



# The Universe Waking Up: A Useful Idea for Atheists

**ABSTRACT:** *Some writers have described human beings as participating in the universe waking up or serving as the means by which the universe comes to know itself. In this paper I argue that this idea can be given a straightforward explanation with minimal metaphysical commitments. As long as one grants that the universe has a kind of unity and that human beings are conscious, it is possible to see human beings as vehicles for the universe's consciousness and knowledge of itself. I also argue that this idea can be useful for atheists because it can satisfy what Thomas Nagel calls 'the yearning for cosmic reconciliation' (2010: 3) better than secular humanism can.*

**KEYWORDS:** atheism, secular humanism, universe, consciousness, meaning of life

Describing what he calls 'the Platonist view', Thomas Nagel says this:

Each of us . . . is a part of the lengthy process of the universe gradually waking up. It was originally a biological evolutionary process, and in our species, it has become a collective cultural process as well. It will continue, and seen from a larger perspective, one's own life is a small piece of this very extended expansion of organization and consciousness. (Nagel 2010: 17)

Similar ideas have been stated before. In her account of existentialism, Sarah Bakewell writes:

The astronomer Carl Sagan began his 1980 television series *Cosmos* by saying that human beings, though made of the same stuff as the stars, are conscious and are therefore 'a way for the cosmos to know itself'. Merleau-Ponty similarly quoted his favorite painter Cézanne as saying, 'The landscape thinks itself in me, and I am its consciousness'. This is something like what Heidegger thinks humanity contributes to the earth. (Bakewell 2016: 185–86)

What could it mean to see human beings as part of the universe waking up? And why might it matter to think of human beings this way?

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Let us call this notion of human beings as participants in the universe waking up ‘the idea of cosmic awakening’. In this article, I will treat this idea as a serious proposal for thinking about human beings, and I will argue that it can be given a straightforward explanation with minimal metaphysical commitments. As long as one grants that the universe has a kind of unity and that human beings are conscious, it is possible to see human beings (as well as other conscious beings) as vehicles for the universe’s consciousness and knowledge of itself. While this idea is not specifically atheist, it can help to address a supposed disadvantage of atheism, which is hard pressed to identify any way in which human beings could matter to the universe as a whole. The idea of cosmic awakening points to a possible way that human beings play an important role for the universe in the absence of any God. Thanks to this role, human beings could understand themselves as connected in a meaningful way to the universe as a whole, thus satisfying what Nagel calls ‘the yearning for cosmic reconciliation’ (Nagel 2010: 3), which I discuss below.

The first section of the paper explains how it can make sense to see human beings as participants in the universe waking up. In the second section, I distinguish this idea from other apparently similar metaphysical or philosophical positions, some of which speak of human beings in similar ways. These positions include Nagel’s teleological view of the universe, monism, panpsychism, cosmopsychism, Advaita Vedanta, and religious naturalism. I will argue that the idea of cosmic awakening can stand independently of all these other positions though it is compatible with several of them. In the third section, I will argue that the idea of cosmic awakening is more successful than secular humanism in addressing what I will call the ‘desire for cosmic harmony’. Finally, in the fourth section, I take up three objections to the idea of cosmic awakening: that it improperly reduces human beings to means; that the concept of the world or universe may be incoherent; and that the prospect of death and extinction renders the idea of cosmic awakening meaningless. My goal in this paper is not to argue that all atheists should take up this view of human beings as part of the universe waking up. It is intended mainly for those atheists who feel the pull of the desire for cosmic harmony that I discuss later and for whom views like secular humanism are unsatisfying.

## 1. The Universe Waking Up

What is the universe? One might first think of it simply as the space-time container in which everything resides. If so, there would be no particular unity between the container and its contents, just as there is little relation between a grocery bag and what is inside it. Yet events in the universe do not appear to be random. They happen according to patterns that some envision as laws. Some of these patterns we understand. It is a working hypothesis of physics and cosmology that the patterns we observe in our locality also apply throughout the universe as a whole, by and large. Of course, there are certain times, such as immediately after the big bang, and certain situations, such as inside black holes, where the regular patterns would not or do not seem to hold, but often there is some tentative understanding

of why that is. These patterns or laws make the universe more than an indifferent container. Insofar as everything happens and comes to be in accordance with these patterns or laws, then the universe has a particular character. In having this particular character, the universe can be considered a unified whole. Spinoza's distinction between *natura naturata* and *natura naturans* captures this insight. While *natura naturata* refers to the various beings that we might consider parts of nature, *natura naturans* refers to the processes by which those beings come to be and pass away. Although the various beings form a multiplicity with apparently little in common, a deeper unity becomes evident when we consider them as governed and produced by patterns and processes that are the same throughout the universe. This is the approach taken in the science of cosmology, which treats the universe as a unified whole with a particular structure: 'Physical cosmology has achieved a consensus Standard Model (SM), based on extending the local physics governing gravity and the other forces to describe the overall structure of the universe and its evolution' (Smeenk and Ellis 2017: sect. 1).

