

VOLUME XXII, NUMBER 3, SUMMER 2022

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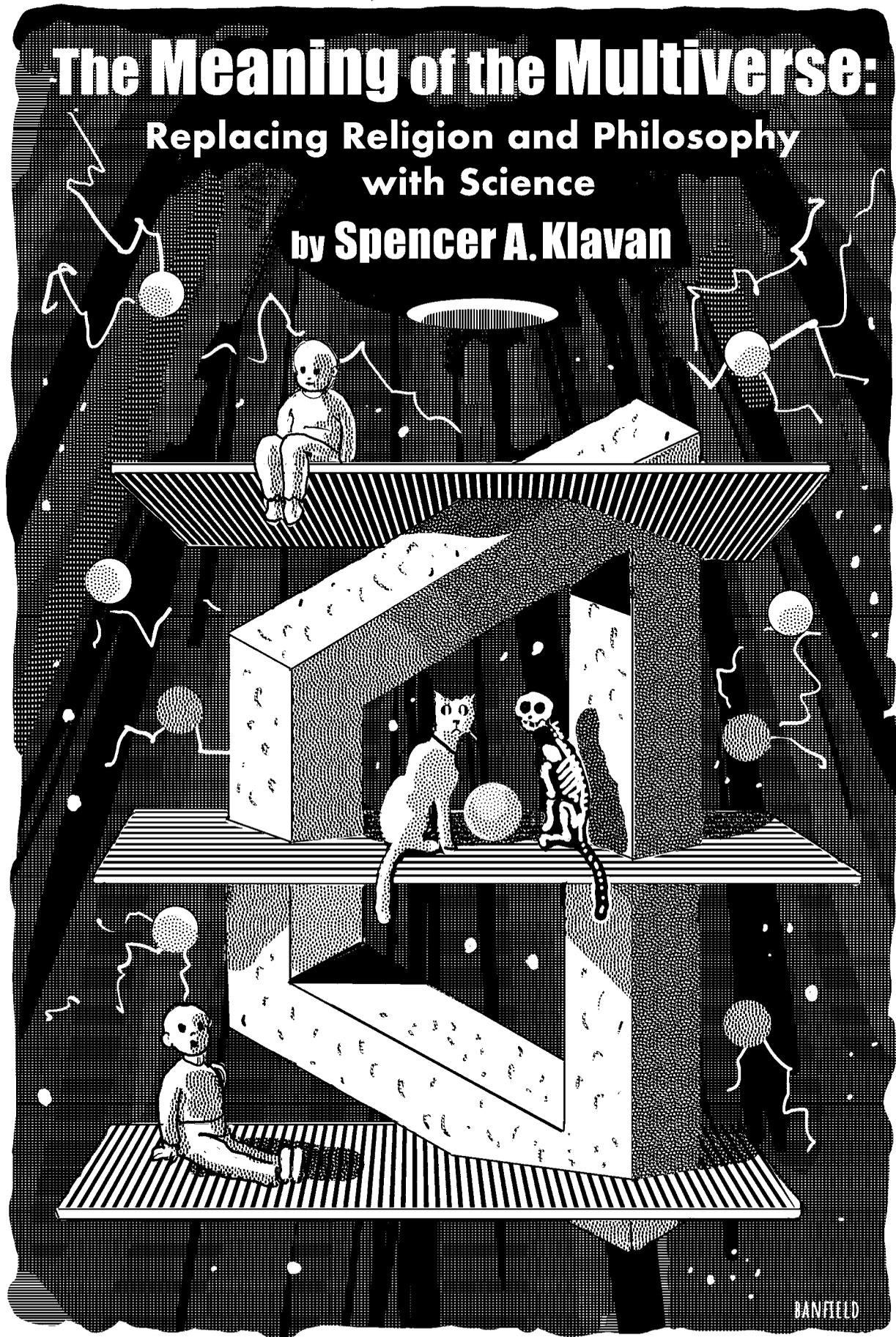
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## WORLDS WITHOUT END

*Marvel comics, quantum physics, and the secrets of the cosmos.*

THE MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE (MCU) is the most successful franchise in movie history. So far, Marvel Studios (a subsidiary of Disney) has produced 29 titles—from *Iron Man* in 2008 to *Thor: Love and Thunder* this year. Collectively, the movies have grossed over \$26 billion worldwide. That's before factoring in the TV shows, video games, theme park rides, merchandise, and all the other movies scheduled for production in years to come. These films have caused a cultural and economic sensation that merits more than passing attention.

