Guiding Purpose and Meaning of Life

By Barbara Baudot

Vaclav Havel wrote that only "humankind's understanding of its place in the world will allow the development of new models of behavior, sets and scales of values, and objectives in life."[i]

There are many challenges to considering so weighty a topic in the wake the 20th century that has had its fill of large-scale social experiments. Nationalism, fascism, and communism are doctrines with precise beliefs and goals that have given sense to millions of people but have also bound the world in wars and massacres for the greatest part of that century. Moreover, the looming "clash of civilizations," which threatens to engulf the 21st century in fear and terror in the names of Allah, Jehovah, and God is likely to drive reasonable and peace-loving people towards cold, rational, and atheist cultures. Ideals and religion risk being identified with abuses and atrocities committed in the name of a cause or ideology.

The search for meaning and purpose, however, is not about grand ideologies or social experiments in the name of God. It is "simply" a quest for sense and direction that can inspire human flourishing, social harmony, and life in equilibrium with nature. It is not teleological: it is in its largest sense about "being." The decisive obstacle to this effort is that the prevailing western culture, likely in response to the tumult of the past and present centuries and the revolutionary advances in science and technology, seems to have broken away from its human, spiritual, and moral moorings. Ironically, the postmodern culture may suffer from its bleak entanglement of senseless connections, without obvious means to liberate itself from the bonds of brute materiality. The appropriate response to this crisis is reunion not only between the self and the world, but also between the heart and the mind.

Seeking meaning and purpose is part of the quest to respond not only to the perceived gap between self and world, but also to break down the walls that isolate individuals in their radical subjectivity. It relates to the notion that morality shapes empathetic and sympathetic relationships to things and to other persons. The search for meaning is comparable to seeking passage to a different dimension of Truth, and therein a promising route to an enchanting perspective on Nature and Life. If the discovery has the inner consistency of reality and offers even a distant echo of divine grace in the sentient world, it will somehow expand the horizons of human hope and a fulfilled destiny.

It would be misleading, however, to imply that the postmodern society has no goals or purpose: its goals and purpose are circumscribed by access to capital, natural resources, science, and technology. For Nature and many people, the dark side of western modernity is the perception that economic progress is the universal measure of well-being, the foundation for happiness, even implicitly the purpose of life. The success of a government is measured in terms of changing levels of economic activity. Good citizens

do their duties to society by participating in the market, through buying, selling, and producing efficiently. Social well-being and happiness are assumed to derive from success in this competitive environment, wherein *Monsieur le Capital* and *Madame la Terre* promise fulfillment in material things.[ii]

Concomitantly, the prevailing trend in modern societies is to ask governments to assure only an orderly playing field for private interests and market forces, and, if called on, to provide security and social safety nets when the private sector is reluctant to act charitably or when outside forces challenge the security of the state. Moreover, it is fashionable to consider modern democratic governments much like economic systems with their resource inputs and outputs of goods and services. Political inputs are the aggregates of social and individual wants and the policy outputs are stated variously in terms of wealth, security, and deference; or in terms of the functions of extraction, distribution and regulation.

This current conception of the public sphere is a legacy of a particular interpretation of the western Enlightenment and is reflective of Machiavelli's consideration that effective governments are amoral, their leaders concerned with matters of power—how to get it and keep it. But the encountering of serious social inequities and life threatening environmental destruction along the way appears to affirm Plato's observation that reason requires the spirited, magnanimous heart to control the largest part of the soul.[iii] Without magnanimity in its members, society's purpose is circumscribed by its material preoccupations and its future survival may be jeopardized.

In the classical period, the vision of government is quite different. Individualism is not a virtue. Individuals with their political natures are one with the substance of the *polis*. Aristotle, the father of comparative politics, having examined the workings of over a hundred constitutions, characterizes as good those governments that work selflessly for the happiness of all. In his idealistic conception of the *res-publica,* he considers life in the *polis* a fact of nature. "Political animals" are desirous of living with others according to their common interests, in proportion as they severally attain to any noble measure of well-being. What is best for the citizen coincides with what is best for the state. [iv] The constituents of the best life are not the external things of wealth and power [though in moderation these are essential externalities,] but the virtues of intellect and character.[v] The best state is happy and acts nobly. To be a human being is to strive to attain noble things; and there is no deed either of person or the city that is to be separated from virtue and prudence. The courage, justice, and prudence of the city have the same power and form as those virtues in individual human beings, who are called just, prudent, and sound. And, every citizen is given the opportunity to achieve excellence. [vi]

While there is no way to attain or to go back to an ideal form of government such as Aristotle designs, nor is it necessarily desirable given that his *polis* excludes women and slaves, who compose the bulk of the population. It remains unquestionable that the sense of meaning and purpose Aristotle attaches to life and government is instructive. It must

be added that even modern political leaders have some inkling of the values and virtues of such just and ideal forms of government, judging from the sometimes noble and lofty language of their speeches.

