

## 'On Purpose' by Charles Birch - a personal response.

Charles Birch's book, "On Purpose", was published in 1990 in the US as "A Purpose for Everything", a title which unfortunately seems to give the impression that it is about how everything is for the best if only we knew, since otherwise God wouldn't allow it to happen. Birch is describing a very different universe from that.

As part of his view of how the universe works, Birch seeks to establish that purposes can be real causes in our lives and for the universe as a whole.

I agree with him that human life feeds on purpose. Purpose, the sense of meaning in life, and creativity are what one loses with clinical depression and they are what can keep depression at bay if they can be regained. A sense of being free is also fundamentally important to us.

He mentions with approval the book of Auschwitz survivor, Victor Frankl, - "Man's Search for Meaning"(1964), which demonstrates how people who have a strong, positive set of beliefs cope better in extreme situations. But Frankl mentions that this was true for Communists and other atheists as well as for Jews and Christians. Birch ignores that point.

He believes that only those who are able to link their own life with something eternal can really have a sense of meaning in their lives. He dismisses the existentialist idea that we can set purposes for ourselves in a meaningless universe, as a self-delusion. Yet there is something absurd about telling a person like Phillip Adams, who believes one can give meaning to one's own life without any link to the eternal, that he may feel his life is meaningful but he is simply mistaken about what he feels.

Of course, what Birch says about needing to relate to the eternal may be true for a majority of human beings.

However, he is not advocating a life devoted to the eternal only. Later in the book, he reminds us "By their fruits ye shall know them."(He is a Christian, though a very different one from in his fundamentalist youth). One of the purposes he wants us to adopt is that of preventing the deterioration of conditions for life on this planet and for human civilisation, which he sees happening. As a member of the Club of Rome, he isn't afraid to state that the world's population may yet hit the eight billion mark. Ironically, many existentialists, Humanists and others have set themselves the "save the world" purpose too.

According to Birch, Bertrand Russell said that either life is matter-like or matter is life-like, and chose the former, while Alfred North Whitehead (originator of process theology) chose the latter. Yet Russell spoke favourably of Leibnitz' idea that the ultimate stuff of the universe was as much mind as it was matter. This is the position Birch arrives at, except that he does not use the term "stuff" which sounds "thingy" but speaks instead of "events" or "processes".

Birch is contrasting two broad ways of viewing the world: on the one hand, mechanism which is deterministic, that is, it does not allow for free will or self determination; and an opposing viewpoint that emphasises some level of purposiveness, sentience, free will and creativity not only in people but also (in a primitive way) in simpler living things, even at the molecular, atomic and subatomic levels. (This only applies to what Birch calls individual entities. Things he calls "aggregates", like tables, chairs, pens and stones, do not have mind-like characteristics.)

I have always been fascinated by the question of how mind or consciousness relates to the brain and how it could have arisen in evolution. Some theorists argue that consciousness just emerges in evolution when there is a big enough collection of neurones, or brain matter. Birch argues that mind (which for him means some level of purposiveness, sentience and free will) was present from the beginning; it just became more complex as living forms became more complex. I would be content to accept that as likely to be true simply because other characteristics of complex organisms are rooted in some characteristic of earlier forms. Why should we think something as startling as consciousness arrives out of nowhere?

In his argument against mechanism, Birch claims that a living cell has much greater responsiveness to its environment than any machine ever could. But how can he be so sure that his claim holds for future machines? Even a modern car takes some account of its environment (eg the engine takes note of the temperature, the oxygen level, there are anti-collision devices, anti-skid devices etc) and future machines may be extraordinarily responsive to their environments.

Sometimes the images Birch gives us are not the most useful to his argument. He tells us that we would not hesitate to ascribe mind to an amoeba on the basis of its behaviour if it were the size of our pet dog, just as we ascribe mind to the dog. Yet what does this say about our concept of mind, since a great deal of an amoeba's behaviour can already be explained as cause and effect at an electro-chemical level? I don't think Birch escapes from the possibility that the amoeba, the dog, everything else to which we ascribe mind including ourselves could ultimately be explained in a cause and effect way, that is, a deterministic, mechanistic way. Perhaps mind or consciousness is an epiphenomenon – that is, something that is just given off by the electro-chemical activity in the organism as an effect and something that is never itself a cause of such activity?

