

Natural Questions

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A question for the panel, I believe



Can Camouflage Keep up With Climate Change?

“White Hares on Brown Snowless Backgrounds as a Model to Study Adaptation to Climate Stress” examines the important scientific questions for wildlife management in the face of climate change of whether animals will be able to locally adapt, allowing them to persist in place without need for corridors or planned translocations. This webinar was a part of the NCCWSC Climate Change Science and Management Webinar Series.

United States Geological Survey videos, 24 July 2014 (youtube.com)

The matter is not where we go
 But how long it will last
 The question is how fast
 The question is how fast
 The question is how fast
 This is not a test, it's just an ask
 And the question is how fast

Superchunk, The Question is How Fast (On the Mouth)

The human beings were different primarily because they were the only species intensely curious about their surroundings. In time, mutations occurred, and an odd subset of humans began roaming the land. They were arrogant. They were not content to enjoy the magnificence of the universe. They asked “How?” How was the universe created? How can the “stuff” of the universe be responsible for the incredible variety in our world: stars, planets, sea otters, oceans, coral, sunlight,

the human brain? The mutants had posed a question that could be answered—but only with the labor of millennia and with a dedication handed down from master to student for a hundred generations. The question also inspired a great number of wrong and embarrassing answers. Fortunately, these mutants were born without a sense of embarrassment. They were called physicists.

Leon M. Lederman, The God Particle: If the Universe Is the Answer, What Is the Question?

Q. Are there important aspects of the Universe that can only be understood using the Anthropic Principle? Or is this principle unnecessary, or perhaps inherently unscientific?

A. Very roughly speaking, the Anthropic Principle says that our universe must be approximately the way it is for intelligent life to exist, so that the mere fact we are asking certain questions constrains their answers. This might “explain” the values of fundamental constants of nature, and perhaps other aspects of the laws of physics as well. Or, it might not.

Scott Chase, Michael Weiss, Philip Gibbs, Chris Hillman and Nathan Urban, The Original Usenet Physics FAQ

“Have you ever noticed this—that people never answer what you say? They answer what you mean—or what they think you mean. Suppose one lady says to another in a country house, ‘Is anybody staying with you?’ the lady doesn’t answer ‘Yes; the butler, the three footmen, the parlourmaid, and so on,’ though the parlourmaid may be in the room, or the butler behind her chair. She says ‘There is nobody staying with us,’ meaning nobody of the sort you mean. But suppose a doctor inquiring into an epidemic asks, ‘Who is staying in the house?’ then the lady will remember the butler, the parlourmaid, and the rest. All language is used like that; you never get a question answered literally, even when you get it answered truly. When those four quite honest men said that no man had gone into the Mansions, they did not really mean that no man had gone into them. They meant no man whom they could suspect of being your man. A man did go into the house, and did come out of it, but they never noticed him.”

“An invisible man?” inquired Angus, raising his red eyebrows.

G. K. Chesterton, The Invisible Man

WE cannot expect that the wisest men of our remotest posterity, who can base their conclusions upon thousands of years of accurate observation, will reach a decision on this subject without some measure of reserve. Such being the case, it might appear the dictate of wisdom to leave its consideration to some future age, when it may be taken up with better means of information than we now possess. But the question is one which will refuse to be postponed so long as the propensity to think of the possibilities of creation is characteristic of our race. The issue is not whether we shall ignore the question altogether, like Eve in the presence of Raphael; but whether in studying it we shall confine our speculations within the limits set by sound scientific reasoning. Essay-ing to do this, I invite the reader’s attention to what science may suggest, admitting in advance that the sphere of exact knowledge is small compared with the possibilities of creation, and that outside this sphere we can state only more or less probable conclusions.

The reader who desires to approach this subject in the most receptive spirit should begin his study by betaking himself on a clear, moonless evening, when he has no earthly concern to disturb the serenity of his thoughts, to some point where he can lie on his back on bench or roof, and scan the whole vault of heaven at one view. He can do this with the greatest pleasure and profit in late summer or autumn—winter would do equally well were it possible for the mind to rise so far above bodily conditions that the question of temperature should not enter.