Marvel movies may not always be high quality but they are high impact: they occupy a central place in the current American imagination. Though the movies can be silly and snarky, they take themselves seriously as intergalactic narratives of valor and heroism. Marvel presents a vision of the cosmos and man's place within it that lots of people seem to find compelling. And so it is worth pondering the fact that the studio has recently fixated upon one of the most controversial and suggestive ideas in modern physics: the idea that our universe is not the only one. Marvel has given massive popular appeal to the notion of the multiverse.

In 2013, Marvel released *Thor: The Dark World*, the second Thor film and eighth in the MCU. One scene in *Dark World* briefly features a blackboard on which the astrophysicist Erik Selvig (Stellan Skarsgård) has scribbled a mess of equations and diagrams, some fictional and some referring to real discoveries in quantum mechanics. At the center is a radiating nexus of spheres labeled "616," the number assigned to our universe in the original Marvel comics. Six-One-Six marks out the main reality of the comic books, distinguishing it from a potentially infinite range of parallel universes. This was the first indication that the timeline of the films would one day branch out into a limitless web of alternate possibilities (hardcore fans insist that the movies already take place in a different universe than the comics, numbered 199999).

Since then, the multiverse has become the central governing concept of Marvel's franchise. In *Doctor Strange* (2016), Tilda Swinton plays a Shaolin-style mystic called the Ancient One, who explains to the awestruck doctor (Benedict Cumberbatch) that "this universe is only

one of an infinite number: worlds without end." Other references popped up in other films, but the idea really took off in 2019 after *Avengers: Endgame* brought Marvel's previous storylines to an ostensible close. *Endgame* was the fourth in a series of crossover epics that commingled characters from all the different properties to date, summoning heroes like Captain America and Iron Man from their own corners of the fictional world to do collective battle with a super-villain named Thanos. Having exhausted the narrative but not the financial possibilities of their intellectual property, Marvel's execs then emphasized that this supposedly climactic battle was actually only one possible outcome—the one which occurred in this fictional universe, but not in others.

Thus the same beloved characters could tread the same market-tested ground again and again, with slightly different parameters each time. In *Eternals* (2021), the Armageddon depicted in *Endgame* turns out to be only one among many such wars that have occurred on this world—and this world is only one among many such planets. In the Disney Plus series *Loki* (2021), Thor's devious half-brother blows the lid off the "Sacred Timeline," allowing endlessly new versions of old stories to branch outward from the ones we know. In the blockbuster hit *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021), three different versions of New York's plucky guardian from three previous movie series—played by Tom Holland, Tobey Maguire, and Andrew Garfield—grapple together with bad guys collected from all the different films (for which purpose Disney acquired access to older Spideys from Sony's Columbia Pictures). And in the animated show *What If...?* (2021), streaming on Disney Plus, old plots are played back again with one new element, e.g., a gender-swapped hero or a rampant zombie virus. *What If...?* is presided over by Jeffrey Wright as Uatu the Watcher, a surpassingly intelligent being who articulates the overarching premise of all new Marvel content: "Time. Space. Reality. It's more than a linear path. It's a prism of endless possibility."

In one respect, this multiverse gambit is just the latest version of a time-honored tactic for eking more revenue and plotlines out of fan favorites. DC Comics pioneered the technique in 1961 with "Flash of Two Worlds!" (*The Flash* #123), in which the hero discovers

that a version of himself from the 1940s still exists as a doppelgänger on "Earth-2." Nostalgia was a major factor even at this early stage: the old Flash (alias Jay Garrick) had a distinctive look from the Golden Age of Comic Books, the period from the late '30s to the mid-'50s when superheroes first impressed themselves upon America's collective psyche. Resurrecting a character from this bygone era was a sure-fire way to elicit cheers of recognition and affection.

Soon it became apparent that the parallel universe was a device of almost unlimited potential and versatility. David Thorpe brought the idea to Marvel when he resurrected a long-dormant character, Captain Britain (*Daredevils* #7, 1983). "We wanted to do anything we liked," Thorpe told an interviewer. So he and his team made up an alternative timeline in which Captain Britain could come safely back without consequences for the other stories playing out within the remit of Stan Lee's comic book empire. The idea was such a hit that Captain Britain's new world eventually became the "real" universe, i.e., the 616 timeline in which whatever happens is "canon." But the appeal of the multiverse for creators is that no event really counts as permanent or irrevocable. Old plotlines can be retroactively altered ("retconned"), heroes and villains who died last year can come back to life, and outcomes that obtained in one universe can be marginally or drastically different in another. The multiverse gives it all a veneer of coherence, tying every new story into one giant super-narrative.