I assume that life and consciousness are the result of these patterns and laws. (Theists may disagree, but as my purpose is to develop an atheist vision of human life in the universe, I will put their doubts aside for now.) Everything that exists is part of the universe, not just in the minimal sense of taking up space in it but in the stronger sense of being a result or expression of the basic underlying patterns at work in the universe. In a similar way, one can see a mountain range as the result or expression of underlying patterns of geology, weather, and erosion. Each one of us, in turn, is a result or expression of the universe at work. In this sense, each of us is a part of the universe.

As parts of the universe, we belong to it. We bear the stamp of the particular patterns or laws and the particular processes that have led to our being here. Clearly the universe must be one that permits our existence. More than this, its workings have produced us. What belongs to us, in turn, belongs to the universe as features of the universe produced by the patterns and processes at work in the universe. In that respect, a human being's life and consciousness belong to the universe in the sense that both are expressions of the universe. The universe, then, has life and consciousness, not in the sense that the universe itself is alive or conscious in the same way that human beings are, but in the sense that the universe has life and consciousness in it that it has produced. The universe permits and generates life and consciousness.

We are part of the universe. Our consciousness and knowledge also belong to it. In this respect, we could say that the universe is conscious and has knowledge because of us, similar though not identical to the way that an individual is conscious and has knowledge because of her brain and other organs. Human beings and other animals are the means by which the universe is conscious and has knowledge. Of course, most if not all things that we are conscious of and know are also parts of the universe in the same way that we are. (Possible exceptions are God, if God exists, and mathematical truths, but I will not pursue this question further.) Many instances of knowledge, then, are also instances of the universe's knowledge of itself. In this way we can see ourselves as the vehicles of the universe's self-knowledge.

I am not suggesting that there is some mind in the universe that unifies all the knowledge and consciousness in it. Each person is a site for the universe's knowledge and self-knowledge, but nothing unites that knowledge to others' knowledge beyond the sorts of tools that we human beings and other organisms use, language probably foremost among them. However, individual human beings share and combine this knowledge in many ways as part of the 'collective cultural process' that Nagel mentions. Nonhuman animals are part of this process too because human scientists study their ways of knowledge, and human beings sometimes rely on animal expressions of their experience for warning and discovery, as when people use pigs to locate truffles.

The point is that simply by being here, as forms of life with some sort of consciousness and knowledge, human beings and other organisms are part of a qualitative change in the universe: without us, as far as we know, the universe would not have woken up, would not now be awake. We and other conscious beings are the means of this awakening. It does not matter that, as far as we know, our planet is the only site for such conscious life, and that it is a tiny, transient speck in our vast and old universe. We mirror its vast extent and old age in our thinking, at least as much as we can. If we think of ourselves as the means by which the universe becomes conscious of itself, then we are the means for a qualitative change in the universe. What matters is not the extensiveness of our existence, how far through the universe we are able to spread, or the like. What matters is the intensity of our mirroring the universe in our thoughts and actions. If like Richard Rorty you do not like the metaphor of mirroring for consciousness, then we can put this another way: what matters is the intensity and depth of our responsiveness to the universe in consciousness, action, and creativity.

Consciousness and responsiveness are also a service we perform: the service of recognition and acknowledgement. Imagine that the universe began and developed pretty much as it has, but no conscious beings ever came to be. There would be no one to perceive and acknowledge the many things to be found here. It would be a universe lacking awareness, with nothing and no one to see or to know. For as long as we are here, however, we bear witness to the universe in whole or in part.

The idea of cosmic awakening portrays human beings as parts and expressions of the universe. It gives human beings a function, a role to play, in the universe: to know the universe and be the means by which the universe, in a sense, comes to know itself. In this respect, human beings and all conscious organisms play a truly cosmic role in the universe.

## 2. Minimal Metaphysical Commitments

The idea of cosmic awakening depends on two main principles: the universe has a kind of unity, and human beings are conscious. Beyond these principles the idea can remain neutral on several metaphysical questions. The best way to show this is to compare the idea of cosmic awakening to other positions that sometimes speak of human beings or the universe in similar ways. These positions are Nagel's teleology, monism, cosmopsychism, Advaita Vedanta, and religious naturalism.

## 2.1 Nagel's Natural Teleology

As we saw, Thomas Nagel suggests that, at least according to what he calls 'the Platonist view', human beings participate in the process of the universe waking up. In another passage, he says, 'Having, amazingly, burst into existence, one is a representative of existence itself—of the whole of it—not just because one is part of it but because it is present to one's consciousness. In each of us, the universe has come to consciousness, and therefore our existence is not merely our own' (Nagel 2010: 6).