Simon Newcomb, The Extent of the Universe

Should I be worried about climate change? Will it affect me personally?

Worldwatch Institute, Questions and Answers about Global Warming and Abrupt Climate Change

“To all these natural questions the voice of public History is as yet silent. Certain only that he has been, and is, a Pilgrim, and Traveler from a far Country; more or less footsore and travel-soiled; has parted with road-companions; fallen among thieves, been poisoned by bad cookery, blistered with bug-bites; nevertheless, at every stage (for they have let him pass), has had the Bill to discharge. But the whole particulars of his Route, his Weather-observations, the picturesque Sketches he took,

though all regularly jotted down (in indelible sympathetic-ink by an invisible interior Penman), are these nowhere forthcoming? Perhaps quite lost: one other leaf of that mighty Volume (of human Memory) left to fly abroad, unprinted, unpublished, unbound up, as waste paper; and to rot, the sport of rainy winds?

Thomas Carlyle, Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh

Do mobile homes attract tornadoes?

Of course not. It may seem that way, considering most tornado deaths occur in them, and that some of the most graphic reports of tornado damage come from mobile home communities. The reason for this is that mobile homes are, in general, much easier for a tornado to damage and destroy than well-built houses and office buildings. A brief, relatively weak tornado which may have gone undetected in the wilderness, or misclassified as severe straight-line thunderstorm winds while doing minor damage to sturdy houses, can blow a mobile home apart. Historically, mobile home parks have been reliable indicators, not attractors, of tornadoes.

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Frequently Asked Questions About Tornadoes

“It was him they were really out to get. And they did it. They got him. The bomb might as well have gone off in their living room. The violence done to his life was awful. Horrible. Never in his life had occasion to ask himself, ‘Why are things the way they are?’ Why should he bother, when the way they were was always perfect? Why are things the way they are? The question to which there is no answer, and up till then he was so blessed he didn’t even know the question existed.”

Philip Roth, American Pastoral

Foreman: Another question from the audience, I think. Mrs. Sally Whitaker from Bournemouthe has a question for the panel, I believe. Mrs. Whitaker?

Mrs. Whitaker: Thank you, Brian. Well, I’m a new gardener and this is my first frost and in two short months my garden’s gone from being a real color explosion to a very bare thing indeed ... Friends have advised flowers with a compact habit but that leaves me with lots of tiny auricula and double daisies, which look

silly because the garden’s really quite large. Now, I’d really like to plant something a little more striking, around the height of a delphinium, but then the wind gets it and people look over their fences thinking: *Dear oh dear (sympathetic laughter from the studio audience)*. So, my question to the panel is, how do you keep up appearances in the bleak midwinter?

Foreman: Thank you, Mrs. Whitaker. Well, it’s a common problem ... and it doesn’t necessarily get any easier for the seasoned gardener. Personally, I never get it quite right. Well, let’s hand the question over to the panel, shall we? Joyce Chalfen, any answers or suggestions for the bleak midwinter?

Joyce Chalfen: Well, first I must say your neighbors sound *very* nosy, I’d tell them to mind their own beeswax if I were you (*laughter from audience*).

Zadie Smith, White Teeth

The door-bell rang.

Cairo’s eyes jerked into focus on the passageway that led to the corridor-door. His eyes had become unangry and wary. The girl had gasped and turned to face the passageway. Her face was frightened. Spade stared gloomily for a moment at the blood trickling from Cairo’s lip, and then stepped back, taking his hand from the Levantine’s throat.

“Who is it?” the girl whispered, coming close to Spade; and Cairo’s eyes jerked back to ask the same question.

Dasheell Hammett, The Maltese Falcon

Is it physically possible, or even logically feasible, to have more than one universe? The screenwriter doesn’t know. The girl expels a mouthful of smoke and asks: Does this cigarette exist? The smoke? “2.063 The sum-total of reality is the No World.” A slight alteration of W’s pronouncement. She goes back to her initial inquiry. She thinks the answer must be simple, because a thoughtlet is like a fundamental particle, and these constitute everything else in existence, everything a mind learns, and everything it imagines, are composed of these. And if it bodies forth a whole world, it must do so because it doesn’t want to be alone. It’s the only possible answer to the question. It’s the only answer the girl can think of.