### The Shadow of God

IN THE COMICS, THE MULTIVERSE CAME along with a healthy dose of camp humor. "There was a lot of satire," said Thorpe: "we had our tongues in our cheeks." In Marvel's *Fantastic Four*, an evil genius known as "the Maker" finds a central hub from which he can control all universes (*Ultimates 2*, vol. 2, #9, 2017). "Here, we can rewrite every story," the Maker cackles, and one can't help noticing with amusement that the writers themselves are in exactly the same position. Stan Lee's spirit of self-deprecation, and his collaborator Steve Ditko's flair for sci-fi melodrama, pervaded the whole enterprise. But though Lee's puckish cameos helped impart a similar self-



Books discussed in this essay:

*The Selfish Gene*, by Richard Dawkins.  
Oxford University Press, 544 pages, \$15.95

*The Beginning of Infinity:  
Explanations that Transform the World*, by David Deutsch.  
Penguin, 496 pages, \$21

*Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*,  
by Diogenes Laertius, translated by Pamela Mensch.  
Oxford University Press, 704 pages, \$51

*On the Nature of Things*,  
by Lucretius, translated by Martin Ferguson Smith.  
Hackett, 162 pages, \$47 (cloth), \$16.50 (paper)

*The Return of the God Hypothesis:  
Three Scientific Discoveries  
that Reveal the Mind Behind the Universe*,  
by Stephen C. Meyer.  
HarperOne, 576 pages, \$29.99 (cloth), \$19.99 (paper)

*Scale, Space and Canon in Ancient Literary Culture*,  
by Reviel Netz.  
Cambridge University Press, 890 pages, \$62.99

*The Interpretation of Quantum Mechanics:  
Dublin Seminars (1949-1955)*,  
by Erwin Schrödinger, edited by Michel Bitbol.  
Oxbow, 151 pages, \$55



awareness to the movies (his last one appearing in *Avengers: Endgame*), and though Marvel films are still laden with banter and knowing references, the multiverse itself is increasingly presented as a serious proposition. “I’m a senior fellow at the Baxter Foundation, and I specialize in multiversal research,” explains a straight-faced Christine Palmer (Rachel McAdams) in *Doctor Strange and the Multiverse of Madness* (2022). Mordo, Strange’s arch-enemy in one universe and sometime friend in another, thunders with epic gravitas about the “desecration of reality” that Strange has occasioned by traveling between worlds. Over time, the tone of the MCU’s multiverse drama has veered toward the portentous.

Part of this shift has to do with the prestige Marvel is attempting to borrow from real-life science. By riffing on the latest ideas in quantum physics, the films give the impression that they are touching on the most profound secrets of the heavens and the earth. A pervasive modern assumption is that science has displaced metaphysics and religion as the definitive story about who we are and why we are here. “It was Darwin who first put together a coherent and tenable account of why we exist,” wrote the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene* (1976). He went on to quote with approval the paleontologist G.G. Simpson: “[A]ll attempts to answer that question before 1859 are worthless and...we will be better off if we ignore them completely.” Dawkins and his fellow “new atheists” did much to popularize the idea that Aristotle, Plato, Moses, Christ, Muhammad, and their ilk are obsolete in light of scientific discovery. If the mathematical laws of the physical world can furnish an exhaustive picture of reality, then all life’s meaning is to be found through scientific experiment and theory. Naturally, then, science fiction is the type of art that can tell us most about man’s nature and destiny.

So Marvel can present the multiverse as more than just a gimmick to sell movies, because the idea is currently finding favor among actual physicists. The recent abundance and success of other multiverse-themed movies suggest that rival studios are also following scientific taste: in A24’s *Everything Everywhere All At Once* (2022), for instance, Michelle Yeoh plays a laundromat owner who must chase her daughter from dimension to dimension in an effort to stave off the nihilism that naturally follows from getting lost in an infinity of worlds. In an interview with Vox’s Alex Abad-Santos, physicist Spyridon Michalakis confirmed that multiversal cinema does indeed seek meaning in modern science (“Everything Everywhere All At Once, ex-

plained by a quantum physicist,” April 2022). The power of the movie, Michalakis argued, comes from the profundity of a new physics which posits “an infinite number of space times, all happening at the same time.”

This real-life multiverse theory has come into vogue as a way of resolving mysteries that have vexed scientists since the 1920s, when Erwin Schrödinger and Werner Heisenberg pioneered quantum mechanics. Heisenberg’s and Schrödinger’s equations suggested that subatomic particles, such as the photons that make up light, might exist in multiple states at once until they are observed. This idea of “superposition” is a major component in the “Copenhagen Interpretation” of quantum physics favored by Heisenberg and others like Niels Bohr. Superposition means answering questions such as “is light a particle or a wave?” with a resounding but perplexing, “both.”

