

Purpose is dead, long live purpose!

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Thinking in terms of purposes is inevitable in daily life. We make to-do lists and we go to the store “in order to” stock up on necessities. We enroll in education and training courses, buy or rent property, commit to a romantic partner. Our religions, albeit controversially, identify “ultimate purposes”. Purpose thinking seems deeply engrained in our cognition.

Even so, purpose thinking has never sat easily with post-Cartesian modern science. When the world is modeled as a structure of efficient causes, then the apparent existence of final causes becomes an explanandum. Typically, final causes related to human beings are handily cordoned off with the is-ought (or cause-reason) firewall. However, the science of life is not so easily confined. Like a never-healing wound, biology has for centuries been a source of philosophical vexatiousness. The most well-known example is biologists’ persistence in ascribing “functions” to organismic traits or properties. Purpose thinking pops up in various other problematic guises too, whether speaking of the “agency” of natural selection (e.g., by Darwin himself in *The Descent of Man* 1871, 2) or deeming evolution to be “progressive”. And it is not as if we have been delivered from this purgatory today. For instance, many find themselves wondering about ascriptions of intentions and/or sentience to organisms (and with that, moral status).

The contrast between first- and third-person perspectives on purpose – value and fact, reason and cause – easily lends itself to hackneyed textbook representations. Hence, it is easy to forget that this is genuinely a deep philosophical problem. In fact, it has driven much work in the philosophy of biology since Kant, and Michael Ruse – perhaps more than any philosopher today – has devoted his thinking life to various dimensions of this contrast: evolution and morality, evolution and religion, evolution and progress. Time and time again he has charted how purpose-related concepts, despite the effort to eliminate them, have a tendency to resurface in other ways. Purpose is dead, long live purpose!

From this perspective, *On Purpose* is not simply one of “his many books”, to use a phrase from the back-cover. I can truly believe Ruse when he writes in the very first sentence of the book that “this project started nearly half a century ago”. *On Purpose* tackles a question that has remained one of the big questions for philosophers over centuries. It also tackles a question that has animated Ruse’s career.

This combination means that *On Purpose* works both as an introductory text as well as a philosophical testament. It traces the history of purpose thinking, weaving a narrative that spans Western philosophical and scientific thought. At the same time, it is a retrospective on Ruse’s work on the history of biology, on progress, functionality,

religion, creationism, and morality. The result is a book where one learns about the history of philosophy and the history of science, but not neutrally so, since one is looking through the eyes of one of the most active participants in recent debates.

Structure

The first half of the book is structured as a chronicle of philosophical thought about purpose. The first two chapters cover Greek and Christian thinking about purpose. The book then moves on to Cartesian mechanistic thinking, Kant's attempt to reconcile our judgments of purpose with a mechanistic world view (in his third Critique), and finally to how evolutionists and Darwin approached purpose. This narrative arc occupies the first half of the book, and Ruse deftly weaves between different types of purpose, from functionality to the purposivity of living beings (soul or life force) and evolutionary progress. Special attention is given to the metaphysics of transcendent beings as the "ultimate" purposes of life – whether Plato's Demiurge, Aristotle's Unmoved Mover, Augustine's Christian God, or Kant's guarantee of the unity of happiness and virtue.

This first half means that *On Purpose* would be very appropriate as a background text to an entry level course on the history of science, or the history of the philosophy of science, even the history of philosophy as such. After all, the metaphysics of purpose has been a crucial theme in the history of philosophy, and focusing on this one concept would be an interesting way to create a thematic unity for students.

Sometimes Ruse's own interests – such as his battles with creationism and the (by now not so new) "New Atheists" – seem to seep into his reading of the history of philosophy. For instance, Plato's Demiurge receives considerable attention, to the extent that at times Platonic thinking about purpose almost appears to be proto-creationist. To be fair, Ruse does acknowledge the controversy as to whether the myth of the Demiurge is a literal creation myth or a narrative device (p. 8). Even so, later references to Plato's thought about purpose do tend to automatically adopt the literal reading. Such quibbles aside, on the whole Ruse's presentation of the history of the philosophy of purpose is quite accurate and continuous with standard textbook presentations.

The second half consists of a further six chapters which engage more directly with contemporary debates. The topics discussed are wide-ranging: Michael Behe and Intelligent Design Theory; God and guided evolution; the Anthropic principle; the Vitalist and Spencerian sympathies of Sewall Wright; McShea and Brandon's Zero Force Evolutionary Law; progress and human evolution; evolutionary debunking arguments of morality; sentience and panpsychism.

