

Why Is the Water in the Teakettle Boiling? -- & the Meaning of Life

I hope this title caught your attention. It is a wonderful example illustrating how one can be both a rational, logical scientist and a spiritual believer at the same time. This is the example I always use when I am asked how I can be both a physicist and a rabbi. It is drawn from a marvelous small book called *God's Universe* by Owen Gingerich (Harvard University Press, 2006).

Here's the situation. In your kitchen, the water in the teakettle is boiling. Why? If you're like me, the first answer coming to your mind will have to do with heat from burning gas raising the temperature of the water to the boiling point making the water boil. If you remember your high school or college Chemistry (and want to show off a little), you might get more technical, describing the increased motion of the molecules, the partial pressure of water vapor and so on. However detailed you get, this is one, true reason why the water is boiling.

But there is another true reason. It's because you want some tea!

The first answer is what Aristotle called an efficient cause, an explanation of how the specific phenomenon takes place. The second answer, because you want tea, is the final cause, the reason the phenomenon takes place. Please note that we don't have to insist that one of the reasons is wrong for the other one to be correct.

And so it is with the creation of the universe and the world as we find it. Why is there a universe? Why is there life on earth? How and why have human beings evolved into the marvels that we are. One answer, the efficient cause, lies in the world of my old career as a scientist. Creation came to be through the Big Bang and humanity came to be through Darwinian Evolution. But that's not the whole story. Many of us are interested in the "final cause" of the creation of the universe and of humanity. This is the world of my current career – that of being your rabbi.

Our wonderful universe which seems so perfectly designed for creation of life and even of humanity exists because a Creator wanted it to exist. This is a belief not a scientific fact just as we might argue that your desire for tea is not a scientific fact – perhaps the water is boiling because you have the flu and you wanted some moisture in the air.

This does not prove God's existence. But it does prove that God's existence as a final cause of the universe does not require us to suspend our belief in science. It also leaves unanswered the question of why God wanted a physical universe and why God wanted people. One traditional rabbinic answer is that God wanted people because God loves stories.

I wish you many happy hours of exploration and learning in the complementary worlds of science and religion. And I do hope you spend a few of them and your own life stories, with me.

Rabbi Michael Lotker