Nagel supposes that for this idea of human beings as part of the universe waking up to make sense, it must be necessary in some respect. That is, the universe must have a particular end or goal, a *telos*, that involves consciousness in some way and therefore makes conscious beings necessary. For this reason, he criticizes the natural sciences for treating nature and the universe as essentially purposeless. He develops these ideas further in his controversial book *Mind and Cosmos* (Nagel 2012). Nagel's view suggests that the development of conscious beings is inevitable. As an atheist, he is not saying that there is a God who has some plan of which human beings are part. Rather, there is something about the nature of the universe itself that makes the appearance of conscious beings a necessity. In *Mind and Cosmos*, Nagel argues that the purposeless laws of modern science are not enough to explain the development of consciousness in the universe. He envisions a 'natural teleology' that

would mean that the universe is rationally governed in more than one way—not only through the universal quantitative laws of physics that underlie efficient causation but also through principles which imply that things happen because they are on a path that leads toward certain outcomes—notably, the existence of living, and ultimately of conscious, organisms. (Nagel 2012: 67)

The idea of cosmic awakening, however, does not require taking a stance on whether Nagel is right or wrong about natural teleology. Either way, the appearance of conscious beings is an expression of the universe's way of working. It may be more comforting to see the development of consciousness as necessary rather than accidental. If the appearance of consciousness is unplanned and unnecessary, then there is nothing to guarantee the continued existence of consciousness. Human beings would not enjoy any privilege within the universe. Any number of accidents could be responsible for our being here, and any number of accidents could extinguish us. But then this consciousness of our contingency would contribute to the universe's knowledge of itself because it, too, is an expression and result of its way of working.

## 2.2 Monism

Existence monism is the view that there is but one substance, that is, one entity that exists independently. Usually that substance is identified as the world or the universe, taken as the whole. Everything else is a part of that whole and, as such, exists as a

part in a dependent relation to the whole. Priority monism differs from existence monism in accepting that there is more than one substance. There are many substances, many of which are the sorts of entities we commonly consider beings. However, the universe is the only basic substance, that is, the only substance that is not dependent on or grounded in any other substance. All other substances are grounded in the universe.

The competing view is called pluralism. It holds that the basic substances that ground everything else in reality are really the atoms or particles of which everything is made. The universe or the whole of reality, then, is really grounded in the microconstituents of all things. The universe gets its character from these constituents, and the parts make up the whole. In priority monism, the whole determines the character of the parts and in this way takes priority (Schaffer 2010).

Priority monism is compatible with the idea of cosmic awakening. Human consciousness belongs to the universe in the sense that it is produced by the underlying processes and laws at work in the universe. This would explain how consciousness is grounded in the universe. It is easier still with existence monism because it maintains that only one substance exists. Any consciousness whatsoever belongs to the one substance as a mode or property of it.

But one need not be a monist of either sort to think of human beings as the vehicle for the universe's knowledge or self-knowledge. The dispute between monists and pluralists turns on two questions: whether there is one substance or many substances and whether the universe is basic or the smallest constituents of things are. These questions do not need to be resolved to see human beings as part of the universe waking up. All one needs is the idea that there is a kind of unity to the universe rooted in the patterns and processes that govern what happens and what comes to be in it. A priority monist might think of those patterns and processes as themselves grounded in the universe as the one basic substance. A pluralist could think of those patterns and processes as grounded instead in the fundamental constituents of things, that is, in the properties of electrons, quarks, or the like. For the idea of cosmic awakening, as long as the universe is granted unity on the basis of the patterns and processes at work in it, it does not matter how one explains that unity, whether it is itself basic and rooted in the universe as the one basic substance or is itself a product of the fundamental particles.

### 2.3 Panpsychism, Cosmopsychism, and Advaita Vedanta

Panpsychism is the view that mentality is a fundamental property of matter. Everything material, down to subatomic particles, has mental properties. This does not mean that everything material is conscious because it could well be that consciousness emerges only when bits of matter are arranged in particular ways such that their mental properties can be combined to produce consciousness. The motivation for this view is to reconcile mind and matter while avoiding both dualism, which treats mind and matter as distinct substances, and materialism, which posits that mind emerges from matter by some as yet unknown process. For panpsychists, mind is already present in matter, at least in some primitive state. In this sense, as William Seager says, 'The world is awake. That can stand as a

slogan for *panpsychism*: the view that I will understand here as holding that consciousness is fundamental and ubiquitous in nature' (Seager 2020: 1).

Cosmopsychism, at least in recent forms, combines panpsychism with priority monism. If, as priority monism holds, there is one basic substance in existence, namely, the universe, and consciousness is a feature or property of that substance, then it follows that the universe as a whole is conscious in some form or other. Cosmopsychists do not hold that only the universe is conscious. They maintain the existence of smaller or partial consciousnesses, such as those human beings have. But the universe's consciousness serves as the ground for the smaller or partial consciousnesses just as for priority monists the universe is the one basic substance that serves as the ground for all other substances. One puzzle for cosmopsychism is how smaller consciousnesses, such as human ones, are related to or grounded in the universe's consciousness. In any case, cosmopsychism appears to posit a universe that, as conscious, can easily be described as awake (Goff 2017: 220–55).