There are strong links between the first and second half. In the first half Ruse identifies three basic cognitive templates for thinking about purposes: external, internal, and heuristic purpose thinking, represented respectively by Plato, Aristotle, and Kant. That framework structures the discussion of the more recent debates in the second half. The approach to teleology in intelligent design is "Plato redivivus" since purposes are imposed externally. Conversely, theories of self-organization as well as the Zero Force Evolutionary Law (ZFEL), which Dan McShea and Robert Brandon introduce to account for a spontaneous tendency towards complexity, are categorized under for internal purposiveness, or "Aristotle redivivus". The analysis of recent debates suggests that there are simply not many options to choose from when it comes to the logic of purpose.

Rusean philosophy of biology

The second half of the book is also more identifiably “Rusean”, if you will. There are the colorful put-downs. McShea and Brandon are sent packing with “Candidly, anyone who believes in ZFEL is probably ripe for Father Christmas” (p. 154). There is the virtuoso shifting across centuries of biological thinking. For instance, in the space of a few pages, Bergsonian creativity (and latent progressivism) is connected via Sewall Wright and Herbert Spencer to the progressivism in E.O. Wilson’s thinking. And then, combining the polemical with synthetic insight, there are the delightful sociological debunkings of entire philosophical traditions. For instance, Sidgwick’s, Russell’s, and Moore’s opposition to Spencer’s evolutionary ethics is connected to the biases of their class in the British system: Ruse attributes their “willful ignorance of quality science” to their search “for the philosophy that imbued British middle- and upper-class education at the end of the Victorian era...” (p. 168).

Michael Ruse is a singular figure who resists easy classification. He is a founding figure of the analytic philosophy of biology and yet compares much contemporary work in said field to the worst excesses of scholasticism (p. 100). He is an atheist on seemingly friendlier relations with religious thinkers than with fellow atheists such as Richard Dawkins. It is hard to resist the suspicion he is a type that would tend to be “selected away” in the current academic environment, where normality is confused with excellence and idiosyncrasy dismissed as embarrassing. (In fact, in one particularly amusing passage, he notes that “I am now being criticized in journals that would never accept anything by me”.)

Neither can he be pigeon-holed geographically or culturally. Having grown up in England, he never settled there, and spent most of his adult life in Canada and the U.S. He is an atheist, but makes no secret of how his Quaker roots color his thinking. More subtle is what appears to be an allergy to class distinctions. While defending Spencer from the charge of laissez-faire morality, Ruse mentions Margaret Thatcher, whom he describes as coming “from the same British Midlands, lower-middle-class, nonconformist background as did Spencer, and she, like Spencer, was less interested in having widows and orphans starve than in breaking down the powers of the traditionally ensconced rich and powerful.” (p. 218). It is difficult not to detect some of Ruse’s own views on life, as a fellow Midlander, in this description.

I mention these Rusean features because, while the book is highly synthetic of the history of purpose thinking, it is also disarmingly personal. Tellingly, he ends the book by discussing the three aspects of his life that have given him meaning and a sense of purpose: family and friends, service to others through teaching, and the life of the mind.

No doubt the introduction of personal details into a largely academic book is something only Michael Ruse can pull off. It does mean that *On Purpose*, as a whole, is not simply a neutral educational text. However, this is not necessarily a point of criticism. According to the Humboldtian ideal, good education does not consist in “spoon-feeding” students (*Verschulen*), but grows out of a living relationship between student and professor. Moreover, the ideal dictates that professors and students are equal in their pursuit of knowledge. And there is no better way to convey this equality than to candidly chart one’s own struggles with the subject matter – even the personal ones.

In this way, we return to the contrast between first- and third- person perspectives, not just those on purpose but also on the *philosophy* of purpose. Ruse is not simply interested in finding the narrative arc in the history of philosophy and biology from a third-person perspective. He is also intensely invested in the topic from

the “first-person perspective”. The philosophy of purpose is not a mere parlor game; it matters.

Conclusion

In *On Purpose* the reader is taken on a whirlwind tour through millennia of thought, and Ruse, more familiar with the museum than anyone else, knows exactly when to take the reader by the arm and hurry back and forth between the different sections. Michael Ruse can do this because, in fact, he is not only one of the museum’s founders, but the originator of many of the marvels on view. This of course means that none of the exhibits receives an entirely in-depth treatment, as the customary trade-off dictates. However, the “purpose” of *On Purpose* is to convey a fascination with a deeply engrained, philosophically ancient, and likely ineradicable feature of our cognition, and in that, *On Purpose* succeeds marvelously well. If Ruse were not so critical of the concept of progress, one might think that *On Purpose* was “purposefully” written as the *culmination* of a lifetime’s work.

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