

# SOUL STORY

EVOLUTION AND THE PURPOSE OF LIFE

T!M FREKE

# **CONTENTS**

1	EMERGENT SPIRITUALITY
1.1	an ambiguous life
1.2	soul crisis
1.3	scientific knowledge and spiritual wisdom
1.4	the evolution of soul
1.5	matter, life, soul
2	THE TIMESTREAM
2.1	the mystery story
2.2	the reality of time
2.3	time accumulates
2.4	the past and the possible
2.5	you are your past
2.6	the objective world
2.7	objective information and subjective experience
2.8	subjectivity is discrimination
2.9	you are your life
<b>3</b>	THE SELF-REALIZING UNIVERSE
3.1	moment zero

3.2 expanding space-time

- 3.3 individuation and unividuation
- 3.4 objective and subjective evolution
- 3.5 an emergent reality
- 3.6 the life-world and the soul-dimension
- 3.7 reductionism and emergentism
- 3.8 primal spirit

#### 4 BODY, SOUL, SPIRIT

- 4.1 psyche and the brain
- 4.2 somastream and soulstream
- 4.3 objective soul-information
- 4.4 an emergent relationship
- 4.5 the experiencer
- 4.6 one in spirit
- 4.7 the presence of awareness
- 4.8 your multidimensional identity
- 4.9 the emergence of spiritual awakening
- 4.10 deep awake

#### 5 THE EVOLUTION OF PURPOSE

- 5.1 the realization of potentiality
- 5.2 soul formation
- 5.3 emergent levels of purpose
- 5.4 evolving soul-stories
- 5.5 unconscious oneness to conscious oneness
- 5.6 the evolution of love

- 5.7 multidimensional purpose
- 5.8 spirit in all

#### **6** THE EVOLUTION OF CHOICE

- 6.1 we are what we choose
- 6.2 creativity and pastivity
- 6.3 chance evolves into choice
- 6.4 unconscious choices and conscious learning
- 6.5 the coexistence of causality and choice
- 6.6 slow and circuitous evolution
- 6.7 good and evil

#### 7 THE EVOLUTION OF IMMORTALITY

- 7.1 death is safe
- 7.2 the evolution of evolution
- 7.3 the conscious timestream
- 7.4 memory and the past
- 7.5 dreams and death
- 7.6 the imagnos
- 7.7 the evolution of heaven
- 7.8 psychosymbiosis
- 7.9 falling asleep and falling alive
- 7.10 loving the body
- 7.11 the first soul

#### 8 THE REALITY OF MAGIC

- 8.1 when life becomes dreamlike
- 8.2 psychic experiences
- 8.3 causality and narrativity
- 8.4 the multiplayer, interactive game of life
- 8.5 competing and cooperating soul-stories
- 8.6 intentional magic
- 8.7 an invitation to participate
- 8.8 black magic
- 8.9 fulfilling your destiny

#### 9 THE EMERGENCE OF GOD

- 9.1 the love-light
- 9.2 a drop in the ocean?
- 9.3 the communion of souls
- 9.4 god is love
- 9.5 bringing heaven to earth
- 9.6 transivity and the will of god
- 9.7 your individual genius
- 9.8 evolution and the fall
- 9.9 the genealogical multiverse

#### 10 REALIZE YOUR GENIUS!

- 10.1 evolution and ambiguity
- 10.2 your life matters
- 10.3 love-wisdom
- 10.4 soulology

- 10.5 soul autonomy
- 10.6 preparing for death
- 10.7 do your best

#### **GLOSSARY OF NEW TERMS**

# 1 EMERGENT SPIRITUALITY

contemporary society is experiencing a 'soul crisis', caused by the cultural dominance of objectivist science and the demise of outdated religion, which has left us adrift in a meaningless universe

in this book i want to suggest the solution is a revolutionary new philosophy i call 'emergent spirituality', which brings together the scientific theory of evolution with a fresh understanding of perennial spiritual insights to reveal the deep purpose of life

i want to take you on an exhilarating journey through a huge number of new ideas, dealing with the nature of time, soul, purpose, volition, death and magic

in this chapter i want to start by looking at how science and spirituality offer us opposite perspectives on the ambiguous nature of reality