A view similar in some respects to cosmopsychism is offered by Advaita Vedanta. Shankara, the leading classical proponent of Advaita Vedanta, proposes a monistic metaphysics, where the only genuine reality is Brahman. The universe of distinct beings is an illusion. Everything, including the human soul, is nothing but Brahman. In turn, Brahman is pure, infinite, blissful consciousness. Smaller or partial consciousnesses may exist as well, but they are rooted in Brahman. Moreover, their existence is itself the result of illusion. When a finite consciousness overcomes this illusion, it rejoins infinite Brahman and loses its distinct identity (Shankara 1947). Advaita Vedanta differs from cosmopsychism in being a form of idealism, in that the basis for all existence is mental in nature. While cosmopsychism ascribes consciousness to the universe, it still maintains that the universe is also fundamentally material or physical (Albahari 2020; Gasparri 2019: 137–40). It is just that mentality or consciousness is part of the 'deep nature' of matter or the universe (Goff 2017: 143). For Advaita Vedanta, the universe is grounded in consciousness or awareness. In a peculiar way, insofar as the physical universe is the product of illusion, it is marked by forgetfulness, by a lack of awareness. Waking up would mean realizing the illusoriness of the universe and one's genuine identity with Brahman.

Clearly these three views have the resources to depict the universe as being awake. However, they differ from the idea of cosmic awakening. All this idea needs is the claim that human beings are conscious and in a meaningful way part of the universe. As such, it is neutral on the question of which theory of mind is ultimately correct, whether panpsychism, materialism, or dualism.

If cosmopsychism is correct, then it would seem that human beings and other conscious beings do not play any transformative role in the universe as a whole. That is because the universe as a whole is already conscious and awake. It does not need to wait for the appearance of conscious beings to become awake, nor does it need human beings to be the vehicle for its own knowledge. Instead, according to cosmopsychism, the appearance of conscious organisms is itself dependent on the universe's own consciousness. But the universe would be conscious whether or not human beings or other conscious organisms

developed. In this way cosmopsychism deprives human beings of the kind of cosmic role described in section 1. This is not a reason for thinking that cosmopsychism is false, just a difference between cosmopsychism and the idea of cosmic awakening.

Unlike cosmopsychism, Advaita Vedanta denies the fundamental reality of matter or even of individual minds, which are all the product of illusion. The idea of cosmic awakening, however, does not question the perhaps naive assumptions of common experience: that matter is real and that many different things exist. Moreover, like cosmopsychism, Advaita Vedanta denies that human beings have any particular role in the universe because Brahman, the source of all, is infinitely and eternally conscious, whether or not human beings exist. In addition, while it is common to contrast Brahman with monotheistic concepts of God, because God is usually thought of as personal while Brahman is impersonal, still Brahman, being infinite, conscious, blissful, and the source of everything else, probably has enough in common with God to deter committed atheists. The idea of cosmic awakening is intended to be compatible with atheism.

In different ways, cosmopsychism and Advaita Vedanta posit a single foundational consciousness that belongs to the physical universe or generates it. The idea of cosmic awakening does not require such a single foundational consciousness. In fact, by offering a story that makes human beings and other conscious organisms important precisely for possessing a consciousness that the universe as a whole otherwise lacks, cosmic awakening opposes theories of a single foundational consciousness.

## 2.4 Religious Naturalism

The last position I discuss here is not really a metaphysical one, nor does it involve a particular theory of mind. The label ‘religious naturalism’ covers a broad range of views and attitudes. As a form of naturalism, this view denies the existence or importance of ‘supernatural’ entities such as God, spirits, and so on. Nature is all there is. As ‘religious’, however, this view asserts ‘the possibility and desirability of a robust religious/spiritual life without recourse to the supernatural’ (Stone 2018: 7). A purely naturalistic view can satisfy whatever religious or spiritual needs human beings have. Like the idea of cosmic awakening, religious naturalism tends to portray human beings as parts of nature or the universe, produced through natural processes and participating in manifold relationships with other beings. It is compatible with thinking of human beings as the vehicle for the universe’s consciousness of itself. Carol Wayne White, for instance, declares, ‘humans are relational processes of nature; in short . . . we are nature made aware of itself’ (White 2016: 32).

Certainly religious naturalism as I have described it is compatible with the idea of cosmic awakening, as White’s example shows. But if we consider religious naturalism as expressing a certain attitude toward human life and the universe, then this attitude is purely optional and not required by the idea of cosmic awakening. One thing that White wants to do, for example, is to establish a naturalistic concept of the sacred:



With other religious naturalists, I share the sentiment that reveling in a sense of our connectedness with other living beings can only be described as sacred. . . . our sacrality has fundamentally to do with ways of conjoining with others that transform us. . . . According to my view, sacrality is a specific affirmation and appreciation of that which is fundamentally important in life, or that which is ultimately valued: relational nature. Humans are interconnected parts and processes of nature, and our sacrality is a given part of nature's richness, spectacular complexity, and beauty. (White 2016: 33)

A set of value judgments is expressed here, about what is sacred, what is fundamentally important in life, and what is ultimately valued. Nature is rich, spectacular in its complexity, and beautiful.

