Does the Universe have a Purpose?

There are over 7 billion people sharing this planet, and many like to think that it does. By extension, this line of reasoning contends, humans have a purpose as well – and almost certainly a very special purpose. As the dominant species on the planet, the argument continues, our exceptionalism is irrefutably established. Certainly, then, (as the argument reaches its “logical” conclusion) in a fair universe, special status and special purpose, must merit special protection.

On this basis, it’s easy to understand why many of us want to believe the universe has a purpose. But if emotional reasoning and the tendency to selectively attend to, and self-servingly interpret, those facts which support what we wish to believe are left behind, a different picture emerges. The Earth is approximately 4.5 billion years old. Our species, Homo sapiens, evolved about 150,000 years ago. This means that humans have been around for a mere 0.004% of the Earth’s history. The universe, of course, is far older with its origin thought to have occurred 13.8 billion years ago. This means that if the universe has a purpose which requires human attention, then the universe has been in no rush to have that purpose fulfilled; the universe, evidently, has not seen its purpose as urgent.

All the better for us, I would argue, from a psychological standpoint. Because then the issue is not having a purpose, not being tasked with one, not having one imposed from an outside source. Rather the issue is one of finding a purpose, or better still finding a number of purposes to devote your time, your energy, your life to.

There’s an old saying, “Be careful what you wish for.” In my view, if fulfilled, the wish to have a purpose imposed upon our lives by an external force – even a force as grand and mind-boggling as the universe – would not, in actuality, improve life. Rather, from a psychological perspective, the most inspiring scenario entails sentient, intelligent creatures having the opportunity to select their purposes based upon their individuality, their values, their interests, (and, one might hope, their compassion).

Only in this way is your life your own; an expression of who you are. Only in this way can your life stand for something meaningful that truly comes from you.