**Meaning in Perspective**

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March 16, 2018

24.00 – Topic 1

In “The Argument from Cosmological Fine Tuning,” Roger White argues that God must have adjusted the cosmological constants of our universe in such a way to permit life to develop. His motivation stems from the observation that certain facts require a satisfying explanation. Since the outcome of life developing has such substantial meaning and is arguably such an improbable phenomenon, the setting of these constants requires an explanation. In this paper, I will outline White’s argument and I will proceed to argue that meaning and improbability are not sufficient in determining whether an observed fact stands in need of explanation.

In White’s “Argument from Cosmological Fine Tuning,” he attempts to provide an argument for the existence of the creator of the universe. His first premise is a restatement of the inference to the best explanation. An inference to the best explanation is an argument where an observable fact stands in need of explanation and there is some hypothesis that explains this fact. If there is no other, more satisfiable, explanation of this fact, then this hypothesis is taken to be the best explanation for the observed fact (Rosen 29). This sets up the framework for White’s argument.

From this, White’s second premise finds the fact that life exists in our universe to be a fact requiring an explanation. He likens the setting of cosmological constants to throwing a handful of alphabet tiles into the air and observing the pattern they make on the table. If the letters form a sequence of random letters, we wouldn’t feel this requires an explanation. However, there is an equally improbable outcome that these tiles will form a quote from *Hamlet*. White argues that since the second sequence holds meaning, it stands in need of explanation (Rosen 32). One possible explanation is a human agent’s intervention. In the same way, the reason for fine-tuning of the universe to allow for life requires explanation, since life is valuable and has meaning.

White’s third premise concludes that an explanation for the fine-tuned constants conducive to developing life is that God, creator of the universe, adjusted these constants. He points out that in the alphabet tile example, an external, intelligent agent must’ve arranged the tiles, giving the sequence meaning (Rosen 33). To arrange the letters in a specific way such there is meaning is a “plausible purpose” (Rosen 33) that a rational agent might have. Similarly, the creation of life is a plausible purpose that God may have to set the constants in a specific way. The existence of a plausible purpose, White claims, is more satisfying than assuming the fine-tuning happens by accident. Extending beyond a human agent analogy, although we do not know how God would fine-tune the universe, we can still justly believe he did. As White explains, prior to knowing how the brain worked, a conversation with another human can reveal the fact that they also have a mind themselves (Rosen 34).

Lastly, White’s fourth premise concludes with the idea that there is no comparably satisfiable explanation for the fine-tuning of the cosmological constants other than God’s intervention. He explores this concept by assuming, to the contrary, that a multiverse explains fine-tuning better than God. White compares a multiverse to throwing the alphabet tiles into the air trillions of times. If someone else throws the tiles before you, trillions of times, and then you come along, throw the tiles, and get a line from *Hamlet*. White argues that you would still feel that there is an explanation for this observation (Rosen 35). As such, a multiverse’s existence would not directly provide an explanation for the fine-tuned constants, rather, remove the need to explain them in the first place.

When analyzing White’s premises, in the second premise, he attempts to quantify exactly what is required for an observed fact to stand in need of explanation. His conclusion in the premise is that an observed fact stands in need of explanation when it is both highly improbable and meaningful. In his explanation, these two qualities are both necessary and sufficient.

However, White quickly glosses over the idea of meaning in his second premise. With the analogy to alphabet tiles, he provides a passage from *Hamlet* to convey the aspect of meaning in the sequence of tiles. However, suppose instead that a French-speaking individual sees the alphabet tiles rather than an English-speaking individual. The French-speaking individual would not look twice at the sequence of tiles, to them it looks random. But the quote from *Hamlet* is no less improbable when observed by an individual of different nationality. Nor is the quote any less meaningful: it is still a line from *Hamlet*. Yet one individual will seek an explanation, and the other will not. Clearly, there is a missing attribute of a fact standing in need of explanation.

This example introduces the importance of perspective when defining meaning. The quote from *Hamlet* has meaning from the perspective of the English-speaking individual but not from the perspective of the French-speaking individual. Thus, only the English-speaking individual will seek explanation because they see the sequence as highly improbable and meaningful from their perspective. But this should still stand in need of explanation (or not in need of explanation) either way. Nothing about the tiles changes when viewed by different individuals. The ability to detect meaning should not alter this fact. Thus, the aspect of perspective adds a whole new level of complexity to White’s argument.

The idea of perspective is more damaging when applied to White’s comparison of the Big Bang to a lottery (Rosen 33). He uses this example to justify his second premise: why fine-tuning requires explanation. He says that each of the outcomes of a lottery equally requires no explanation, as someone had to win. And this is reasonable from our perspective given that we know how the lottery works. We know that one person wins any given lottery every season. But we can construct a modified version of the lottery example. What if we were not aware that one individual must win the lottery every year? Now, from this new perspective, there are millions of cases that do not require an explanation, and one case that overwhelmingly does require explanation.

White claims that the Big Bang is different from the lottery he proposes because not all the outcomes equally call for an explanation (or no explanation). As it stands to us, most of the Big Bang outcomes are desolate and empty with only a few outcomes suitable for life. This may appear true, or even obvious, but this takes our perspective for granted. Not all the outcomes of the Big Bang equally call for an explanation *from our perspective*. But in the case of my modified lottery example, it is clear the importance a small piece of information can have. Without the requirement of a single winner, the modified lottery example becomes analogous to the Big Bang. However, we would not be justified in believing that the observed fact required explanation. The new element of perspective resolves whether we correctly or incorrectly decide if a fact is standing in need of explanation. Hence, the argument cannot be universally applied to approach overall truth, rather, it appeals to different worldviews.

**Bibliography**

Rosen, Gideon, et al. *The Norton Introduction to Philosophy*. 2nd ed., W.W. Norton, 2018.