

Proposed Paper Abstract
Notre Dame Center for Ethics & Culture
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“Modern Science and the ‘Re-enchantment’ of the World”

The ironic dilemma of the modern scientific worldview is that the more humanity seems to be advancing toward becoming, in Descartes' hopeful prediction, “the masters and possessors of nature,” the more our existence, as well as that of the whole universe, appears meaningless. At the core of the scientific project of rationally explaining nature lurks despair, because in a universe which we believe ourselves able to master, at least intellectually if not technologically, our existence is devoid of any relation with transcendence and metaphysically groundless. Even the scientists who contribute most to this worldview can admit that it is difficult for human beings to accept. The physicist Steven Weinberg, for example, famous for acknowledging in *The First Three Minutes* that “the more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless,” also said that “it is almost irresistible for humans to believe that we have some special relation to the universe,...that we were somehow built in from the beginning.” Believing instead that the universe is “overwhelmingly hostile,” Weinberg could only suggest that the very research that discovers the emptiness of our existence does at least raise human life “a little above the level of farce, and [give] it some of the grace of tragedy.”

Weinberg's suggestion that science itself can metamorphose meaninglessness into at least a small amount of tragic meaning is modest compared to theories proposed in the past fifteen or twenty years by other scientists and science writers who claim that human beings were “built in” and that a much more substantial and optimistic meaning and goal exist for cosmic and/or human evolution, the latter to be assisted by both actual and (so far) theoretical advances in biotechnology. I propose to discuss and analyze some of these theories that attempt to use science itself to create a substitute world-immanent “infinite” that would, in effect, “re-enchant” the world to provide grounds for hope within the limits of the scientific worldview. I will discuss how they are part of the modern debate about the meaning and role of reason and suggest an explanation of why these theories are developed and what they tell us about ourselves and the nature of reality.