Schrödinger found this notion severely unsettling because it implied that reality is in some sense what we make of it. According to the Copenhagen school, matter is fundamentally indeterminate until it meets with

### Giving multiverse theory the imprimatur of science means giving scientists the authority of philosophers and priests.

a human mind. Immanuel Kant, who made a powerful impression on the Copenhagen theorists, argued that we simply cannot know the objective nature of things “out there,” independent of our perception. But quantum experiments suggested something still more radical: that the material world might *have* no definite objective reality except in relationship with a subjective human consciousness.

Schrödinger’s famous imaginary cat was designed not to support this paradoxical idea, but to emphasize just how counterintuitive it is. The cat sits in a box containing poison which will only be released if a single radioactive atom happens to decay. Since the radioactive atoms have not been observed, they have both decayed *and* not decayed, meaning that after a while the cat is both alive *and* dead. If that seems fundamentally unacceptable, then there must be some other way of understanding quantum physics. Schrödinger floated one in a 1952 lecture. What if, he asked a little sheepishly, the various outcomes of quantum equations are “not alternatives, but all really

happen simultaneously”? In other words what if, instead of being both dead and alive in our world, the cat is dead in some worlds and alive in others? This is the first known reference to the “many-worlds interpretation,” and thus to modern multiverse theory.

As David Deutsch of Oxford’s Centre for Quantum Computation points out in *The Beginning of Infinity* (2011), Schrödinger himself apparently never carried further the idea of many parallel worlds existing simultaneously. But the American physicist Hugh Everett III did so shortly thereafter, fleshing out the notion with more robust mathematics in the mid-1950s. And another version of the multiverse has also gained traction in the age of string theory, a description of the universe in which tiny one-dimensional strings vibrate at particular frequencies to produce the laws of physics. Stephen Hawking’s landmark contributions to this discipline promised to reconcile the bizarre quantum behavior of fundamental particles with the laws of space and time that Albert Einstein outlined in his theory of relativity. Eventually, string theory became a serious candidate for the much-coveted title of Unified Field Theory, a mathematically consistent set of rules for all physical phenomena from the very smallest to the largest. But the equations of string theory have a curious property: there are many ways to solve them. Only one set of solutions corresponds to our world, in which life as we know it exists. The others describe a totally different set of realities, a plethora of potential universes other than ours.

At around the time that this was becoming apparent, physicists were also grappling with the startling fact that our own universe looks “fine-tuned” to support life. Basic aspects of physical reality—like the strength of gravity and the mass of particles in atomic nuclei—sit exactly in the tiny range of values they *need* to be for life to come into being. There is no philosophical or mathematical reason why this must be so: it just is. It all starts to look suspiciously like someone had a hand in designing things: “A commonsense interpretation of the facts,” said the astrophysicist Fred Hoyle, “suggests that a superintellect has monkeyed with physics, as well as chemistry and biology, and that there are no blind forces worth speaking about in nature.” The shadow of God was looming.

Unless, of course, there are more worlds than our own. Multiverse theory now offers an escape route, for those seeking one, to avoid concluding that our universe is presided over by one great Mind. Perhaps it only looks that way; perhaps, of all the universes described by the string equations, ours just happens to be

the one that supports life. Combining string theory with inflationary cosmology, according to which the universe expands from a highly dense starting point, multiverse advocates propose that new universes might come into being if the string configurations, which cause the laws of physics, “decay” and expand from new starting points with new laws.

### The Universe Machine

THE “STRING INFLATIONARY LANDSCAPE model” describes a sort of universe-producing machine. This machine coughs up cosmos after cosmos until eventually it happens to produce one that satisfies the conditions for conscious life, like the proverbial monkeys endlessly pounding away at their typewriters until they eventually produce the text of *Hamlet*. Left unanswered is the question of who, if anyone, created the mechanism for generating universes in the first place. But generally the assumption is that no one did: Hawking himself, before he died, wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* that “the laws of gravity and quantum theory allow universes to appear spontaneously from nothing” (“Why God Did Not Create the Universe,” September 2010). As mathematician George Ellis and physicist Joe Silk explain in *Nature*, “The multiverse is motivated by a puzzle: why fundamental constants of nature...have values that lie in the small range that allows life to exist.” Multiverse theory is attractive precisely because it furnishes an answer to that question without invoking divine creation (“Defend the Integrity of Physics,” December 2014).

