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## **The Meaningful Meaninglessness of Multiverse Movies: EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE (Daniel Kwan/Daniel Scheinert, US 2022), Camus, and Qoheleth**

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# The Meaningful Meaninglessness of Multiverse Movies

## EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE (Daniel Kwan / Daniel Scheinert, US 2022), Camus, and Qoheleth

### Abstract

Until recently, in Western culture the “multiverse” has most typically been limited to the abstractions of theoretical physics or the imagination of comic-book writers. However, in *EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE* (Daniel Kwan / Daniel Scheinert, US 2022), the multiverse functions differently, becoming a deeply affecting metaphor particularly suited to the Asian-American immigrant experience but also suited more generally to the absurdity and chaos of contemporary life. The multiverse functions in the movie as a symbol of life’s vanity, its absurdity, which paradoxically throws both characters and viewers back on the need for kindness and love. After unpacking the film narrative, this article moves to an inter-textual dialogue with two philosophers who also note the need to recognize life’s meaninglessness in order to live meaningfully: Albert Camus and the unknown writer of Ecclesiastes.

### Keywords

Multiverse Movies, *EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE*, Albert Camus, Qoheleth

### Biography

Robert K. Johnston is Senior Professor of Religion and Culture at Fuller Seminary, USA. He has published in a variety of fields, including theology, selected Old Testament topics, evangelical theology, theology and film, and theology and culture. His recent books include *God in the Movies* (edited with Catherine M. Barsotti, 2017), *God’s Wider Presence: Reconsidering General Revelation* (2014), *Don’t Stop Believin’: Pop Culture and Religion from Ben Hur to Zombies* (edited with Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor, 2012), and *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* (2nd ed., 2006). He is editor of *Reframing Theology and Film: New Focus for an Emerging Discipline* (2007), an Old Testament general editor of the *Understanding the Bible Commentary Series* for Baker Books, coeditor of both the *Engaging Culture* and the *Exegeting Culture* series for Baker Academic as well as the *Religion and Film* series for Routledge. A past president of the American Theological Society and the recipient of two major research grants from the Luce Foundation, Johnston is an ordained minister in the Evangelical Covenant Church.

## Introduction

Over the last decade or so, the “multiverse” has moved from the fringes of Western culture to its center.<sup>1</sup> This shift is a result of scientific advancement, particularly in theoretical physics, but in significant ways it has taken place also thanks to the universe of Marvel movies (the MCU). The notion that we live in a cosmos with multiple universes is not only discussed in most university physics departments, but also now pervades popular culture, even if most scientists are sure that the MCU has not gotten its science entirely right.

In 2022, Marvel Studios announced their next five-year plan, to comprise sixteen movies and multiple shows, all bound together by the concept of a “Multiverse Saga”. Having already begun with *BLACK WIDOW* (Cate Shortland, US 2021), it is scheduled to conclude in 2027 with *THE AVENGERS: SECRET WARS* (no director announced yet). Or to give a second example, after losing much of its dynamism, the Spider-Man franchise has rebooted with three multiverse stories in which multiple spider-men appear, satisfying customers and critics alike, who find the franchise re-energized.

There are multiple definitions of the “multiverse”, which is more a group of ideas than a coherent theory at present, but we might generalize by saying that the concept of a multiverse proposes that there are an infinite number of universes that exist side by side with the universe we live in. These all have their origin in the fraction of a second surrounding the Big Bang, which occurred billions of years ago. The presence somewhere of every possible universe can help some come to terms with the infinitesimally small chance that our universe had the right circumstances for life to develop. If there is literally an infinite number of universes, with their totality encompassing all possibilities, then it is not improbable that our universe is supremely life-friendly, having the very precise, necessary conditions for life to begin. Our universe just happened to win the lottery, even though the odds of that happening were enormous.