# 1.1 AN AMBIGUOUS LIFE

what is life? does it have a purpose? is it going somewhere? do our individual lives have any importance? is death the end or could there be more?

i've been contemplating such questions since i was a child, which is how i've ended up becoming a philosopher

the problem i've found myself confronting when seeking clear answers is that, in my experience, the nature of existence is extremely *ambiguous* 

sometimes life has seemed so magical it's taken my breath away ... and i've felt sure there must be profound meaning to our existence

yet other times life has seemed so futile i've felt asphyxiated ... and then the idea that existence is a meaningless accident has seemed much more credible

i've had sublime experiences which have filled me with the deep conviction that there's a supreme being of love who is guiding our lives

but then i've witnessed the horrendous suffering in the world and the idea of an indifferent universe has

# seemed much more likely

in attempting to understand the nature of existence i've felt pulled in two different directions

on the one hand i've felt attracted to a spiritual understanding of life, because this addresses my magical experiences of the numinous nature of reality

but on the other hand i've found myself drawn to a scientific understanding of life, because this offers me a rational explanation of the material universe

so i've struggled with reconciling these opposite perspectives, each of which seems to describe one aspect of my ambiguous experience

the adventures of my life, through which i've grown as a human being, have felt deeply meaningful to me ... but my understanding of science has forced me to look at the bigger picture and ask awkward questions

if existence is expressing some deep meaning, what is the point of those strange fish lurking in the darkness of the deep ocean ... and the plethora of ugly insects infecting us with vile diseases ... and the trillions of desolate planets in our vast cosmos that don't support life?

science has discovered a universe that has been evolving for 13.8 billion years, which has left me with contradictory feelings

i've been so awed by the magnificence of the cosmos it's seemed absurd to believe this could all exist for no reason

but i've found it hard to conceive of a grand cosmic purpose that includes 180 million years of lumbering dinosaurs!

what does it mean to be a human being in the 21st century, now that science has rejected the idea that we were created in god's image, and we see ourselves as monkeys who wear clothes?

sometimes it has seemed to me that there is an essential goodness within people, who are doing their best in difficult circumstances

but other times we've seemed more like parasites that have infected this beautiful planet and are unconsciously killing our host

as a curious human being i've wanted to understand life as i *actually* experience it, which means accounting for all the perplexing ambiguities of existence

i've been determined not to hide from the bleak realities of life ... but i've needed to account for the intense optimism that often surges within me ... making me sure that something wonderful is going on

despite all the evidence to the contrary, i've been unable to shake off the intuitive conviction that there

is a profound purpose to this bittersweet life ... which redeems the horror and reveals the true significance of the human adventure

in light of these dilemmas i've spent the last period of my life developing a worldview that accounts for the paradoxical nature of existence, by reconciling the inspirational, intuitive insights of deep spirituality with the pragmatic, empirical discoveries of modern science

> the problem i've faced in creating this synthesis, however, is that spirituality is still largely stuck in an outdated, pre-rational, religious mind-set

and science has now established itself as the new religion ... with all the same narrow, domineering, fundamentalist tendencies as all the old religions

# 1.2 SOUL CRISIS

what is the meaning of life? to simply ask the question can feel ridiculous, because in the intellectual mainstream of our culture it's now assumed that life has no meaning

> the grand religious narratives that gave us meaning in the past have crumbled under sceptical scrutiny, so we put our faith in science, which uses reason to describe a universe which exists without a reason

i am astonished by our scientific knowledge and the technological world it has allowed us to create

i am convinced that nothing has done more to ameliorate human suffering than the scientific method

yet science offers us power not purpose

despite its impressive ability to explain the 'how' of life, it can say nothing about 'why'

this has left our postmodern world gripped by a *soul crisis* caused by lack of meaning

it seems to me, however, that human beings need meaning as much as they need food and shelter ... perhaps more so?