At this point, though, it becomes urgent to determine where science ends and philosophy begins. By their very nature, universes besides our own cannot be observed, because they do not affect the reality we experience. This makes it impossible to verify their existence by any known form of scientific experiment. Deutsch argues that we can see evidence of the multiverse in the behavior of quantum particles, such as when photons pass through a device called a half-silvered mirror: “When a photon strikes such a mirror, it bounces off in half the universes and passes straight through in the other half.” But this is question-begging. The whole reason why the many-worlds interpretation is an *interpretation* is because it provides only one *possible* conclusion that can be drawn from the evidence. A Copenhagen theorist would say the photon takes *both* paths at once, until observed. What the evidence shows depends on which theory you have already accepted, not on the evidence itself.

For this reason, skeptics of the multiverse are keen to designate it as metaphysics rather

than scientific fact. As Ellis argues in *Scientific American*, “Nothing is wrong with scientifically based philosophical speculation, which is what multiverse proposals are. But we should name it for what it is” (“Does the Multiverse Really Exist?” August 2011). In *The Return of the God Hypothesis* (2022), geophysicist and philosopher of science Stephen C. Meyer goes further: in order to explain away the fine-tuning of the universe, he writes, “inflationary cosmology and string theory needs to affirm numerous purely hypothetical entities, abstract postulates, and unobservable processes.” It may be interesting, in other words, but it’s not science.

Empirical verification has been a key requirement of scientific fact at least since the days of Francis Bacon and Galileo Galilei. No experiment or observation can interpret itself—as Karl Popper observed in the 20th century, every measurement is already laden with assumptions about what that measurement might *mean*. But still, Popper insisted, an explanation of natural phenomena must be testable in order to count as science: “the scientifically significant *physical effect* may be defined as that which can be regularly reproduced by anyone who carries out the appropriate experiment in the way prescribed” (emphasis added). For modern scientists, experiment is what ancient Greek philosophers would have called the *kritērion*, the touchstone of truth against which claims are to be measured. Scientific hypotheses are designed so that experiments can prove them definitively true or false.

Multiverse enthusiasts want to claim that same level of scientific certainty, but without fulfilling the traditional requirements of experiment. Philosopher of science Richard Dawid, for example, argues that “the construction of the scientific paradigm is itself not a matter of logical deduction but a matter of plausibility, coherence, and success.” But to Ellis and Silk, “this is moving the goal posts”: plenty of plausible, coherent, and successful descriptions of reality are nonetheless unfalsifiable. For example, it is plausible that evil corrupts the soul. I can argue coherently that it does so. And assuming I am right will successfully explain many of my daily observations, such as the distastefulness of murderers and rapists. But no experiment could ever prove or disprove the existence of evil or the soul: these are not testable hypotheses but spiritual convictions. We need spiritual convictions. We cannot meaningfully speak of human life without them. But formulating them is the task of ethicists and clerics, not scientists. That is why the many-worlds debate has become so heated: giving multiverse

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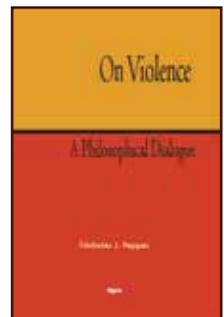
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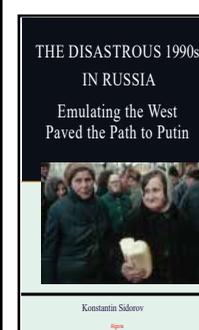
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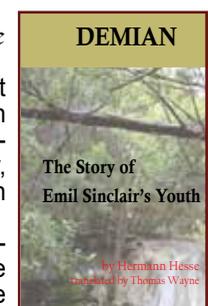
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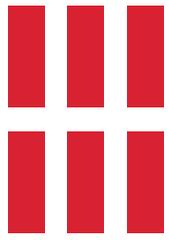
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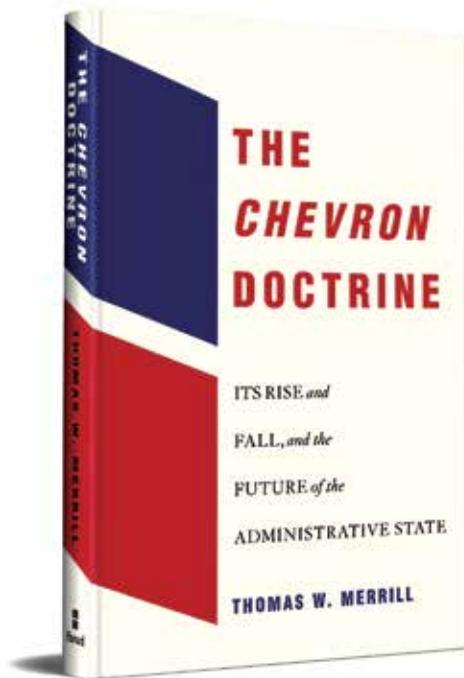


