The Question May Be the Bug

A stone, a meaningful experience and 42. Part III of I Am X asks what the significance we find can tell us about an intention behind it.

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An event happens. It matters to me. I begin to wonder whether it was meant to happen. That last step is easy to miss. An unexpected meeting, a coincidence, a sentence that arrives when I need it: the significance feels so strong that I start treating it as evidence of an intention behind the event.

But something happening, something mattering, and somebody intending it to matter are three different claims. The feeling can establish the second for me. It cannot establish the third by itself.

In I Am X (https://hedegreenresearch.com/articles/i-am-x/), I was looking for an ordinary name for my position: accepting experiences as real while questioning an additional irreducible phenomenal property. In I Don't Know (https://hedegreenresearch.com/articles/i-dont-know/), I separated knowing that a state occurs from knowing its causes or its fundamental nature. Neither distinction makes the experience disappear. Here I want to turn the same caution outward: what can the meaning I find tell me about the world in which I found it?

A stone in the water

Imagine I am standing by a lake with my son. I throw a stone. He laughs, tries it himself, and learns to make one skip. Years later, perhaps he teaches his own child. The first afternoon becomes a family story: this is where it began.

The scene is imagined, but the distinction is ordinary. What a moment comes to mean can depend on what happens afterwards. I might have intended to amuse my son. I need not have intended the family tradition that could grow from it.

Looking back, we could mistake the importance the afternoon acquired for evidence that its later role was planned from the beginning. The story would still be worth telling. We would simply need to distinguish its significance from its origin. This is what I want to preserve when I question an interpretation: a meaning can be made, shared and lived without having been placed there in advance.

Taking an experience seriously

Suppose somebody describes an experience they understand as a message from God. I can follow their explanation, see how it fits their beliefs, and understand why it matters to them.

That does not require me to accept the explanation as literally true. Equally, my disagreement does not make their experience disappear. The experience, its interpretation and any proposed sender remain separate questions.

Of course some messages are intended. A letter, an apology, a gift: people routinely act so that something will mean something to another person. We can investigate that intention through what the sender says and does, the circumstances, and other evidence.

The problem arises when the force of the experience is asked to do all that work. “This changed my life” tells me something important about its consequences. It does not, on its own, identify who or what caused it, or why.

The same standard applies to me. An explanation can feel right because it fits the story I already prefer. Understanding that possibility in somebody else does not exempt my own beliefs.

What does the question assume?

I can ask why the stone moved and look for a cause. I can ask why someone sent a letter and investigate their purpose. Both are ordinary uses of *why*, but they ask for different things.

When I ask why the universe exists, which answer am I expecting? An explanation of how things came to be? A reason that makes their existence necessary? Somebody’s purpose? Those questions may deserve different answers. Asking one does not establish the assumptions of another.

The question becomes suspect when I insist that existence must contain a purpose intended for us, then treat the absence of an answer as a missing message. I have built the sender into the question before finding evidence of one. That is the possible *bug*: an assumption in my model, dressed as a requirement of the world. The word describes a possible mistake in my reasoning. It gives me no reason to imagine that the universe is software.

I also have to distinguish what I cannot see from what does not exist. Imagine the future as an unread page. Not having read it tells me neither that it is blank nor that it is already complete. The metaphor marks a limit on my information; it cannot settle the structure of time. I can leave that question open without turning uncertainty into evidence for my preferred answer.

Forty-two

Douglas Adams left us a smaller case and an actual reply. In The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy (https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/for-math-fans-a-hitchhikers-guide-to-the-number-42/), the answer to the ultimate question is 42. Getting an answer leaves the characters with the problem of understanding the question. Readers have also looked for hidden significance in the number itself.

Asked about his choice, Adams described it as a joke (https://groups.google.com/g/alt.fan.douglas-adams/c/595nPukE-Jo/m/MoTjxC715osJ). In his reply, he said he had chosen an ordinary number for a joke. That is evidence about his intention, not a guarantee that he understood every influence on the choice.

Yet the number plainly acquired significance. Even the discussion around his reply shows people enjoying the search, sharing interpretations, and reacting to his explanation. Their involvement was real. It did not establish that Adams had encoded what they found.

That distinction does not make their enjoyment worthless. It asks us to keep two questions apart: what a work means to its readers, and what its author intended. An author's explanation of a joke cannot settle whether the universe has a purpose. What the example gives me is a reason to pause before treating significance as evidence of intention.

The part I can own

I can apply that pause to this essay. I have connected a stone, a possible family story, a religious interpretation and a comic number. Those connections help me express a question. Their coherence is something I have worked on; it is not independent evidence that the world was arranged to deliver the answer I like.

I still want explanations. I want to know what happened, what caused it, what other accounts could fit, and what evidence would distinguish them. The more an interpretation matters to me, the more useful those questions become.

And I want to keep the meaning. The afternoon at the lake could matter because we enjoyed it, because we remembered it, because somebody later chose to pass something on. Those are already reasons to care.

The meaning I find does not, by itself, establish a message intended for me.

I have not read the next page. I am X. I don't know. That does not make this page meaningless.

RELATION MEMORY

CONTINUES I Don't Know · Applies the caution about self-description and interpretation to perceived significance in the world.

RETURNS TO I Am X · Preserves the separation between experience and an interpretation of its nature.

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