A. G. Porta, No World Concerto

Question: Do you literally mean that when you talked with the audience you came to believe that they had not seen anything else but the chicken?

Wilson: We simply asked them: What did you see in this film?

Question: Not what did you *think*?

Wilson: No, what did you *see*?

Question: How many people were in the viewing audience of whom you asked this question?

Wilson: 30-odd.

Question: No one gave you a response other than “We saw the chicken”?

Wilson: No, this was the first quick response—“We saw a chicken.”

John Wilson, Film Literacy in Africa (Canadian Communications)

Thinking in Fahrenheit—sixteen degrees—I felt very sad for the penguins. But then, as so often happens in climate-change discussions when the talk turns from diagnosis to remedies, the darkness became the blackness of black comedy. Sitting in the lounge of a ship burning three and a half gallons of fuel per minute, we listened to Adam extoll the benefits of shopping at farmers’ markets and changing our incandescent bulbs to L.E.D. bulbs. He also suggested that universal education for women would lower the global birth rate, and that ridding the world of war would free up enough money to convert the global economy to renewable energy. Then he called for questions or comments. The climate-change skeptics weren’t interested in arguing, but a believer stood up to say that he managed a lot of residential properties, and that he’d noticed that his federally subsidized tenants always kept their homes too hot in the winter and too cold in the summer, because they didn’t pay for their utilities, and that one way to combat climate change would be to make them pay. To this, a woman quietly responded, “I think the ultra-wealthy waste far more than people in subsidized housing.” The discussion broke up quickly after that—we all had bags to pack.

Jonathan Franzen, The End of the End of the World (the New Yorker)

Meanwhile, upon questioning him in his broken fashion, Queequeg gave me to understand that, in his land, owing to the absence of

settees and sofas of all sorts, the king, chiefs, and great people generally, were in the custom of fattening some of the lower orders for ottomans; and to furnish a house comfortably in that respect, you had only to buy up eight or ten lazy fellows, and lay them round in the piers and alcoves. Besides, it was very convenient on an excursion; much better than those garden-chairs which are convertible into walking-sticks; upon occasion, a chief calling his attendant, and desiring him to make a settee of himself under a spreading tree, perhaps in some damp marshy place.

Herman Melville, Moby Dick; Or, the Whale

Sources: Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh* (1836), Project Gutenberg, 1997, <http://www.gutenberg.org> Scott Chase, Michael Weiss, Philip Gibbs, Chris Hillman and Nathan Urban, *The Original Usenet Physics FAQ*, 2014, <http://physicsfaq.co.uk>. Jonathan Franzen, “The End of the End of the World,” *The New Yorker*, May 23, 2016. Dasbiell Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon* (1930), Knopf Doubleday, 2010. T. C. Hansard. G.K. Chesterton, “The Invisible Man.” *The Innocence of Father Brown*, Cassell, 1911, <http://www.worlds-best-detective-crime-and-murder-mystery-books.com>. Leon M. Lederman, *The God Particle: If the Universe Is the Answer, What Is the Question?* Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1993. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick: Or, the White Whale* (1851), Airmont Publishing Company, 1964. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, “Frequently Asked Questions about Tornadoes,” NOAA’s National Weather Service, 2014, <http://www.spc.noaa.gov>. Simon Newcomb, “The Extent of the Universe,” *Scientific Papers*, Vol. XXX, *The Harvard Classics*, edited by Charles W. Eliot, P. F. Collier & Son, 1909-14, <http://www.bartleby.com>. A. G. Porta, *No World Concerto*, translated by Darren Koolman and Rbett McNeil, Dalkey Archive Press, 2013. Philip Roth, *American Pastoral*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1997. Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2003. *Superchunk*, “The Question is How Fast,” *On the Mouth, Matador*, 1993. John Wilson, “Film Literacy in Africa,” *Canadian Communications*, vol. I, no. 4, Summer 1961, pp. 7-14, quoted in Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (1962), Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2002. Worldwatch Institute, “Questions and Answers about Global Warming and Abrupt Climate Change,” [worldwatch.org](http://www.worldwatch.org), 2013, <http://www.worldwatch.org>.