However, one can see human beings as part of the universe waking up without accepting these value judgments or the underlying attitude they express. According to the idea of cosmic awakening, there is a reasonable case to be made that human beings and other conscious forms of life are the vehicles for the universe's awareness and knowledge of itself. It is an interpretation of consciousness that, as I will argue in the next section, can go far in satisfying a particular desire, the desire for cosmic harmony. But at the same time the value and significance of this interpretation of human beings are left up to you to decide. It may seem of fundamental importance to you, as it seems to be for White. Or you may think this interpretation is important but have no interest in making it the basis for a concept of the sacred. Perhaps you do not wish to treat anything as sacred. Other things may be more important to you, such that the idea of cosmic awakening seems trivial. Perhaps you find the universe to be an ambiguous place, both creative and destructive, beautiful and ugly, with interconnectedness both a source of value and a fatal weakness. Or perhaps your view of the universe is not ambiguous at all but fundamentally negative because even though the universe generates consciousness, it also saddles consciousness with pointless suffering. The idea of cosmic awakening is compatible with all these attitudes. It is compatible with religious naturalism too, but it does not require adopting religious naturalism.

The idea that human beings are part of the universe waking up does not commit one to thinking that the development of consciousness was necessary. The idea is neutral on the question of what the basic substances of reality are and on the question of how to explain consciousness. It does not posit the existence of a universal mind. And it does not require that one see the role of human beings in the universe as sacred. It does offer an account of the relationship between human beings and the universe that some atheists may find useful, as I explain in the next section.

### 3. Secular Humanism and the Desire for Cosmic Harmony

If human beings are participants in the universe waking up, so what? In this section, I will compare the idea of cosmic awakening with a common atheist perspective, secular humanism. I will examine Thomas Nagel's argument that secular

humanism cannot satisfy what I call the desire for cosmic harmony. The idea of cosmic awakening is a better fit for this desire. However, there is also considerable overlap between the idea of cosmic awakening and secular humanism and some important differences as well. My claim is that atheists who feel the pull of the desire for cosmic harmony and who are dissatisfied with secular humanism can adopt the idea of cosmic awakening while preserving most humanist values.

As with many philosophical labels, ‘secular humanism’ applies to a broad range of views. In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor defines ‘exclusive humanism’, his preferred term, as the claim that human flourishing is the highest good (Taylor 2007: 18). This is a good place to begin, as it succinctly combines three key ideas of exclusive or secular humanism, which I will call ‘humanism’ for short. First, it asserts that human beings have intrinsic value rather than being means to some further end. This is why human flourishing is conceived as the highest good: nothing takes priority to human beings. Second, humanism is committed to human flourishing, taken as happiness and well-being. A key ethical duty from a humanist perspective is to reduce human suffering and promote human happiness. Third, since flourishing includes the actualization of an organism’s capacities, humanism strives to cultivate the wide array of human capabilities, for art, love, knowledge, and so on. Perhaps foremost among them is autonomy, the capacity to decide for oneself what is important, what is worth valuing, and what to do with one’s life. Philip Kitcher writes that the key task of humanism is to bring about the conditions in which people are free to lead lives that they themselves find fulfilling and meaningful. Many humanists point to secular humanism as a natural landing spot for atheists, agnostics, and other unbelievers. As Kitcher says, ‘Secularism needs to become secular *humanism*’ (Kitcher 2011: 24). According to Joachim Duyndam, while atheism and secularism are primarily critical because they reject theism, secular humanism is the next step: a positive, constructive vision of human life (Duyndam 2017: 710–12).

Still, one problem for humanism is that it seems unable to satisfy a particular desire, described by Thomas Nagel, that I call the desire for cosmic harmony. In his essay ‘Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament’, Nagel writes that one historically important task of philosophy has been providing consolation or ‘nourishment for the soul’. This consolation is connected to ‘the significant element of yearning for cosmic reconciliation that has been part of the philosophical temperament from the beginning’, in Plato, for instance (Nagel 2010: 3). Some people desire ‘a view of the world that can play a certain role in the inner life’. Thus Plato, in Nagel’s view, was motivated ‘in part to achieve a kind of understanding that would connect him (and therefore every human being) to the whole of reality—intelligibly and, if possible, satisfyingly’ (Nagel 2010: 4). Nagel sees this desire as seeking to answer a particular question: ‘How can one bring into one’s individual life a recognition of one’s relation to the universe as a whole, whatever that relation is?’ Or, as he later puts it: ‘Is there a way to live in harmony with the universe, and not just in it?’ (Nagel 2010: 5). What is wanted, then, is twofold: first, an understanding of the universe, of oneself in the universe, and of some genuine relation or harmony between the two; and second, a way of living that appropriately expresses that understanding.

It is easy to see how theism could claim to satisfy this desire. Suppose that God made the world with a particular purpose in mind, and everything in the universe has a part to play. People who understand their role can live it out accordingly, confident that their lives have a significance to the universe as a whole and even to God. Harmony with the universe is right at hand.

Obviously this kind of narrative is barred to atheists. However, as Nagel points out, atheists can respond to the desire for cosmic harmony in several ways. One is simply to deny the desire. Nagel thinks that not everyone has it and that it is largely absent from mainstream analytic philosophy. But this does not mean that the desire does not exist, at least in some, nor does it mean that the question about how an atheist can satisfy it is meaningless. Other atheists acknowledge the desire but think it cannot be satisfied and so is best ignored. Another response, which Nagel ascribes to Camus, is to agree that the desire is there and cannot be satisfied, but to say that it should be cultivated as an assertion of our humanity and need for meaning. ‘Not to be defeated by pointlessness is what gives our lives their point’, according to this view, Nagel says (Nagel 2010: 10).