The reality of modern political power and imagination, which makes difficult the quest for harmony between and within societies, as well as between humankind and the natural environment, has much to do with the state to which society has advanced in science and technology. Such focus seems to preclude realization of projects and solution to problems that require imaginative and transcendent thinking. Professor Imamichi addresses the problem of public purpose as one of means and ends captured within a framework circumscribed by technological possibilities.

According to Imamichi, the modern western culture has inverted the logical structuring of human intention. The classical form of this structuring is elaborated in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics:* the major premise is the human aim or ideal, while the minor premise is the range of free choice of means to attain the aim. Following this structure, Imamichi notes that human goal-orientation has spurred technological progress to a position of primacy over other human aims. Thus, today, while the minor premise remains the optional choice of means, this minor premise has been elevated to the major premise in place of "the goal to be realized" now relegated to the minor position. Because of the inversion of means and ends in this syllogism, goals are no longer transcendent ideals—but are determined by the horizons of technological change and technological power.[vii]

Imamichi's views are corroborated by Steven Hawking who observes that philosophy has been overcome by advances of scientific theories. In his view, 18th century philosophers considered the whole of human knowledge, including science to be their field and freely discussed questions concerning the meaning and nature of the universe. Philosophers in the19th and 20th centuries have vastly reduced the scope of their inquiries. This narrowing of inquiry has promoted the remark of Wittgenstein that "The sole remaining task for philosophy is the analysis of language." Hawking adds, "What a come down from the great tradition of philosophy from Aristotle to Kant!"[viii]

So where does this leave society? It leaves it in a strange and unhappy condition. Artists and scholars in a variety of depressing ways grotesquely portray these views. The imagery Roland Barthes offers in his critique of a classical Dutch painting captures human life in the postmodern era wherein all vestiges of its sacredness have faded away, to be replaced with humankind and its empire of things: "[Humankind] stands now, [their] feet upon the thousand objects of everyday life, triumphantly surrounded by their functions. Behold [them], then at the pinnacle of history, knowing no other fate than a gradual appropriation of matter."[ix]

Barthes characterization of humanity in this image evokes a postmodern version of the classic "Nobody," captured already in the 16th century, in Holbein's painting of the *Table*

Top. This picture portrays the ubiquitous "Nobody," a sleeping creature surrounded by fragmentary things that are unrelated to each other and to everything else.[x] Such descriptions represent the phenomena of a particular time in history when "nobody" is seen to be responsible for the deterioration of the ordinary household, which by extension, evokes a disorderly social world where nobody's position is fixed.[xi]

Nobel Prizewinner in Physiology and Medicine (1965), biologist Jacques Monod, adds to this pessimistic vision: "the blind and disordered processes which lead to our origin looked toward nothing, were directed toward nothing, and were stumbling in the dark. Man, appears without purpose and without meaning."[xii] It should be added that all these representations, impressions, and ideas bear the message that a purely material and vacuous sense of life and of the universe leads to the belief that whatever occurs happens by chance and that "no body" is responsible for events predetermined by this unknown, undiscoverable, purely physical fate in which human values are relative and readily reduced to random insignificance.

Such observations as these provoked Lecomte de Nouy to point out that humanity had decided its own meaninglessness using the tools it had itself invented. He notes, in the introduction to his book *Human Destiny (L'Homme et sa Destinée)*, that the human ego and intelligence have deprived humankind of its meaning for being by destroying, in the name of science, the religious and philosophical doctrines that heretofore gave purpose to human efforts and actions. In so doing humankind has reduced itself to a vision of pulsating plasma.[xiii] With such destruction of meaning, notions of morality, spirituality, and hope vanish, leaving in their wake but a discouraging sentiment of total vacuousness.

Although human knowledge and interpretation of natural science can be blamed for catapulting the individual into a global, technological civilization under a regime of domineering materiality, this is not the whole picture. Physics and higher mathematics point to many more significant ideas concerning the realities of the universe and life that can remove the chains binding human intentions to material circumstances and aspirations. With the assistance of enlightened reason, high mathematics, and imagination, modern science can also lead humanity to a high sense of purpose that perceives value in wisdom and ecological harmony. Physicist Brian Greene's view summarizes this standpoint:

> To open our ideas to the true nature of the universe has always been one of physic's primary purposes. It is hard to imagine a more mind stretching experience than learning, as we have over the last century that the reality we experience is but a glimmer of the reality that is.[xiv]

The sublimity and order, which reveal themselves both in the spirit of Nature and in this world of thought, offer inspiration, possibilities, and purpose to those suffering the futility of material aims, desires, or necessities.