human beings made resilient by meaning can withstand terrible adversity

human beings enlivened by meaning can create new worlds

human beings given hope by meaning can face the inevitability of death

feeling free to ask big questions such as 'why am i alive?' is important, but increasingly our culture ridicules such existential inquiry

we are told that we now have the answers to these questions, unsavoury as they turn out to be

our ancestors filled their heads with religious wishfulthinking, but we know the hard truth

there is no purpose to life ... there is no benevolent god ... there is no immortal soul

we're just clever primates clinging to a spinning rock in a cosmos created by chance and heading for oblivion

this pessimistic worldview doesn't feel right to me ... but i don't believe the solution is to revive the superstitions of the past

in my previous books i've been an outspoken critic of religion ... and i believe that the creation of a secular

society has been one of the greatest human achievements

yet i feel we urgently need an alternative to the souldestroying understanding of science that has become dominant in our culture over the last few decades

i call this philosophy 'scientific objectivism', because it regards only the objective world as real

for scientific objectivists the world of my imagination, from which these words are pouring right now, is just a by-product of a piece of meat called the 'brain', because only the world that can be measured and mapped really exists

enthusiastic presenters of science documentaries bring the objectivist gospel to the people, inspiring us with a vision of the wonders of nature, which are truly astonishing

yet there is a dark side to their vision which goes unmentioned, so they inadvertently lead us into a cold, futile, mechanical world

a belief in scientific objectivism doesn't stop us caring, of course ... but it leaves us irrationally compassionate in the face of the indifference of nature, which is interested in survival of the strongest, not kindness toward the most in need

our compassion is reduced to socio-biology ... our

goodness to others is just the playing out of evolutionary advantageous communal behaviours ... our love is just chemicals

in my experience scientific objectivists can display a sort of macho intellectualism, which delights in reducing all that humans most value to *just* this or *just* that

our ability to make choices, especially moral choices, is one of the defining characteristics of our humanity ... or at least it was until scientific objectivists showed us that we are no more than puppets being moved about by material causality

> the 'reductionism' that reduces the mind to the brain comes with the equally bleak philosophy of 'determinism', which holds that everything is determined by the laws of physics

everything happens according to strict causality, which means the future is fixed

the idea that i am choosing to write this sentence is just an illusion, because really all my choices are causally determined by physics

as the hard-headed cult of objectivism has taken hold of the intellectual mainstream i've watched its effects on my friends and on myself

i've seen us infected by the often unconscious assumption that all educated people know this

worldview describes the way things really are

we may flirt with other more positive possibilities, but quietly in the background we fear the worst

i am writing this book to invite you to consider an alternative to the objectivist worldview

i want to give intellectual credence to an understanding of existence that returns meaning to life

we are living through a soul crisis caused by our culture adopting a philosophy that is literally *soul-destroying*, because it denies the existence of the soul

we don't think too deeply about life because the more we think about things the bleaker it gets, so we distract ourselves with consumerism

we've embraced materialism ... both as a metaphysical position and as a lifestyle choice

but the word 'crisis' comes from the ancient greek *krisis* which refers to a turning point in a disease

we are at a cultural turning point, because our existential emptiness demands we create a new narrative to live by ... and this book is my contribution to that grand endeavour

# 1.3 SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE AND SPIRITUAL WISDOM

my desire to understand the nature of life has led me to study the teachings of the various spiritual traditions of the world

in doing so i discovered that, although they are dissimilar on the surface, they share many deep insights in common

there is a universal wisdom, often called the 'perennial philosophy', which contains these ubiquitous ideas

essentially all is one ... life is a journey through which the soul grows in wisdom ... love is what really matters ... there is a benign presence in the universe that is guiding and teaching us ... the moral choices we make are extremely important ... our intentions have an effect on what happens to us, because we reap what we sow ... death is not the end because the soul is immortal

during my studies it also became clear that essentially all spiritual traditions are pointing us to an *experience* often called 'awakening'

this is a naturally occurring, altered state of consciousness in which we feel we are seeing the

nature of reality in much greater depth

the spiritual insights that make up the perennial philosophy are profound intuitions that arise in the awakened state

spiritual awakening is rarely discussed within mainstream intellectual culture, but millions of people today and throughout history have experienced an awakening in some way or the other