Nagel sees humanism as another atheist response to the desire for cosmic harmony. The humanist response, like some of the others, does perhaps accept the impossibility of cosmic harmony, but it finds a substitute for it in harmony with other human beings, the human species as a whole, and sometimes even other nonhuman organisms. One should not live for oneself alone but also for others. In humanism, Nagel says, ‘The significance of an individual life does depend on its embeddedness in something larger, but it is the collective consciousness of humanity rather than the cosmos that plays this role’ (Nagel 2010: 10). Different forms of humanism ‘go part of the way toward incorporating a cosmic point of view into the life of the individual, and they certainly embed that life in something larger’, Nagel says. But they stop short of full cosmic harmony. These forms of humanism

stop with the value of human (and other) life itself, which does not receive endorsement from some higher value. The point of humanism and other ‘inside-out’ values is that no such endorsement or external support is needed. It is we who give sense to the universe, so there is no need for a higher principle to give sense to us. (Nagel 2010: 11)

In this way, humanism offers harmony with others in place of harmony with the universe. (Certain forms of environmentalism may do something similar by embedding human beings within local environments or the planetary ecosystem, but pursuing this parallel is beyond the scope of this paper.)

Such solutions are undoubtedly satisfying to some. But humanism cannot fully satisfy the desire for cosmic harmony because it stops short of the cosmos. It prioritizes the good of humankind or even life but does not explain why they might matter to the universe as a whole. Humanism could even turn one against the universe because the latter often seems indifferent or hostile to human well-being. This comes through, for instance, in Bertrand Russell’s descriptions of ‘an alien and inhuman world’, ‘a hostile universe’, and ‘an evil world’ in his essay, ‘A Free Man’s Worship’ (Russell 1918: 46–57).

The idea of cosmic awakening can satisfy the desire for cosmic harmony more fully. It envisions a meaningful relationship between human beings and the universe. Human beings are parts and expressions of the universe who in turn are the means by which the universe comes to self-consciousness. Human beings and other conscious beings make the universe qualitatively different than it would otherwise be. Their consciousness and attention bear witness to the universe and offer recognition to it.

Clearly, there are differences between humanism and the idea of cosmic awakening. The main difference is that, according to cosmic awakening, human beings now have a role to play in the universe that relates to the whole. Human beings' attention, knowledge, art, and action all convey the universe's consciousness of itself. In this way, human life can be seen to have a kind of value for the universe as a whole. Asserting that human beings and other conscious life forms have value because they are the vehicles for the universe's self-knowledge and self-consciousness appears to depart from the humanist claim that human beings have intrinsic value but does not contradict it. Things can have value in different ways. However, any humanists who insist on the intrinsic value of human beings and reject the idea that human beings could have any other sort of value will probably want to reject the idea of cosmic awakening. It is also not the case that the idea of cosmic awakening elevates the value derived from one's role in the universe above the intrinsic value that humanists find. People can decide for themselves which value matters more.

It is possible that attention and knowledge can work against human happiness and possibly even against flourishing. This is another point of tension between the idea of cosmic awakening and humanism. Certainly there is much that is beautiful and heartening in this world, but there is also much that is depressing, painful, and ugly, whether we consider the natural world alone or human history and behavior as well. Simone de Beauvoir emphasized the ambiguity of human life, which is marked by both freedom and compulsion (Beauvoir 1976). The same ambiguity exists in the world, which mixes up the good and the bad. Yet, to find value in the idea of cosmic awakening is to say that there is a value to focusing on and knowing reality, including those aspects of reality that are depressing, painful, and ugly, even if this reduces human happiness and flourishing. It is part of the service we render to the universe that has engendered us. This may be some consolation. However, it is not essential to this way of thinking to say that it will be perfectly satisfactory or bring complete happiness to those who adopt it. It may satisfy the desire for cosmic harmony but impose other costs.

In two important respects, however, the idea of cosmic awakening overlaps with humanism. First, in being vehicles for the universe's awareness and self-knowledge, we can see ourselves as possessing a certain dignity and worth. Each of us is the site of this momentous qualitative change in the universe. Human beings have a certain dignity as one of the avenues through which this waking up happens. There is therefore good reason to care about the welfare of human beings and promote their flourishing, just as there is reason to honor other beings who also participate in this change.

Second, the idea of cosmic awakening is consistent with humanism's emphasis on freedom and autonomy. Human beings are already participating in the universe's waking up. It is something we are already doing, not an additional task that we have to complete. This participation leaves intact whatever freedom human beings have. The idea of cosmic awakening offers atheists a way to satisfy the desire for cosmic harmony better than humanism can. That does not mean that the desire for cosmic harmony is most important. It is possible to satisfy this desire and yet conclude that it is less important than other desires we have. If human beings are free, then they are free to rank and assess this desire in just the same way that they evaluate other desires.