Physicists and high mathematicians invite seekers of meaning to journey on an ultra-microscopic trajectory to the precipice of infinity and void, which Albert Einstein calls

the frontier of science and religion. Einstein defines this experience as a cosmic religious feeling which:

> (. .)takes the form of a rapturous amazement at the harmony of natural law, which reveals an intelligence of such superiority that, compared with it, all the systematic thinking and acting of human beings is an utterly insignificant reflection.[xv]

Einstein esteems this feeling to be the guiding principle of life and work, in so far as individuals succeed in keeping themselves free from selfish desire. He finds it akin to that feeling which has possessed the religious geniuses of all ages. Einstein is not alone in this discovery and its source of meaning and purpose.

Building on Einstein's theories of relativity (1905, 1915), Max Plank's quantum theory (1900), and Werner Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty (1926), a group of scientists at Cambridge in the 1930's, plumb the depths of physics and molecular biology and find the world to be inexplicable in material terms. In looking for the fine structure of molecules as to their atoms, one enters a region dominated by void. At the fine structure level, just when one might expect to find ultimate particles of matter, matter vanishes—only electrical and gravitational fields cavort in the void. Astronomer, Sir Arthur Eddington, concludes that: "The stuff of the world is mind-stuff."[xvi] While Eddington agrees that there are two kinds of worlds—the familiar one of actuality and that of physics, their only connection is through the human mind, which can appreciate both the solidity of the object world and the metaphysics perceptible only to mathematics. Scientist, Sir James Jeans, concludes that if the universe is one of thought, then its creation must be an act of thought. As an act of imagination or the Logos, the universe is thought up into existence by the shaping of the void. This idea is validated by Einstein's matter-tensor, which gives the mathematics whereby substance (mass-energy) can be accounted for by pure non-Euclidean geometry, i.e. the shaping of the void. [xvii]

Nearly 75 years have passed, since the Cambridge club theorized the existence of the world as a function of mind. In the meantime many more sophisticated mathematical theories of the nature of the Universe have been presented. Super String Theory and M Theory, an advanced version of string theory, may successfully merge general relativity and quantum mechanics, and hold out the hope that humankind is closer now to really understanding the deepest laws of the universe, though actual experimentation to verify their findings is still beyond the pale of science. According to Greene, string theory holds that there is one fundamental building block of the multidimensional universe; that is the string.[xviii] The wealth of particle species simply reflects the different vibration patterns that a string can execute, just as a string on a violin or cello can vibrate in many different ways, producing a full range of sounds. Greene writes:

> Metaphorically, the different notes that can be played by a single species of string would account for all of the different particles that have been detected. At the ultramicroscopic level, the universe would be akin to a string vibrating matter into existence.[xix]

M theory and super string theories have also identified branes of different dimensions as extended objects that arise with strings. Perhaps as today's more controversial but promising Matrix theory suggests, zero branes are the ultimate building blocks.[xx] This would not seem to change the latest theory that matter emerges from a series of vibration patterns, perhaps now shaped in the void by a master musician playing his cello, to build on the metaphor begun by Jeans, mentioned above.

There are many thoughts to be considered that seem related to this tour through science in search of meaning. Certain ideas might have a positive influence on postmodern society and its "nobodies," by enticement towards a more meaningful sense of personhood. Some ideas follow directly from the most recent studies of the universe. Others derived from time honored wisdom gain modern relevance because of these discoveries. The humility that comes from recognizing that humankind's material conception of the world is only a glimmer of reality, gives renewed validity to earlier views on the importance of transcendent thinking for society's well-being and humankind's flourishing. A few examples follow:

The wonders of the universe, in particular, the remarkable arrangements of carbon and oxygen nuclear resonance offer astronomer and historian, Owen Gingerich, evidence of some grand design and designer. He recognizes nevertheless that there will always be scientists who think science teaches that the universe itself suggests no point to existence and those detractors will say, when faced with the transcendent possibility; "since we are contemplating them, those details could be no other way." For Gingerich it is not a matter of scientific proofs and demonstrations, but of making sense of the astonishing cosmic order that the sciences repeatedly reveal and even more so the remarkable evidences of design in the biological realm. As Jeans did before, Gingerich concludes: "A common sense and satisfying interpretation of our world suggests the designing hand of a super intelligence. (…) in other words, the heavens do declare the glory of God," and bowing to the skeptics he adds: "but only to the prepared mind." [xxi]