Though physicists do not believe that we can ever access these other universes directly, there are several lines of scientific argument supporting this idea of a multiverse. Quantum mechanics, with its understanding that

1 An earlier version of this article was first given as a public lecture at Gonzaga University, Spokane, WA, on 27 September 2023, as part of its annual Faith, Film, and Philosophy conference.

events can only be described in terms of probabilities, suggests that reality might split off and create new universes where all possible alternate events might happen. If in one universe you decided to speed through a traffic light turning red, in another universe the driver slammed on the brakes. Max Tegmark, a theoretical physicist at MIT, is a leading advocate for this explanation, arguing that “everything that could in principle have happened here did in fact happen somewhere else”.<sup>2</sup>

Others believe the multiverse to be the result of cosmic inflation, the theory that in the instant before the Big Bang, our universe expanded exponentially – it radically inflated, its energy igniting a fireball of particles and radiation in the process. This cosmic inflation ended 13.7 billion years ago in our part of the cosmos, but other inflations might also have occurred. Moreover, if these universes touched momentarily at birth, this might have left detectable “imprints” on our universe from other universes. And in fact, Laura Mersini-Houghton, a physicist/cosmologist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, claims that one predicted dent can actually be observed in our universe.<sup>3</sup>

## The Multiverse in the Movies

Tellingly, Daniel Scheinert and Daniel Kwan, the writer-directors of the 2023 Oscar winner *EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE* (US 2022), who call themselves “the Daniels”, explain that their multiverse movie was inspired by both the many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics and the idea that cosmic inflation created infinite bubble universes.<sup>4</sup> Here science and popular culture have come together.

That said, though many, if not most, physicists today believe the multiverse to be likely, there is no current scientific support for “verse jumping”, a staple of the Marvel universe. In fact, to travel between our cosmos’s universes would be scientifically cataclysmic according to current scientific projections. In the real world there are no wormholes that allow for other Spider-Men to join Miles Morales. However, such metaphorical, or poetic, license is perhaps necessary if the multiverse is to be used in our culture’s

2 Tegmark 2004, 464.

3 Mersini-Houghton 2022.

4 Johnson 2023.

storytelling. Somehow, we need access to these alternate realities, for otherwise our narratives will falter.

The reason for the importance of the multiverse in our culture's storytelling goes beyond such scientific projections, however intriguing they might be. Several lines of thinking seem particularly significant. Phil Lord co-wrote *SPIDER-MAN: INTO THE SPIDER-VERSE* (Bob Persichetti / Peter Ramsey / Rodney Rotham, CA/US 2018), which featured the death of Spider-Man and the introduction of a new Afro-Latino teenage Spider-Man, who was also bitten by a radioactive spider. (In the film he gets his Spidey costume at a shop run by the creator of the Spider-Man comics, Stan Lee.) Lord's script weaves into its storyline a Spider-Woman, Gwen Stacy, an older disillusioned Peter Parker, a hard-boiled Spider-Man Noir, an anime-styled Peni Parker, and even a Spider-Ham, Peter Porker. Lord believes that the fractured lives of people today help explain sociologically why such metaphorical, or poetic, use of the multiverse has proven so compelling. He says, "I think we're living multiple lives in parallel dimensions [...] all the time [...]. We're living an online life – or lives. Then we're living a work life that's on a screen [...]. Then there's a home life, and then one with your friends. Trying to resolve those things is [...] something we're all thinking about all the time."<sup>5</sup> The multiverse has become a metaphor for the chaos and disconnection of our lives today, a chaos and disconnection exacerbated for many by the extended isolation and insecurity caused by Covid-19.

Besides this sociological reason for the multiverse's connection to many today, there might also be a psychological reason for the multiverse's popularity, thinks Lord. Whether because of nature or nurture, many feel drawn to exploring possibilities that have passed us by or are yet to be. What might have resulted if just one thing had happened differently or if one choice had been made differently? The multiverse provides us with access to our potential other selves. As human beings, we are storytellers, and as such we are drawn to imagining other possible outcomes for our lives. This was the power of the turn-of-the-millennium's cult classic *LOLA RENNT (RUN LOLA RUN)*, Tom Tykwer, DE 1998) – a movie structured like a pinball game that reboots three times until a satisfying ending results. Multiverse movies have simply ramped up such storytelling, adding more alternatives, more sci-fi, more spectacle. There are endless possibilities.

Of course, not all multiverse movies have been able to carve out these deeper connections. At times, the multiverse seems little more than a gadg-

5 Phil Lord, quoted in Page 2022.

et in the screenwriter's toolbox. It has been used simply as a plot device, to bring back into the fray favorite characters who have died, to substitute younger or more diverse heroes, or to alter the trajectory of plot lines that are headed toward a dead end. Sometimes the reason for the multiverse seems to be little more than spectacle, following the too-typical Hollywood pattern that if one spectacle is good, two is better and a plethora is best (think of the sequels to *THE MATRIX* [Lana Wachowski / Lilly Wachowski, US/AU 1999]).