One issue at stake here is one's overall view and evaluation of the universe. Views can range from very positive to very negative. One useful test is to ask whether it would matter if there were no conscious beings in the universe. It would have all the stars and galaxies and planets it has now, and perhaps on some of those planets forms of life lacking consciousness come to exist, but there would be no one to perceive the waterfalls, sunsets, rock formations, clouds, night skies, winds, and so on. Someone might respond that this would be a shame, a bad thing, for there to be a whole universe here and no one to see it. This implies a feeling on their part that the universe is worth seeing or deserves to be seen. In this view, the universe has a certain value that deserves appreciation by the kind of beings that we are. It is by means of this appreciation that human beings could be said to perform a service to the universe.

But one could take a different line. The universe is a place of suffering, of often apparently pointless existence. It raises our hopes of happiness and beauty and dashes them. In this view, the universe has no value, and it does not need or deserve anyone to see it. Perhaps it would be best if no one saw it. From this perspective, we may be part of the universe waking up, but this too is worthless.

For this reason, seeing human beings as part of the universe waking up preserves the humanist emphasis on autonomy. The idea of cosmic awakening does not dictate what value we should put on this or what we should do in response to it. One might regard this way of seeing human beings and other organisms as a crucial insight, one that deserves expansion and deepening. Perhaps one might conclude that we should push further our attempts to understand the universe as well as other organisms' means of knowing and experiencing it as ways of deepening the universe's consciousness of itself. But one could reach the opposite conclusion, that in the end this aspect of human beings is relatively unimportant and pales next to persistent problems like poverty, violence, disease, and inequality. To say that we are part of the universe waking up is not to say what we should do. It is to say what we are actually doing. For this reason, the idea of cosmic awakening leaves us just as free as we were before. It just gives us a new way of thinking about ourselves in relation to the universe that goes further than humanism in satisfying the desire for cosmic harmony. My guess is that if you feel this desire and you generally regard the universe as a good, interesting place worth knowing, then this way of seeing ourselves may well seem worthwhile. But if you do not feel this desire, or if you think that in the end the universe is just a cruel place, then the idea of cosmic awakening will be unsatisfying or unimportant.

## 4. Three Objections

Here I will briefly address three objections to the view of human beings as part of the universe waking up: first, that the idea of cosmic awakening treats human beings improperly as means, not ends; second, that the idea of cosmic awakening is incoherent because the idea of the universe or world is incoherent; and third, that the inevitability of death and species extinction means that cosmic awakening is impermanent and thus meaningless.

### 4.1 An Ethical Objection

One could object that the idea of cosmic awakening objectifies human beings or treats them as means by envisioning them as the vehicles for the universe's self-consciousness and self-knowledge. Theistic outlooks can be said to do the same thing when they portray human beings as means for carrying out God's will (Baier 2008: 101). From the standpoint of Kantian ethics, treating human beings only as a means is wrong because doing so ignores the rational autonomy that makes human beings worthy of respect. In this way the idea of cosmic awakening would do wrong to human beings.

There are two ways to meet this objection. The first is to underline the difference between God and the universe in these two cases. While there is considerable dispute about whether God is a person, my guess is that most theists would agree with Paul Tillich when he says that God is 'not less than personal' (Tillich 1973: 245) and thus has some measure of agency. If seeing human beings as the tools for carrying out God's will does human beings wrong, then it is a wrong that God commits and is responsible for by virtue of being a person or not less than a person. The universe, however, is less than a person. Human beings and similar organisms are the means by which personhood enters the universe, and the universe is not in any sense a person before they emerge. In this sense, the universe is not a moral agent capable of doing wrong.

Second, the idea of cosmic awakening describes something that human beings are already doing: playing their part in the universe's waking up. For this reason, envisioning human beings in this way does not undermine their autonomy at all, which I attempted to show in the previous section. In being free, people are also free to determine what meaning the idea of cosmic awakening has for them. It imposes no duties and presupposes no plan that needs to be carried out. For this reason, the idea of cosmic awakening does not objectify human beings or treat them only as means.

### 4.2 The Incoherence Objection

The second objection arises from the thought that the concept of 'the world' or 'the universe' is incoherent or empty. Markus Gabriel describes the world as 'the all-encompassing . . . the domain that comprises everything—life, the universe, and everything else'. Such a domain, he argues, 'does not and cannot exist' (Gabriel 2015a: 9). Existing, in Gabriel's view, means appearing in a

particular domain. My desk exists in the domain of my office; Hamlet exists in the domain of the play; the universe exists as an object of study in the domain of cosmology; and numbers exist in the domain of mathematics. The world as Gabriel sees it would be the domain of all domains, but this means that it cannot exist, precisely because it does not appear in any further domain. It is a logical impossibility. Instead, we have to imagine a kind of infinite array of domains, with no domain encompassing all the rest. In this respect, there is no such thing as ‘the world’ in the sense of ‘the all-encompassing’. Certainly Gabriel agrees that the universe exists, but only because it is the object of study in fields like cosmology and physics. The problem arises when people take such domains, constituted by the sciences, to be the primary or only real domains. As he says in an interview, prioritizing the sciences as a guide to reality promotes the error

that we have to start from a conception of the universe as if it were a world without spectators. This then raises the problem how spectators fit into a blind universe and tempts us to ascribe a metaphysical value to the lovely romantic view that nature opens its eyes in us and looks at itself via one of its products etc. (Gabriel 2015b)

Gabriel favors a view he calls ‘ontological pluralism’, which does not prioritize any one domain over the others as fundamentally real. Thus, in Gabriel’s view, the idea that we are part of the universe waking up has two main problems. It is meaningless if we think that the universe stands for the whole, the all-encompassing. There is no such thing. And the idea wrongly prioritizes the domains constituted by the natural sciences over others.

