

OUR CHANGING STORIES FOR WHY THINGS HAPPEN

by Rutherford

Human history suggests three constants in our understanding of the world around us:

1. That we have a fundamental need for a narrative able to explain *Why Things Happen*
2. That (as illustrated, first by our embrace, and then rejection of *animism, shamanism, polytheism, monotheism*, leaving us, for the moment, at *empiricism*) we are prepared tolerate the significant social and emotional trauma resulting from the adoption of radically new stories, **provided that:**



3. The new story promises to explain EVERYTHING

Beginning by conceiving of the gods – and later the single ubiquitous God – based on our experience of a powerful and capricious parent, ancient peoples made sense of the world in the same way one ‘knows’ another living being; accordingly, every event with which s/he is confronted (a thunderclap, a successful hunt, or a serendipitous or tragic accident) was assumed to have meaning – and moreover, a meaning whose origin and reasons was understood based on our experience of the fear, desire, or anger of another.

Known as ‘Magical Thinking’ or as *Mythopoeic thought*, our ancestors made sense of the world by assuming that things happen because Someone or Something *wills it*. We smile indulgently at tales of so-called primitives who, frightened by the sight of a solar eclipse, throw spears at the monster who devours the Sun, but in times of stress, our own rational and ‘objective’ way of making sense of events is readily overthrown – and we revert to our ancestors’ mode of relating to the world. (Think back to the last time you desperately wanted something to happen – or not to happen: did you not try to ‘make a deal’ with God or whatever you call It?) In Magical Thinking, because everything that happens is an expression of Someone’s or Something’s will, it follows that, if offered sufficient supplication, It, or the gods or God or His saints or angels might just be induced to intervene in events and grant our fervent wishes.

Thanks to the revolutionary insights of Galileo, Newton, Darwin, Freud and others, when we (finally, reluctantly, anxiously) abandoned monotheism (and, by extension, Magical Thinking) in favour of (cold, hard, impersonal) empiricism, the resulting new conception of what is ‘real’ and how we ‘know’ it pulled the rug from under *what we (thought we) knew*. As a result, we had to accept that our little world was no longer the centre of the universe but was just one among billions located on the outer edge of one of countless galaxies. This in turn obliged us to accept – despite the predisposition resulting from what St. Augustine, Pascal and Sartre described as the ‘God-shaped hole’ in human consciousness – that we are not the centre of an anthropomorphised Father-God’s attention. Of all the stories we have abandoned along the way, the loss of this one must have been the most unsettling, as it threatened to leave us – both as individuals and as a species – alone and unprotected in an empty, impersonal and uncaring universe.

The implications of the shift now on the horizon – from the Newtonian ‘clockwork’ universe to the disturbingly counter-intuitive world of quantum physics – promises to be just as radical. Aside from the intellectually fascinating discoveries of quantum physics – for example, that under certain conditions, future events influence the past (that cause and effect can be reversed) and that particles separated by great distances behave as if they are still connected (called ‘quantum entanglement’ – or what Einstein described as “spooky action at a distance”), but will result in a similarly powerful realignment of our conception of what is ‘real’, the nature of the universe, our place in it – and how we ‘know’ any of this.

Hang on to your hats; the new reality on the horizon is going to take some getting used to.