Even Daniel Kwan, one half of the Daniels, expressed in an interview the fear that rather than strengthening a storyline, the multiverse might actually water it down, undercutting the pathos of suffering or death or the heroics of a rescue. When everything can happen, does anything ultimately matter? There is no need for the audience to feel anything deeply. The story can be kept at arm's distance. As a result, Kwan argued, "The audience detaches. There's no connection to it, because it doesn't feel like any of it mattered in the end."<sup>6</sup> When such a multiverse movie does work, however, when connection is made with its audience, it can prove powerful, both culturally and aesthetically. And there is no better example at present than the Daniels' Academy Award winner *EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE*.

## **EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE**

The movie tells the story of a Chinese family in America who live above the laundromat run by wife and mother Evelyn (Michelle Yeoh). Driven by her immigrant's dreams of a better life, Evelyn finds her hopes soured by the mediocrity of her life, a life made all the worse by an unfeeling IRS auditor (Jamie Lee Curtis), a judgmental father (James Hong), who opposed her marriage and emigration and is visiting from China, and an angry daughter, Joy (Stephanie Hsu), who has brought her lesbian partner over to the house only for Evelyn to introduce her to her judgmental father as simply a "friend". Evelyn has no time for her sweet husband, Waymond (Ke Huy Quan), who believes the only way left for him to get her attention is to serve her with divorce papers, though he loves her and wants to be with her.

It is only after this extended setup that what seems to be her husband Waymond, but actually is "alpha Waymond", who has dropped in from another

6 Daniel Kwan, quoted in Page 2022.



Fig. 1: Waymond and his fanny pack. Film still, *EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE* (Daniel Kwan / Daniel Scheinert, US 2022), 00:29:22.

universe, challenges Evelyn to save the cosmos by defeating Jobu Tupaki, a malevolent force throughout the multiverse who turns out to be Evelyn and Waymond's nihilistic daughter, Joy. In the 90 minutes that follow, audiences experience a helter-skelter, mad dash through a host of bizarre, humorous, and sometimes gross-out worlds as Evelyn tries to save the cosmos.

We see Waymond fighting successfully using his fanny pack as a nunchuck (fig. 1), a chef with a raccoon under his hat, which is a reference to the movie *RATATOUILLE* (Brad Bird / Jan Pinkava, US 2007), the IRS agent playing the piano with her feet because her fingers are hot dogs, two talking rocks in an alternate universe that will not support life, and on and on. However, these ridiculous multiverse mini-plots never lose the movie's focus in service of the main question: What is the meaning of Evelyn and her family's life? The absurd is not the point; it serves the point. And the point is that each family member needs to understand that their life is not a problem to be solved but a gift to be enjoyed and treated kindly.

As the movie ends, Joy still wants to leave the family, and her grandfather is still judgmental, telling his daughter to allow Joy to go. However, Evelyn will not let her, having discovered new strength in herself. She says to her father, "How could you let me go? How on earth did you do it so easily?" (01:59:43–48) Then, after reaching out with a new acceptance to Joy's partner, Evelyn tells Joy, "I still want to share [life] with you. I will always want you here with me." Joy has her doubts and responds, "Why? ... You can be

anything anywhere... Here all we get are a few specks..." To which Evelyn responds, "Then I will cherish those few specks." (02:06:45–02:07:33)

The film's answer to the paradox of life is the title to Part Three of its narrative, "All at Once". Nothing matters, but everything matters. The paradox is central. Laughter. Raccoons. Waymond's smile. Hands holding each other. All are part of the final scene. The Wangs are a family, even if the IRS agent still has a problem!

Rather than deny the multiverse's relativizing of life's significance, the Daniels brilliantly make its problematic the foil against which life's fragile beauty shines ever more brightly. From the disappointment of Part One, to the infinity of possibilities of Part Two, the movie ends with an appreciation of the Wangs' small corner of the multiverse in Part Three. There is a battered optimism to the movie, so much so that tears are common among those viewing it. Life is meaningless, absurd. However, it is simultaneously meaningful, wonderful. "Two are better than one. [...] A threefold chord is not easily broken" (Eccles. 4:9–12, NRSV, used throughout).

