

LIVING IN A MYSTERIOUS UNIVERSE

By Stephan Martin

Go out on a clear night and look up at the dark sky. If you're like many people, you may be soon filled with enchantment and awe, wondering "What is the universe? Where did it come from? What's my role in all this?" These questions and others have been asked and explored by countless people and cultures throughout history. Humans have a natural fascination with the universe and their role in it. Our innate curiosity and wonder about ourselves and our relationship to the world is part of what makes us human.

Every culture throughout history has looked up at the heavens and formed its own set of myths, beliefs, and creation stories in response to the question, "What is the universe?" How we answer this question, individually or collectively as a culture, greatly influences how we live in the world and our orientation towards life and the universe. For example, the Dagara people of western Africa see the cosmos (and particularly the natural world) as imbued and endlessly flowing with energy, spiritual intelligence, and power. Contemporary western culture views the universe as the interplay of matter and energy in various combinations, consistently evolving and changing through the laws of physics. And in some forms of Tibetan Buddhism our universe is one of an infinity of worlds, all coexistent and appearing as forms of consciousness in an infinite and eternal Mind.

Yet all these diverse views are talking about the same universe, aren't they? What do we mean when we talk about the universe? Is it spirit, matter, energy or mind? Is it random, purposeful, intelligent, or meaningless? How can we all live in the same universe and yet see and experience it so differently? Great scientists, philosophers, and religious teachers throughout the ages have asked and answered questions such as these about the nature of the universe, yet we continue to ask these same questions today. Why?

These kinds of questions about the universe are not simply abstract philosophical speculation, but are personally relevant for each of us. How we view the

universe and our relationship to it shapes our worldview and our efforts to find and make meaning in significant ways. How we answer cosmic questions such as “What is the Universe?” on an individual, cultural, or global level – whether consciously or unconsciously – not only forms the basis of our philosophical view of the world, but also determines how we act in it. A Dagara huntsman who sees the world as composed of spiritual energy will likely have a very different experience and interaction with the world than a Boston structural engineer. Where our attention is drawn moment to moment is largely based on our values, which ultimately arise from our beliefs about the universe. Where we place our attention on a daily basis guides how we act in the world and how we eventually live our lives.

One practical example of this is technology. The word “technology” derives from the Greek *techné*, which means craft or art as applied in a practical way. Anything shaped or created by a culture represents its particular worldview realized into material form. Each crafted object begins as an idea which is formed and shaped according to the skills of people with a specific set of values and beliefs about the universe. If the principles of physics were not valued by people in modern industrialized societies, there would be no television sets, computers, or airplanes. If the indigenous peoples of western Africa did not value different principles of existence, they would not have created the staffs, masks, and earth shrines that reflect the spiritual principles inherent in their worldview. The variety of art, architecture, and crafts among cultures around the world and throughout history all express the many different perceptions of the universe.

A second example is the environment. A culture’s relationship to and interaction with its environment is ultimately based on its cosmic worldview and relationship to the larger principles of existence. The current global environmental crisis has urged many to promote a more ecological worldview for modern technological cultures, but this has been difficult for several reasons. One is that the primary orientation of much of modern culture towards the natural world is based on what cosmologist Brian Swimme has called the “use cosmology,” the viewpoint that the universe is composed primarily of dead or nonliving matter and that the natural world is essentially a collection of inert objects and resources available for human use.

A pine forest, for example, could be perceived as a vibrant community of living beings, pulsing with life and interrelationships, or it could be viewed as

“standing lumber,” an available resource whose primary value is based on human use and consumption. The forest is of course all of these and much more, yet our cosmic viewpoint makes all the difference. Given the collective impact of the human presence on the planet and the potential consequences for ourselves and other species, we need to be very certain that our worldview and actions are congruent with the larger principles of existence. Whether we are aware of it or not, our understanding of the nature of the universe and our relationship to it is largely determining the future and direction of life on Earth.

One final example is that of meaning. Humans have an inherent drive to search for purpose and meaning in their lives and form meaningful relationships between themselves, others, and their environment. Whether we see the universe as purposeful or meaningless, alive or inert, and separate from or inclusive of ourselves makes a great deal of difference in our outlook and interactions with others. How we act towards ourselves and the world will collectively determine the kind of community, culture, and world we live in. Where and how we create meaningful relationships and find satisfaction in our lives is based on who and what we think we are and what the world is.

So what kind of universe do we actually live in? I would suggest that we live in the universe of matter, energy, and light as described by modern physics, but we also live in a universe filled with the spiritual energy of the Dagara, and one that is also the manifestation of the universal Mind of the Tibetan Buddhists. Perhaps the universe is so rich, so multivalent, so multiperspectival, that no one culture, tradition, discipline or individual can grasp or describe it fully. Perhaps each of these diverse views represent distinct and valid perspectives on a mysterious phenomenon that is much more than the sum of all of them.

I propose that we need to continue to expand our current scientific research into the nature of the cosmos, which has revealed so much of its majesty and beauty through our telescopes and other astronomical instruments, but that we also include in our researches viewpoints and insights from outside of modern science as well. Indigenous peoples, for example, have lived in harmony with the Earth for millennia, and thereby have accumulated a great amount of insight into the underlying principles and dynamics of the cosmos. So too have the world’s wisdom and spiritual traditions, who have explored the vast reaches of the inner cosmos of the human psyche, discovering immense vistas of human and cosmic experience as seen through the lens of consciousness.

This is the value of asking cosmic questions such as “What is the Universe?” from multiple and diverse perspectives. We all inhabit the same universe and yet each one of us represents a different cosmic experience, a unique viewpoint on the whole. From this perspective, asking each other “What is the Universe?” can be much more than casual conversation, but can become a new form of cosmological research. Alongside our data collection with telescopes and particle accelerators, through dialogue and shared experience we might also collect data on the human dimension of the cosmos.

For our collective conversations on the nature of the universe and our role in it, I propose we bring together astronomers, physicists, philosophers, priests, shamans, artists, and elders in conversation to explore this endlessly describable experience we collectively call “The Universe.” Let’s have these conversations in our universities but also in our churches, in our cafes, as well as in our workplaces. We can discover the universe around the dinner table, while riding the bus, and even while talking with the neighbors.

Through these conversations we can discover not only our own unique voice in the great cosmic symphony, but our shared participation in its magnificent journey. We all have the same cosmic origin, nature, and destiny and so we share a common ground between ourselves, the Earth, and the larger universe that transcends any divisions based on culture, religion, or even species. Truly from a cosmic perspective, we are all in this together. These cosmic conversations can bring us new insights into the kind of world we live in while discovering ourselves to be unique and precious expressions of a remarkable and mysterious experience we call the universe.

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