunning intricacy of a butterfly. Almost all of them believed in some type of god or gods, and transcendent Purpose behind it all; that our sense of consciousness is intrinsic to the universe, not an epiphenomenon. After a brief excursion in the past two centuries into claims that science would answer everything, we are back to that point. The most culturally relevant academic discussion moving forward may not be the debate between the theist and the atheist, but between advocates of two different versions of theism, namely the unlimited God and the limited deity of Goff and neo-paganism.