## Analyzing the Narrative

In unpacking the movie's story, it is useful to consider more closely how the multiverse functions in *EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE*. Drawing on Wesley Kort, let me suggest four aspects that seem relevant, each corresponding to one aspect of the narrative whole:<sup>7</sup>

- (1) The movie's humorous portrayal sets the *tone* for the movie, providing a necessary counterbalance to the sense of disappointment that is central to the movie's plot line.
- (2) Rather than deny that the multiverse undercuts the significance of human action, the relativism of everything is made a central plot point. In the

7 For a discussion of these four elements of a fictional story, see Kort 1975. Kort argues that the power and meaning of a story (as well as its relationship to religion) can best be understood by analyzing the story in terms of these four constitutive parts. "Plot" and "character" for Kort are defined typically. "Tone" has to do with the implied narrator's (for film, this would be the filmmaker's) attitude toward the story's subject and audience. "Atmosphere" is more than the emotional element of the story. Rather, it is the unchanging backdrop against which the narrative is played out (e. g., the Holocaust in *THE ZONE OF INTEREST* [Jonathan Glazer, UK/PL/US 2023]).

movie, the reality of the multiverse is a given, its presence central to the movie's *atmosphere*.

(3) To deepen the story's meaning, the actors' personal stories of disappointments and dreams are purposely allowed to bleed into their *characters'* storylines, creating, as it were, still another alternate "universe" for the audience to consider.

(4) Rather than simply portraying meaninglessness, the movie paradoxically and simultaneously embraces love's meaningfulness. This paradox of life's meaningless meaningfulness (or meaningful meaninglessness) summarizes the arc of the movie's *plot*.

## Tone

Humor is key to the success of the Daniels' movie. We laugh when characters turn up with hot dogs for fingers and must play the piano with their toes (fig. 2), or when the IRS agent played by Jamie Lee Curtis is deadpan in her interaction with Evelyn. We laugh when Waymond (not Raymond) seeks to connect with his wife, whom he loves, by trying to serve her with divorce papers, when one of the universes is built off Evelyn misremembering the movie title RATATOUILLE as "racca-cooney", so that a raccoon manipulates the chef like the rat in the Pixar movie, and when Joy has outlandish costume after outlandish costume, and when Julie Andrews sings, "A cupful



Fig. 2: Evelyn and Deirdre, the IRS auditor, with hot dog fingers. Film still, *EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE* (Daniel Kwan / Daniel Scheinert, US 2022), 00:58:13.

of sugar makes the medicine go down”. Rather than treat the multiverse simply as a serious scientific hypothesis, *EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE* creates space for all its viewers by portraying life’s absurdity absurdly.

## Atmosphere

Nonetheless, the movie is also wrestling with a serious topic: Does life have meaning, and if so, what is it? In posing the question, the filmmakers use the multiverse to encourage viewers’ reflection. The multiverse pervades everything in the movie. It is the given, the “background” – the atmosphere – for everything else. Thus the title, *EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE*. The multiverse’s seeming relativism turns Joy into a nihilist. Its presence threatens Waymond’s niceness. If everything is allowed, then nothing seemingly matters. As the writer of Ecclesiastes recognizes, “Vanity of vanity. All is vanity” (Eccles. 1:2). Why should Evelyn care? Yet, she does. In *EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE*, the multiverse provides the backdrop against which the Daniels explore what possible meaning life can have.

In the absurdist fashion typical of the Daniels, the primary symbol the film uses to frame this question is the “everything bagel” (fig. 3). Joy, who has become Jobu Tupaki, the colorfully dressed, wily force of malevolence, shares with her mom,



Fig. 3: The “everything bagel” as Jobu Tupaki’s headpiece. Film still, *EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE* (Daniel Kwan / Daniel Scheinert, US 2022), 01:33:11.

I got bored one day, and I put everything on a bagel. Everything, my hopes and dreams, my old report cards, every breed of dogs [...] and it collapsed in on itself [...]. When you really put everything on a bagel, it becomes this. It's the truth – nothing matters [...] it feels nice doesn't it. If nothing matters, then all the pain and guilt from making nothing of your life goes away [...] sucked into a bagel (01:00:10–01:01:42).

The multiverse calls everything into question. However, is nihilism, for the Daniels, the ultimate truth?