Gabriel’s point about the world is a problem only if the idea of cosmic awakening requires the universe to be all-encompassing. It does not. Gabriel admits that the universe exists in the domain of cosmology or perhaps in the domain of the natural sciences more broadly. For this reason he says that the world is larger than the universe because the world is supposed to encompass everything while the universe exists in the context of the natural sciences. But Gabriel’s analysis is questionable. In their survey of philosophy of cosmology, Christopher Smeenk and George Ellis write, ‘Cosmology deals with the physical situation that is the context in the large for human existence: the universe has such a nature that our life is possible. This means that although it is a physical science, it is of particular importance in terms of its implications for human life’ (Smeenk and Ellis 2017). From this perspective, ‘the universe’ refers to the context of human life, taken in its largest possible sense (putting aside the possibility of a multiverse). It is implied when people look up at the night sky and ask, ‘What does it all mean? What is it all about?’ In this respect, the world or the universe does appear, not as the domain of domains that Gabriel says is impossible, but rather within the domain of human hopes, fear, and curiosity. Consequently, it is not the case that the idea of cosmic awakening relies on a universe that does not exist in Gabriel’s sense. Nor does it prioritize scientific perspectives over others.

### 4.3 The Objection from Death and Extinction

Then there is the problem posed by death and extinction. The idea of cosmic awakening holds that human beings and other conscious organisms are the occasion for a fundamental change in the universe. But human beings die, and the human species will become extinct at some point and so, most likely, will every other species of conscious life wherever it may be. Given current theories of the universe's future, it will become unable to sustain life anywhere, albeit perhaps not until billions of years from now. The universe may have woken up, but at some point it will go back to sleep. How fundamental a change is the awakening, then?

Where death and extinction are concerned, it is tempting to echo Descartes when he says, 'let anyone who can do so deceive me; so long as I think that I am something, he will never bring it about that I am nothing. Nor will he one day make it true that I never existed, for it is true now that I do exist' (Descartes 1993: 25). Even if at some time consciousness will vanish from the universe and the universe will look for all intents and purposes largely the same as one in which consciousness never appeared, it is still the case that its history is different from that of a completely unconscious universe. In a way, if it is a fundamental change in the universe when consciousness appears, then it is an equally fundamental one when it disappears. Consciousness would then be at the root of two fundamental changes, which a completely unconscious universe never goes through.

The objection from death and extinction can be given a deeper answer. Obviously we are aware of the possibility or inevitability of future death because we are considering it now. And it is possible to consider the disappearance of consciousness from the universe as the universe going back to sleep. Yet, on current theories of the universe's future, the universe itself will wind down. Entropy will increase. Stars will burn out, with no more stars being born. It seems possible that the universe might enter a state in which nothing really happens or can happen, a state from which it might never emerge. This would be a kind of death, even if the universe were to continue to exist forever. Thinking about death, extinction, and the impermanence of consciousness in the universe would be a way of reflecting on the decline and deathly stasis that the universe seems on current theories bound to reach a very long time from now. If the universe is mortal in a certain way, then it makes sense that its own awakening and knowledge sustained by conscious life would also be mortal. In this light, the prospect of death and extinction would not be an objection or challenge to the idea of cosmic awakening so much as an occasion to reflect on the universe's own apparent fate.

## 5. Conclusion

My goal here has been to propose a way of thinking about human beings that is consistent with atheism and does better at addressing the desire for cosmic harmony than humanism does. The idea of cosmic awakening integrates human beings into the universe more fully than humanism can. It suggests that human beings actually have an important part to play in the universe being what it is. Yet



it is also consistent with key aspects of humanism. Atheists who do not have the desire for cosmic harmony may not care about the idea of cosmic awakening, and that is fine. I am not trying to persuade them to give up humanism. The idea of cosmic awakening is intended as an alternative for atheists who find humanism lacking. Atheists will, I hope, welcome the appearance of new and multiple ways of being an atheist. The availability of different options for atheists might make it easier for some to become atheists in the first place.

Theists may find the idea of cosmic awakening to be insufficiently hopeful. That is as may be. However, this idea shares with humanism a commitment to the value and importance of human beings. It rejects the common claim that life without God has no meaning or value. It asserts that even now, living as we do and conscious as we are, we contribute a recognition and awareness to the universe that, as far as we know, it would otherwise lack. We are free to admit that we are insignificant in size and power with respect to the rest of the universe. But at the same time, thanks to the abilities that our long biological and cultural evolution has given us, we, along with other organisms, are the means by which the universe comes to consciousness and knowledge of itself. The meaning and consequences of our participation in this process depend in part on how we freely choose to respond to it.

BRUCE MILEM 

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT NEW PALTZ

[milemb@newpaltz.edu](mailto:milemb@newpaltz.edu)

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