Gingerich further observes that humankind does its best to create a picture that makes sense when all the pieces of the puzzle are not at hand. He maintains that the same principle should hold for faith in a powerful Consciousness beyond the capacity for humankind to grasp, but for which nature gives astounding and ample evidence. In light of the rapidity with which modern society is consuming nature and its resources, Gingerich concludes that unless society learns the message of servanthood and sacrificial love that a transcendent belief in the meaning the cosmos conveys, humankind may be doomed as a species.

To those skeptics who fail to recognize that a deeper understanding of the universe can make life richer and more meaningful, Brian Greene offers his own experience. Comparing himself with Camus who chooses the hapless but courageous Sisyphus as his hero, Greene chooses the courageous scientists Newton, Einstein, Neils Bohr, and Richard Feynmam to be his heroes. In so doing he begins a journey, the destination of

which, would enable him to begin to assess life and the universe on all possible levels, not just those accessible to the frail human senses.[xxii]

In this postmodern age of skepticism and non-truths, however, the world vainly seeks facts and then proofs. In science there are no such fixed facts and proofs on such subjects. Scientific thinking and instrumental rationality, as Albert Einstein reminds the world, have strong limitations. The whole of science is "nothing more than a refinement of everyday thinking (…) even the concept of the 'real external world' of everyday thinking rests exclusively on sense impressions."[xxiii] Science is methodically directed toward finding regulative connections between our sensual experiences—bringing together by systematic thought, the perceptible phenomena of the world into as thorough going an association as possible. In the immediate it produces knowledge and indirectly, implies means of action. But, such empirical thinking is neither the way to determine the meaning in life, nor to identify the goals and values essential to social harmony, sustainable life-styles, and happiness. These can only be discovered through reason by way of philosophical or religious thinking.[xxiv] The state of the art of thinking about the laws of the universe does not appear to alter these observations of Einstein.

Evidence of the existence and practical importance of higher meaning is to be found in the timeless import of religion as well as literary and philosophical work inspired by transcendent vision. For example Hinduism, an ancient faith practiced by nearly a billion people in India, emphasizes the separation of soul and body, the latter being ephemeral and mortal, while the soul is immortal, imperishable, and all pervading. The soul is the cause, the manifestation, as well as the support of the universe; changeless, and indestructible. Realizing the allness of soul as the causation of the universe is seen as the illumination of divine light inside of oneself. Such realization is the ultimate outcome of total immersion in spirit and meditation. The Vedas and Upanishads expound and clarify this as the ultimate "truth". The seer, perfecting his efforts, receives " enlightenment", by means of an inward journey, an experience recorded in many other religions over the centuries.[xxv]

Alexis de Tocqueville, reflecting on the materialist tendencies of the American culture in the 1820's, observes that while a belief in materialism is probably the most rational to the human being, a belief in the super sensual and immortal principle is indispensable to humankind's greatness. However tenuous that belief might be, the body and its wants, consciously or unconsciously, become secondary to the immaterial nature of man.[xxvi] This conviction "would give a lofty cast to the believers' opinions and tastes, to bid them tend with no interested motive, as it were by impulse, to pure feelings and elevated thoughts." Tocqueville finds mere belief in the separation of soul and body—the former surviving the latter—, was enough to give Platonic philosophy the sublimity which distinguishes Plato's work, while the works of his professed materialist contemporaries, have not reached to the 19th century in meaningful form. Moreover, he observes that the greatest number of the most famous minds in literature and arts adhere to some doctrine of spiritual philosophy. [xxvii]

Tocqueville finds relevance in these observations for politicians as well. Decision makers are under obligation to behave as if they themselves believe and to scrupulously conform to moral principles in the management of public affairs, in order to teach the community at large to know and to observe individual and civic virtues.[xxviii]

The metaphorical reference to music in relation to the vibrations of the strings that constitute the universe in a strange way suggests a significant connection between the essential harmony of the universe and the prescription for building sound character essential to Aristotle's conception of Happiness, the ultimate purpose of life. Aristotle states that certain music transforms the soul in ways that ultimate in such "blessedness." Moreover, he observes that: "the young have a certain affinity for harmonies and rhythms; hence many of the wise assert either that the soul is a harmony or it involves harmony." He adds that the tunes of Olympus inspired souls and that inspiration is a passion of the soul-connected character. In rhythms and tunes, Aristotle finds likenesses akin to the genuine natures of anger and gentleness, of courage and cowardice, of moderation and excess.[xxix]