i experienced the awakened state for the first time when i was a 12-year-old boy and i've been exploring it ever since, so i'm completely confident it's a real and important experience

i'm not going to write about my personal experiences in this book because i've done that previously in other books, such as 'how long is now?' and 'deep awake'

my intention here is not to convince you that the awakened state exists and that the insights it leads to are valid ... rather i want to invite you to consider a philosophical worldview that makes sense of our spiritual experiences as well as our scientific discoveries

it's important to me, however, that no one gets put off by the word 'spirituality', which is often associated with irrational superstition just as much as religion is

when i talk about spiritual awakening i'm simply

### pointing to a natural state of consciousness

the fact is that many of the most awake people i know don't see themselves as 'spiritual' at all

they've clearly experienced a shift in their state of consciousness, which has left them open, positive and compassionate, but they don't think about life in spiritual terms

i hope this book will speak to such people just as much as those who see themselves as spiritual explorers

whoever you are and whatever your background, i want to share with you an expansive philosophy that i've created to help me understand *both* my mundane, causal experiences *and* my sublime, spiritual experiences ... which i hope will deepen your own appreciation of what it is to be alive

the problem with bringing together spirituality and science, of course, is that they seem to make completely contradictory claims about what is real

spirituality teaches that life has a deep purpose ... our ability to make moral choices is important ... the soul is immortal ... and how we think can affect what happens in magical ways

but scientific objectivism claims that life is accidental ... volition is an illusion ... the death of the body is the end of our existence ... and everything can be

# explained through material causality

can scientific knowledge and spiritual wisdom really be united?

until recently human culture has been dominated by various theological worldviews

scientific objectivism has played the positive role of challenging dogmatic religious ideas and creating a secular society ... but the hubris of objectivists, like that of the priests before them, is to believe they've arrived at a final understanding of reality

i suggest the process of cultural evolution is far from over and a new twist in the tale is coming

science has freed us from irrational religion ... and that has cleared the way for a vibrant new form of *rational spirituality* ... which complements the discoveries of science, but offers an alternative to bleak objectivism

### 1.4 THE EVOLUTION OF SOUL

in this book i want to offer you a new philosophy i call 'emergent spirituality', which seeks to explain the spectrum of our human experience, from the mundane to the sublime

central to this new worldview is the idea of *evolution*, which is usually associated with science ... and the idea of *soul*, which is usually associated with spirituality

i'm going to be exploring the evolution of soul

what is the soul? many of us have grown up imagining the soul as some sort of spooky entity that lives inside us and pops out when the body dies

but the word 'soul' originally referred to what today we call the *psyche*, which is the ancient greek word for soul

if you examine your experience of the present moment the nature of the soul is obvious ... take a look

first be conscious that you are experiencing your body in the world

now be conscious that you are also experiencing another immaterial dimension of existence that is full of thoughts and images ... this is your soul

the soul clearly doesn't exist inside the body, because it doesn't exist in three-dimensional space at all

soul is a non-spatial dimension of your experience in which you are understanding the meaning of these words right now

we use many words to refer to our experience of an immaterial dimension of reality, such as 'soul', 'psyche', 'imagination' and 'mind'

in this book i'm going to use all these terms interchangeably depending on the context, because they have different *flavours* 

'soul' is my favourite term because it conveys such warmth

for most of human history the soul has been extremely important, but with the rise of objectivism it has become seriously devalued

once seen as divine and eternal, the psyche is now viewed as merely a temporary side effect of neurones firing in the brain

i'd like to return to the soul its former glory ... and i want to suggest that the foundation on which we can build a new understanding of the importance of soul is our modern scientific theory of evolution

when an evolutionary explanation for the origins of

life was first proposed, its opponents feared it would rob existence of all meaning, but i have come to believe the opposite is true

the idea of 'evolution' is associated with the theory of natural selection, first proposed by charles darwin and alfred russell wallace

this is often caricatured as the brutal idea of 'the survival of the fittest' ... but actually it is the more nuanced idea that evolution happens through the survival of those species that find a way to 'fit in' with their environment ... through cooperation as well as competition

over the years since darwin and wallace, the theory of biological evolution has been developed into one of the most powerful ideas in science