Richard Dawkins, another distinguished biologist, could probably use all the examples of biological phenomena in Birch's chapter "Purpose in Nature" and give us an equally plausible account from a viewpoint that Birch would call deterministic or mechanistic. My own hunch is that Birch's view is probably closer to the truth since mind or consciousness as an epiphenomenon supposes that it is useless and nature rarely indulges in something useless. But Birch doesn't really prove someone like Dawkins wrong.

Birch is very influenced by the new physics, particularly quantum physics, which he says argues against absolute determinism. "Instead," he says, "it provides a role for chance and the notion of probability of events occurring. Inevitability is replaced by probability." I'm very impressed with the weirdness of quantum physics too. Like Birch, I think quantum phenomena seem to endorse at least some degree of free will in the universe (although I am aware a physicist would have to switch to a philosopher's hat to talk about free will.) We must remember, however, that it is not impossible that quantum theory itself may be an approximation to some deeper theory and that theory may be ultimately deterministic. It's rather hazardous to base one's belief in God (because that is where all this is leading) on the current state of physics. After all, Newton did that, and Birch regards Newton's God as superseded along with his physics.

However, if Birch is correct and all nature even down to subatomic particles (or "events") has some kind of mental aspect, and if that really does mean purposiveness, sentience, free will and creativity, it would seem to be an easy step to the view that the universe as a whole must have a mental aspect, which could be called God. That would seem to lead to pantheism where God is identified with his/her/its creation. Although Birch wants his God to be part of the natural realm, not outside in some supernatural realm, pantheism doesn't quite suit him.

He wants to have pantheism (God within the cosmos) because he wants to retain free will and also explain the orderliness of the universe. If all individual entities, from photons to human beings have some degree of self determinism, some ability to choose their response to their environments, there is bound to be some disorder and some evil in the universe. God is needed to establish order, which necessarily will be of the persuasive kind not the commanding kind.

Birch uses the image of a conductor persuading an orchestra into his interpretation of a work, while allowing for some interpretative element on the part of each musician. He gives the example of Leonard Bernstein conducting his own composition "West Side Story". I think this image allows God so much influence as to permit us to raise against the God of persuasive love the old objection of the problem of pain. There is such a lot of suffering on this planet it would appear that God isn't doing a very good job at persuasively conducting the universal orchestra. And since Birch's God presumably is not omniscient, the usual reply to the problem of pain, namely that God allows bad things to happen because he knows that otherwise something even worse would happen, can't be made. Elsewhere, Birch seems to give more freedom to the individual entities of the universe than in the conductor image. Such freedom probably releases his God of the problem of pain objection, but Birch can't go too far with that emphasis or he loses the role of God as the bringer of order.

If purpose is so important to human beings what are God's purposes? Apparently, love and experience. Birch credits Fausto Socinus of the sixteenth century (famous in Unitarian history) as the first to have put forward the concept of humanity contributing to God's life as well as vice versa. Birch does not speak of an afterlife other than the experiences of every person's life being gathered up in God's experience.

Nevertheless, a cosmos such as he describes is really only a metaphor for an ultimate reality, which we are never likely to know. So whatever worldview we adopt, we should be conscious that we might be wrong. That gives us immunity from the pathologies of dogmatism.

To me "On Purpose" is more impressive in its overall vision than in the particular arguments Birch advances. On a purely intellectual level I am not convinced, but on the level of intuitive feeling I think Birch may be on the right track.

Birch's account of the universe could be used by Unitarians, progressive Muslims and Jews as well as Christians.

This is an exuberant and bold book. My response is certainly not the only one possible. It could be worth while discovering your own personal response to it.