A glimpse of reality is perhaps offered in the timelessness of transcending ideas. Aristotle's esteem for powers of music seems to be shared by certain contemporary scientists discovering the intellectually stimulating qualities of Mozart symphonies. Such discoveries, and others, bare out today what Aristotle surmised thousands of years ago, when human intelligence had a more instinctive sense of Nature. The human mind is altered by music, perhaps bringing it closer to the never-ending symphonies of the strings and branes of the universe lead by the baton of a master Consciousness.

Meaning and purpose in just "being" echoes in the music of nature, as revealed in a story of a small bird, told by Giuseppe Sermonti. "The bird, Cyanosylvia svecica (blue throat) delivers his most artistic song, objectively the most complex, when relaxed in the depth of its bush, poetizing to himself." The song changes when the bird seeks to secure his own interests, becoming a monotonous repetition of strong strophes and all grace is lost.[xxx]

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[i] Vaclav Havel, "The Challenge of the World," 12.

[ii] This expression is used by Karl Marx in the context of reification. See Capital, Vol III, 48.

[iii] See discussion on Plato's view of the roles of the three parts of the soul above.

[iv] Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans Carnes Lord, Book III, ch. 6, 1278 b. (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984.

[v] Aristotle, *The Politics*, Book VII, Ch. 1, 1323 a-1323 b.

[vi] Ibid.

[vii] Tomonobu Imamichi, "The Concept of an Eco-Ethics and the Development of Moral Thoughts," *Man and Nature*, ed. George McLeon (New York: University Press of America, 1984), 213-14.

[viii] Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1988) 190-191.

[ix] Roland Barthes, *A Barthes Reader* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 62-63.

[x] *Hans Holbein D.J: Des Meisters Gemalde in 252 Abbildungen*, herausgegeben von Paul Ganz, (Stuttgart und Leipzig: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1912) 6-7.

[xi] Rosalie Colie, *Paradoxia Epidemica: The Renaissance Tradition of Paradox* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966) 295-300.

[xii] Jacques Monod, *Le Hasard et la Necessite*, (Paris: Poche Collection Essais, 1973) cited in Giuseppe Sermonti, "Is There a Purpose in Nature?" in *Is There a Purpose in Nature*, ed. Ivan Havel et al, 33.

[xiii] Lecomte du Nouy, *L'Homme et sa Destinée [Human Destiny]*, (Paris: La Colombe, Editions du Vieux Colombier, 1948) 15.

[xiv] Brian Greene, *The Fabric of the Cosmos*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004) 12.

[xv] Albert Einstein, *Ideas and Opinions*, , based on *Mein Weltbild*, edited by Carl Seelig, and other sources (New York, Bonanza Books, 1984), p. 40.

[xvi] David Foster, *The Philosphical Scientists*, (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1993) 2.

[xvii] Ibid, 2-16.

[xviii] Brian Greene, *The Fabric of the Cosmos*, 346-348. M theory holds that there are 11 dimensions to the Universe.

[xix] Ibid., 347.

[xx] Ibid., 489.

[xxi] Owen Gingerich, "Do the Heavens Declare?" in *The Book of the Cosmos: Imagining the Universe from Heraclitus to Hawking*, D. Danielson ed. (Cambridge MA: Perseus Publishing 2001)522-528.

[xxii] Brian Greene, *Fabric of the Cosmos*, 17.

[xxiii] Albert Einstein, *Ideas and Opinions* 290-1. See also remarks on Bertrand Russel's *Theory of Knowledge*, ibid, 22-23.

[xxiv] Einstein, *Ideas and Opinions*, 50.

[xxv] Contribution from Rangaswami Krishnamurti derived from life experience and textual sources --Swami Yatiswarananda, Ramakrishna Math, *Universal Prayers*, Madras. William E. Williams,Nicolas-Hays, Unbounded Light, York Beach, Maine.

[xxvi] As an example of how tenuous this belief had to be, De Tocqueville offered that belief that the soul passed into the head of a hog.

[xxvii] De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, (New York: Everyman's Library, 1994) 146-147.

[xxviii] Ibid.

[xxix] Aristotle, *The Politics*, 1339-1340.

[xxx] Giuseppe Sermonti, "Science With Meaning, Symbol, and Beauty," *Is There a Purpose in Nature*, ed. Ivan Havel, 168.