> it has been questioned, of course, and i'm sure there is much we are yet to understand or currently misunderstand ... but i'm not going to get into these issues in this book, because i'm interested in the concept of evolution in the broadest sense

in the last century physics developed the 'big bang' theory, which sees the whole universe as evolving from the 'initial singularity'

this massively expanded the concept of evolution beyond the biological theory of natural selection ... so

now we have an evolutionary cosmology that offers us a magnificent narrative beginning with the big bang and arriving 13.8 billion years later at our human experience

this cosmic evolutionary story encompasses all other scientific theories within its vast embrace ... it's a gargantuan achievement of the imagination ... a triumph of the soul

i find the idea of evolution attractive because it explains the different levels of existence i'm surrounded by right now

through the window i can see the stones in the garden that are clearly at a lower level of development than the flowers ... which in turn are at a lower level of development than the birds ... and here i am experiencing the symbolic world of psyche, which is another level of development again

evolutionary theory links all of these levels together into an explanatory, developmental narrative

although today the idea of 'evolution' is seen as scientific, it's actually a very old spiritual idea

the theory of the 'transmigration of souls' is an archaic belief that the psyche evolves by passing through different levels of existence ... mineral, organic, animal, and then human, before eventually transcending the world to become divine

the scientific theory of evolution is quite different, of course, but the developmental journey described is similar

an important difference is that the spiritual theory of evolution seeks to account for a profound sense of purpose underlying life

> it sees the process of evolution as going somewhere, whereas scientific evolutionary theory imagines an accidental process in a meaningless universe

however, it's not controversial to claim that the process of evolution has led to the emergence of psyche ... because no scientist could disagree with that

here's a fascinating way of seeing the evolutionary narrative ...

the process of evolution starts with the big bang ... which is when space begins to expand and the material universe takes form

and it eventually arrives at the experience you are having right now of a stream of thoughts ... which don't exist in space and aren't made of matter

the process of evolution has led from the infinitely dense energy of the initial singularity to an intelligent human being, capable of rational thought and intuitive insight, reading these words and understanding their symbolic meaning i find that astonishing and it makes me wonder ... is the reason that things turned out so well just good luck?

could the universe have existed in a lifeless state forever?

is it possible that soul could never have evolved, so the cosmos was eternally unconscious?

before you consider your answers to these questions, i'd like to invite you to spend a few moments examining your experience of psyche ...

> be conscious of your thoughts and how amazing it is that you can talk to yourself in your mind

be conscious that you can remember the past, so you can revisit previous experiences and learn from them

be conscious that you can conceive of the future and frame intentions

be conscious that your memories of the past and aspirations for the future create a meaningful story that defines your life

be conscious that you enjoy amazing relationships with other conscious beings who are also experiencing this wonderful world of psyche

be conscious that we can delight in beautiful ideas ...

manipulate numbers to form mathematical equations ... imagine music that moves the emotions

now ask yourself which of these two possibilities feels more likely ...

is the psyche an accidental intruder into a meaningless reality?

or has the whole grand story of evolution been leading to soul, so that we could be here contemplating this question?

# 1.5 MATTER, LIFE, SOUL

previously we saw that the scientific concept of evolution started as a biological theory about the origins of species, but in the last century it was expanded so that we now see the whole universe as having evolved

the evolution of the material cosmos and the evolution of life are part of one evolutionary story, but governed by different evolutionary mechanisms ... because natural selection is an explanation for the origin of species, but it doesn't account for the evolution of the chemical elements and galaxies full of stars

i want to suggest that having extended the concept of evolution backward before biology to the big bang, we need to also extend it forward to help us understand the evolution of soul ... not merely as a by-product of biological evolution, but as a new evolutionary phase in its own right, with its own unique characteristics

it seems to me that, in the broadest terms, the process of evolution has gone through three great stages of emergence ... matter, life and soul

first atoms and chemicals ... then plants and animals ... finally sentient beings who experience the non-spatial dimension of psyche

objectivist science deals primarily with the first two phases of evolution, which it has helped us understand in great depth ... but it is spirituality that can help us understand the soul phase of evolution

in this book i want to show how we can integrate our scientific knowledge with our spiritual wisdom to form one coherent account of the evolution of existence

the physical phase of evolution has seen the emergence of atoms, molecules and chemicals ... and the biological phase of evolution has seen the emergence of plants, insects and animals

