

# See Randomness

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Plato quotes Socrates as saying "the unexamined life is not worth living." Part of what he meant was that the proper role of humans is to think, just as the proper role of anteaters is to poke their noses into anthills.

A lot of ancient philosophy had the quality — and I don't mean this in an insulting way — of the kind of conversations freshmen have late at night in common rooms:

What is our purpose? Well, we humans are as conspicuously different from other animals as the anteater. In our case the distinguishing feature is the ability to reason. So obviously that is what we should be doing, and a human who doesn't is doing a bad job of being human — is no better than an animal.

Now we'd give a different answer. At least, someone Socrates's age would. We'd ask why we even suppose we have a "purpose" in life. We may be better adapted for some things than others; we may be happier doing things we're adapted for; but why assume purpose?

The history of ideas is a history of gradually discarding the assumption that it's all about us. No, it turns out, the earth is not the center of the universe — not even the center of the solar system. No, it turns out, humans are not created by God in his own image; they're just one species among many, descended not merely from apes, but from microorganisms. Even the concept of "me" turns out to be fuzzy around the edges if you examine it closely.

The idea that we're the center of things is difficult to discard. So difficult that there's probably room to discard more. Richard

Dawkins made another step in that direction only in the last several decades, with the idea of the selfish gene.

No, it turns out, we're not even the protagonists: we're just the latest model vehicle our genes have constructed to travel around in. And having kids is our genes heading for the lifeboats. Reading that book snapped my brain out of its previous way of thinking the way Darwin's must have when it first appeared.

(Few people can experience now what Darwin's contemporaries did when *The Origin of Species* was first published, because everyone now is raised either to take evolution for granted, or to regard it as a heresy. No one encounters the idea of natural selection for the first time as an adult.)

So if you want to discover things that have been overlooked till now, one really good place to look is in our blind spot: in our natural, naive belief that it's all about us. And expect to encounter ferocious opposition if you do.

Conversely, if you have to choose between two theories, prefer the one that doesn't center on you.

This principle isn't only for big ideas. It works in everyday life, too. For example, suppose you're saving a piece of cake in the fridge, and you come home one day to find your housemate has eaten it. Two possible theories:

a) Your housemate did it deliberately to upset you. He knew you were saving that piece of cake. I say pick b. No one knows who said "never attribute to malice what can be explained by incompetence," but it is a powerful idea.

Its more general version is our answer to the Greeks:

b) Your housemate was hungry.

Don't see purpose where there isn't. Or better still, the positive version: See randomness.

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