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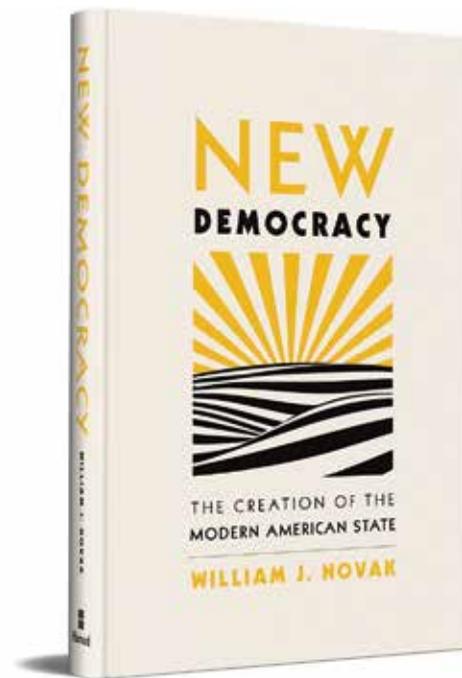


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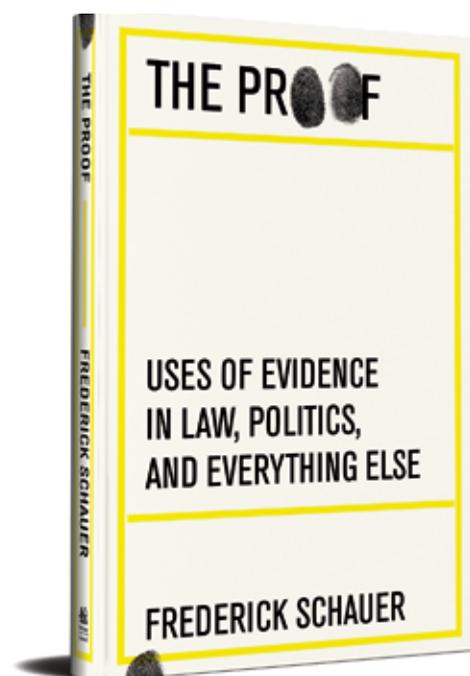
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theory the imprimatur of science means giving scientists the authority of philosophers and priests.

And this is the same reason why Marvel creators and audiences seem to feel that multiverse storylines are not just pastimes but legends of deep spiritual and moral significance. If science is becoming our new pagan creed, then it is natural for science fiction and comic books to furnish our new mythology. After all, superheroes already occupied a place in the American cultural landscape akin to that of the Olympian gods and demigods in ancient Greece and Rome. In each case, we tell and retell galactic adventure stories featuring superhuman beings who embody our local and universal concerns. Superman stands for “truth, justice, and the American way” much as Theseus embodies all that is Athenian in plays like Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus*. And the Greeks wove their philosophy into their folktales just as we do—so it is significant that some Greek philosophers had a multiverse theory of their own.

### Atoms and Void

IT WAS EPICURUS OF SAMOS WHO IN ANTIQUITY made the strongest case for the multiverse. He did so in an age of political and intellectual turmoil. After Athens’ brief and blazing golden age ended with defeat in the Peloponnesian War, the Mediterranean world lost its center of gravity. Alexander the Great made a bid to bring all nations together under his rule, but when he died in 323 B.C. he left behind a splintered empire and a patchwork of competing civilizations. The ensuing Hellenistic Period was defined in large part by the disintegration of old powers and the gradual, overall dominance of Rome. When Rome’s transition to empire became official in 27 B.C. under Augustus Caesar, the Hellenistic age—named for the pervasive and commanding influence of Greek thought—was over.

This political disarray was mirrored in the intellectual fragmentation of the Greek-speaking world. That is one of many things illustrated brilliantly by Reviel Netz in *Scale, Space and Canon in Ancient Literary Culture* (2020). Netz uses statistical analysis of our surviving texts to show how the canons of Greek poetry, history, philosophy, and science formed and hardened over time. He maps the origins and destinations of leading intellectuals, showing how Athens gradually lost its undisputed status as the hub and acme of all intellectual life. “[A]s the Mediterranean kaleidoscope shifted and re-shifted...[in] the Hellenistic and early Roman eras it reinforced the pluralism of Greek civilization,” argues Netz.

During the 5th century B.C., Athens emerged as the undisputed meeting place of great minds. Socrates, whose subversive semi-public debates with leading lights attracted both fascination and loathing, became the central figure in a world-famous philosophical tradition. But though Socrates’ immediate successor, Plato, established a formal institute called the Academy, no one school could contain the implications of Socrates’ legacy. Rival systems proliferated: Stoics, Peripatetics, and Cynics alike claimed to give exhaustive descriptions of life, the universe, everything. Among these many contenders, Epicurus emerged with a radical proposition: maybe we can’t know it all. Maybe reality is too strange and various for the mind of man to grasp fully, just as the peoples of the Mediterranean proved too fractious to follow any one leader for long. Maybe the heavens, like the nations, are irreducibly plural.