> i want to suggest that the soul phase of evolution has also seen the emergence of entirely new aspects of reality

spirituality claims life has a deep purpose, our ability to make moral choices is important, the soul is immortal, and how we think can affect what happens in magical ways

i want to make the radical proposal that purpose, volition, immortality and magic have all come into existence through the evolutionary process

none of these things exist on the physical and biological levels studied by objectivist science ... but they have *emerged* in the soul phase of evolution, which is explored by spirituality this is why i call the philosophy in this book 'emergent spirituality'

i know that objectivists will be tempted to simply dismiss this as preposterous nonsense

the idea of the psyche surviving death, for example, will seem absurd, because objectivists are convinced we are merely physical bodies ... so when the body dies that's it ... end of story ... literally!

but i want to challenge this certainty and argue for a rational understanding of immortality as an *emergent* reality

i am also going to propose that spiritual awakening is a hugely significant development in the evolutionary process ... which is leading to the emergence of a whole new level of existence

#### **SUMMARY**

#### 1.1 AN AMBIGUOUS LIFE

i want to articulate a philosophy that accounts for the ambiguous nature of existence

#### 1.2 SOUL CRISIS

postmodern culture is experiencing a soul crisis caused by lack of meaning

scientific objectivism has taken hold of the intellectual mainstream, so that it is now assumed to be the unassailable truth

#### 1.3 SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE AND SPIRITUAL WISDOM

i want to understand my life as i actually experience it and this includes the experience of spiritual awakening and the profound insights that arise from it

science has freed us from irrational religion, which has cleared the way for a new form of rational spirituality to emerge, which complements science, but replaces objectivism

#### 1.4 THE EVOLUTION OF SOUL

the word 'soul' originally referred to what we now call

the 'psyche'

soul is a non-spatial, immaterial dimension of our experience

the foundation on which we can build a new understanding of the importance of soul is our modern scientific theory of evolution

# 1.5 MATTER, LIFE, SOUL

in the last century science extended the concept of evolution backward before biology to the big bang, and now we need to also extend it forward to understand the emergence of soul as a new phase of the evolutionary process, with its own unique characteristics

evolution has gone through three great stages of emergence ... matter, life and soul

science is primarily concerned with the physical and biological phases of evolution

spirituality is concerned with the subsequent soul phase of evolution

we now need to integrate our spiritual wisdom with our scientific knowledge into one coherent account of the evolution of existence

i'm going to share a philosophy i call 'emergent spirituality', which suggests that purpose, volition,

immortality and magic have all come into existence through the evolutionary process

# 2 THE TIMESTREAM

we're about to set off on a philosophical exploration of reality that i hope will help you understand your life in greater depth

in this chapter i'm going to start by considering the nature of philosophy and its relationship to the mystery of existence

then i want to introduce you to a new conception of time and challenge our common sense assumptions about the nature of the objective world

each section in this book explores a particular idea that i'm going to invite you to consider

as new ideas often relate back to previous ideas, i'll signify this by adding the number of any relevant sections at the end of the sentence ... like this 2.1

#### 2.1 THE MYSTERY STORY

i see philosophers as storytellers who create narratives to help us understand life with greater depth

philosophical stories aspire to truth ... yet no story can be *the* truth, because no story can explain away the great mystery of existence

albert einstein, commonly regarded as one of the smartest people to ever live, put it succinctly when he humbly acknowledged ...

the human mind is not capable of grasping the universe

as a philosopher i feel it's essential to root myself in the unfathomable mystery of existence

so i want to clearly state that i really don't know what life is

i'm not claiming any fake authority to tell you the way things are ... i simply want to offer some fascinating suggestions for you to consider

i want to tell you a story about life that i find compelling, so you can see if it works for you

# SOUL STORY T!M FREKE

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