

The point I want to discuss today is somewhat convoluted, so I hope I can lay out its basics adequately.

At this end of the string, let me note that I think that humans are crafted by evolution to seek meaning in every event they observe. This awareness of the clues in the external world that might lead to food or avoid predators may have been developed in parallel with awareness of our own interior mental functions. Whatever its origins, I see this in practice in almost every human reaction I see – an instinctive question of “Why?”.

I smell blood. Why? Maybe there is a fresh kill to scavenge.

The reeds along the water’s edge are almost all crushed down. Why? Maybe a storm wind came by? Maybe a rhinoceros is just out of sight? Maybe a herd of deer are close by?

Or in today’s world, I hear a siren wailing. Why? Should I leave the building? Are the police coming for me?

The underlying question behind “Why?” is “What does this mean for me?” Storm came by? No big worry. Rhino in the bushes? Potential big problem. Police coming for me? Gotta be going right now.

As this instinct developed more, we became more and more attuned to the observable and what it indicates – and eventually the meaning of everything. My sister dies. What does this mean? Maybe “Avoid nursing people with purple buboes.” But we moved past this elementary kind of meaning, and I don’t think it was all that long ago – perhaps as late as the paleolithic judging solely by burials prior to that time.

But we have reached a point in this evolution where if we cannot immediately discern a clear meaning of an observation, our instinctual need for meaning has begun to impose some imagined meaning. Even if externally no meaning for the observer attaches to an event, the observer is uncomfortable until he finds some kind of meaning. I think this gives rise to spiritual beliefs. I loved my sister. She nursed a plague victim, then she died. Now I am sad and lonely. I find a reality based meaning – don’t expose yourself to Plague. That satisfies my need for meaning in the death. But I have to invent a meaning for my loneliness and sorrow. If I am relatively callous, I find that I was relying on my sister for emotional support, and now I have lost that. If I am more humane, I find that she had so much potential to become so much more, and now that she cannot do that, the world is diminished by a degree.

What is important here is that neither of these “meanings” is truer than the other, or perhaps not true at all. All that matters here is that my human drive for meaning forces me

to find meaning whether it is there or not. I experience an existential discomfort when I cannot see a meaning – my lizard brain fears that I may be missing the rhinoceros.

I will fast forward in my thinking. Today physicists trudge bravely toward knowledge of the instant of the Big Bang. Readers of popular science struggle with the implied idea of non-time, a discontinuity of existence in at least one direction. This is merely a more up to date need for meaning that in earlier times gave rise to spiritual beliefs. I don't say religion in this context – I think religion is a by-product of man's failure to identify adequate meaning. Someone makes up a meaning, and shares it with others, who are more satisfied than by their own invented meaning and it just goes from there through Gilgamesh through Abraham through Jesus and up to Roman Catholicism, Hindu, Buddhism and the rest.

A more subtle but nevertheless common symptom of this need for meaning is the concept of gestalt. I think that what drives us to see ponies in Rorschach blots, or ruminations on past emotional harms in dream analysis is this evolutionary trait, and it matters not at all what the ink blot shape is, or what person's face we recall from the dream. We will assign some kind of meaning, and then treat that invented meaning as informative.

This has been an obviously surface treatment, but I will write more sooner or later.