This counsel of epistemological humility led Epicurus to insist that “[t]here is an unlimited number of worlds, some of them like ours, others unlike” (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* 10.45). The physics underlying this proposition were simple: “[T]he whole of existence is made up of bodies and of void.” Everything is either a material object composed of indivisible atoms, or it is empty space. As the atoms move through empty space, they collide according to fixed laws. At some locations in this infinite expanse, atoms crash together in just such a way as to form a *kosmos*, a world.

Explaining this procedure to Rome’s gentry, the Epicurean poet Lucretius wrote, “[I]t must not be considered likely under any circumstances that this one earth and heaven alone has been formed...especially since our world was made by nature: the atoms themselves collided together spontaneously and by chance.” Given enough of these random collisions, a universe like ours is bound to appear. The Epicurean multiverse, like the modern one, was a universe-making machine in which laws of physics generated infinite material worlds at random. Both theories were developed to serve much the same purpose: to describe how human life could unfold without divine intervention. “Nature is free,” wrote Lucretius. “She does everything on her own steam. Divinities play no part” (*De Rerum Natura* 2.1023-1174). By design, the multiverse insulates materialism against theology.

As these possibilities were occurring to Epicurus, the great artists of the period assembled a multiverse of their own. Greek literary scholarship of the Hellenistic Era found a new, Egyptian home in Alexandria’s famous library, where critics and poets looked back

over the history of myth in art since Homer. “[P]oetic realignment went together with political realignment,” writes Netz: “a culture of performative experiment was displaced by the culture of the entrenched canon.” Hellenistic writers like Callimachus and Apollonius of Rhodes, both poets and librarians at Alexandria, were acutely conscious of themselves as late arrivals to an artistic tradition whose formative days were over. They responded by gathering old narrative material into comprehensive anthologies and retelling well-known myths in subtly new ways.

In his *Argonautica*, Apollonius reassembled material from Euripidean tragedy and Homeric epic into an erudite reworking of Jason’s quest for the Golden Fleece. Callimachus, for his part, gathered myth after myth into a pastiche epic called the *Aitia*; meanwhile, as a librarian, he catalogued Alexandria’s holdings as exhaustively as he could in his tablets, or *pinakes*. Gradually this penchant for compilation would produce what is now called the “epic cycle,” a scheme for organizing the myths of Greek poetry in chronological order. Later summaries of the cycle, like the one recorded by a grammarian named Proclus, bear witness to a kind of master timeline into which various plots could be gathered. The project lived on in the *Metamorphoses*, a grand assemblage of all myths since the beginning of time by the Augustan-era poet Ovid.

### Science Imitates Art

THE EPIC CYCLE AND THE MARVEL CINEMATIC Universe bear witness to very similar cultural moments. In each case, old and beloved stories are assembled into sprawling super-narratives. In each case, audiences and artists alike look backward to favorite legends from a golden age gone by. And in each case, the “true” timeline is supplemented by variants, retellings, and fan fiction. In one alternative iteration of the Trojan War, for example, Helen is not actually carried off to Troy but kept safely in Egypt while Menelaus and Paris do battle for her hand. (Euripides, Herodotus, and the earlier poet Stesichorus all explored this version of events.) Helen didn’t “really” go to Egypt any more than Superman “really” died in DC’s 1992 “Death of Superman,” or Spider-Man “really” died in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018). But in the multiverse, everything happens somewhere.

In the Hellenistic era, territorial battles came along with cultural fragmentation and Epicurean cosmology. In our day, political partisanship and social atomization accompany the rise of Hawking’s string theory and Marvel’s multiverse. It is suggestive, then,



that parallel universes have become the main facilitator in the MCU of “diversity” and “representation,” those two great artistic imperatives of the woke revolution. It is easier to leaven the white maleness of Marvel’s main lineup if some universes contain a female Captain America or a black Captain Marvel. So it is that Xochitl Gomez emerges in *Doctor Strange and the Multiverse of Madness* as America Chavez, the pivotal hero who makes it possible to travel between universes—proudly wearing the new rainbow-plus-trans-plus-BLM flag as a lapel pin. Infinite worlds means infinite identities, infinite demographic permutations and aggrieved groups onscreen. But if identities, like plotlines, can be picked up and dropped again at will, do any of them mean anything at all?

