

Despair, the multiverse, and faith

By [David Williams](#)

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Every week or so, I google and #hashtag-search my way through the collective consciousness of our species, looking for new writings/ findings/research into multiverse cosmology. Ever since writing [my little tome on how this new theory of everything plays with my faith](#), I've kept up with where things are going on that front and where things are trending. It's good to keep track of all the pertinent datapoints, which [I file away neatly on Facebook for future reference](#).

There's a peculiar thread that runs through the more recent writing on the subject. It feels like, for lack of a better word, despair.

This despair takes two forms. First, the realization that if in fact there are an infinite number of universes, science will never, ever know everything. That hope for a grand unifying theory, for completeness of understanding? It's shattered. The multiverse is too large, and utterly inaccessible. It is terrifyingly inscrutable, in that there just ain't no way you can scroot it. That's a word, right?

Well, even if not, the idea that there may be fundamental physical boundaries that delimit our capacity for knowing is a desperate frustration to those who place their faith in the empiricism of the scientific method. There are realities we will never, and can never know. For a worldview whose purpose is knowledge, this is wee bit unsettling. That anxiety is one of the primary reasons there's quasi-dogmatic resistance to this cosmology among some scientists. The multiverse challenges the heart of scientific method itself.

Second, and related, there's the deeper despair that comes from the encounter of the human soul with the nonlinear, atemporal infinite. We human beings are creatures of narrative and story, who find purpose in the movement towards a goal. Without that sense of purpose, we come apart. It gives us cohesion, and lends meaning in existence.

The multiversal creation as a concept is agonizingly, utterly nonlinear. [Be it inflationary, quantum-branching, or some boggling combination of current theories,](#) it does not give us that clear destination. There is no one conclusion, no narrative arc leading to the great last Ragnarok/Apocalypse at which all comes to completion. Our story as a species could end at any instant or carry on. Or do all of those things. Our deepest hopes are realized, and our darkest horrors, all at once. It seems a wild, nauseating churn, the farthest thing from the reassuringly neat windup clockwork universe science had yearned for.

For that first form of multiversal despair, faith is an existential bulwark, because faith accepts that there are both realities and ways of knowing that are forever beyond us. Faith—not the brittle dogmatic certainties of fundamentalism, but faith—looks forever beyond itself.

Faith guides us to understand ourselves as standing in relation to mystery. Faith allows us to accept that mystery is a fundamental characteristic of the Deep Real. Where empiricism's knees buckle before the void, Kierkegaard's leap carries on. Where the seas of chaos rage, Tillich's ultimate concern keeps a steady hand on the tiller. Faith knows we look through that mirror darkly.

For the second form of despair, things become harder. How do we have a "goal," if—as multiverse cosmology suggests—there is no single ultimate goal or necessary conclusion to all things? Absent purpose, human beings collapse into incoherence. Sure, we can claim that we're perfectly comfortable with meaninglessness—we're so brave, so honest—but that way of thinking has a tendency to collapse in on itself. It's a self-devouring proposition.

To find meaning in such a wilderness, we have to be able to determine relative importance. To find purpose among a functional infinity of competing truth claims, we have to have some way of measuring the relative strength of the claim we choose as our guide. Why is this path defensibly the Way? Why is it true? Why does it give us the sense of purpose we need to thrive as beings?

This is a harder exercise, one that requires, well, another post.

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