Underwriting the whole thing, in both modernity and antiquity, is a sense of disarray and fracture, a once-unified world threatening to tumble apart into hostile factions. “[T]he coming of monarchies failed to bring a unified ideology: variety, instead, accumulated,” Netz explains. As in politics, so in science and in art: everywhere there is the sense that no governing logic can unify the world. As political and cultural communities scatter like atoms into the void, there is an increasing suspicion that the center cannot hold.

When philosophy, literature, and mythology converge toward a single set of ideas, it seems likely that they are suggesting something deep-set within the *Zeitgeist* of a culture. The Marvel Cinematic Universe is a parable that shows in the language of story what materialists express in the language of cosmological speculation. Since the multiverse is not provable by experiment, it is more mythology than science. And like all mythologies, it conveys a set of cultural beliefs through imagery and storytelling. Those cultural beliefs are: that physical science is the beginning of all wisdom, that humanity is an accident, and that God is dead. We act as if these assumptions have been proven empirically by science, but in fact it is the other way around: our conviction that the universe is random and uncaring shapes our interpretation of the data science provides. That is why Marvel Studios’ multiverse and the physicists’ multiverse are part of the same trend. Both are attempts to build a “coherent,

plausible, and successful” account of human life without God.

They are failing. For as our pop art becomes more multiversal, it also becomes more shallow and incoherent. What makes the MCU increasingly tiresome and artistically sterile is precisely the constant abandonment of one reality for another, the constant revision of questions that look settled. Characters die and come back to life or show up again in another universe; eventually, even the event of their deaths carries almost no emotional weight. Audiences were moved to see Tom Holland’s Spider-Man dissolving into space dust. But once he and others re-materialized in *Endgame*, it began to look like *none* of the events in the series had any lasting consequences. Since in the multiverse no event excludes the opposite event from happening simultaneously, stories are no longer dictated by the logic of human action but by the actors’ contracts and the financial convenience of studio executives.

Thus every new Marvel movie now effectively renders previous stories obsolete or irrelevant. This effect is achieved most subtly in *Spider-Man: No Way Home*, which quietly rewrites the ending of every previous Spider-Man movie in order to tell a compelling story in its own timeline. This makes the plot in front of our faces exciting, but turns every previous film in which audiences had once been invested into a dead-end and a hoax. Similarly, *Eternals* fails as a narrative because it renders all that came before it practically moot: upon the arrival of nearly immortal beings wielding unthinkable celestial powers, previous events and characters look, retrospectively, insignificant. The old heroes and their concerns become a mere blip compared with the lives of the new arrivals. Nor, at the elevated level of these godlike protagonists, do moral choices make much sense. Sersi (Gemma Chan), who emerges as the main character of *Eternals*, achieves a triumph which must eventually lead to the heat death of the universe. She feels at best ambivalent about this victory, and wonders if her course of action was the right one. Well she might, since in an infinite and random universe of mere atomic flow, governed by no ultimate mind, words like “right” and “wrong” can hardly have much use to begin with.

“In the infinite multiverse there’s a cure for every illness. A solution to every problem,”

says the Scarlet Witch (Elizabeth Olsen) in *Doctor Strange and the Multiverse of Madness*. She’s exactly right, and that’s exactly the issue: two and a half hours of pointless carnage will end us right back where we started if the dead shall be raised as soon as the credits roll. The multiversal MCU is a world without narrative stakes, moral meaning, or tragedy, because it is a world without consequences.

None of these artistic failures proves that the multiverse does not exist or that God does, for the simple reason that neither claim is a scientific hypothesis that could be proven or disproven. They are competing theologies—one of them handed down to us through ancestral wisdom, the other dictated to us by scientific pseudo-clerics and by the spirit of our fractious age. One way of adjudicating between theologies, though, is to ask whether they can inspire art that expresses the full range of man’s nature in a satisfying way. In this capacity it is telling that multiverse theory has inspired the increasingly nonsensical and exploitative schlock of the MCU, which gestures emptily toward heroism even as it portrays a world in which human action cannot possibly have consequence or significance.

Perhaps another set of stories would make better sense of what science discovers. There is at least one interpretation of the data that can account for quantum physics and the realities of the human heart alike. That interpretation goes like this: God made us and he means for us to know him, in part by studying his handiwork through science and reason. Such a God might well have made a universe designed to contain us and to be seen by us—a reality that comes into full fruition only through relationship with our consciousness, as the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum physics suggests. Indeed, the God who would produce such a reality sounds awfully like the God who would make the animals, but invite human beings to consummate creation by giving them names. He is still inviting us to do so, each time we look out into a heaven that declares His glory even now. That is surely a story worth telling.

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