## Character

Perhaps what has been commented on most about EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE is not the film's tone (its humor) or its atmosphere (the givenness of the multiverse) but rather the characters we meet, along with the backstories of the actors playing Evelyn and Waymond. The filmmakers brilliantly complicate and deepen the film's focus on the main characters by having the actors' personal lives bleed into the movie's storyline.

Thus, the actor playing Waymond, Ke Huy Quan, is the accomplished Asian-American child actor who played Short Round in INDIANA JONES AND THE TEMPLE OF DOOM (Steven Spielberg, US 1984) and Data in THE GOONIES (Richard Donner, US 1985). However, few roles are written in Hollywood for Asian-American men, so after landing only a small number of parts as he became an adult in the 1990s, Quan was totally overlooked for acting roles for 19 years. It was as if he did not exist. As with Waymond, despite his positive spirit and giftedness, he was simply ignored, that is, until EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE came along. For his role in the movie, Quan received a standing ovation at the Oscars, as well as the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor. Does life imitate art, or art life? Given his life story and his role as Waymond, *Time Magazine* recognized Quan as one of the 100 most influential persons in the world in 2023.

Similarly, and perhaps even more profoundly, Michelle Yeoh, who plays Evelyn, is widely recognized within the guild for her superior acting. Nevertheless, she has been relegated throughout much of her career largely to second-tier martial arts movies, where her physical skills are demanded, but little else. This fact is the setup for one of the many inside jokes the movie provides. Evelyn, seemingly a woman with few, if any, physical skills, is nevertheless asked to save the universe by defeating the evil "monster" Jobu.

However, since Evelyn is also Michelle Yeoh, one of the greatest female action stars of all time (do you remember *CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON* [WO HU CANG LONG, Ang Lee, TW/HK/US/CN 2000]?) and someone who, like Tom Cruise, actually does her own stunts, it is no surprise that Evelyn proves fully equal to the role she is called upon to play.

In the movie, Evelyn is deeply dissatisfied with the lack of meaning in her own life. Her choices have seemed not to work out. Her anger is front and center as she takes stock of her life. Nevertheless, when she is called upon to save the multiverse and is thus exposed to the pool of alternate Evelyns in the infinite web of branching paths she might have taken, she discovers Evelyns who are stronger, richer, healthier, and happier than she is. She meets herself as a glamorous Hong Kong movie star, a master chef with strong knife skills, an advertising sign twirler, a Beijing opera star, and a kung fu disciple, not to mention a piñata and a rock in a desert landscape. With so many different roles to play, Yeoh is finally able to use her formidable acting talent more fully. The wide range of acting jobs denied to her over the years is open to her all at once, and Yeoh simply excels. It is not just Evelyn we cheer, but Michelle Yeoh as well. Again, the Academy proved wildly appreciative of Yeoh's performance, and like Quan, she won an Oscar and received a standing ovation for her performance. Once again, art imitates life, or is life imitating art?

## Plot

Finally, after considering the film's tone, atmosphere, and characters, we turn to its plot. The movie's plot turns out not to be primarily about the meaninglessness of life given the multiverse, but about meaninglessness's meaningfulness. It is not just about "everything everywhere", but also about "all at once". Though what we find in our lives might be precious "little" (Joy is brutally honest), with Evelyn it is still "precious". Even on the helter-skelter of life, Waymond is right: kindness is the better way. If Evelyn can throw googly eyes at her enemies while hugging them, so can we. We should laugh at life's raccoons. Life is often silly and ridiculous, but it is also sweet and sentimental. Nothing we can do ultimately matters (as Jobu Tupaki says, "Eventually it all just goes away." [01:49:47-53]); we cannot produce meaning by our own effort. Yet, we can accept our portion in life. We can work with all our might (doing laundry and taxes) and love our family. We can be kind to others. Problems will remain, but love and kindness while engaging with life are the way forward. We will always have the IRS. However, that does

not mean nothing matters. “Absurdity of absurdity. All is absurd”, as one translation of verse 1:2 of Ecclesiastes reads. Yet, we can choose love.

## Beginning/Ending

In unpacking the narrative of EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE, I have used its constitutive narrative parts, tone, atmosphere, character, and plot, even while recognizing these are but critical constructions of any story. I could also have looked at the beginning and ending scenes. Here, the Daniels took a huge risk that handsomely paid off. Despite its foray into the multiverse with all its splashiness and dizzying complexity, the movie begins and ends more intimately. It is actually a mother/daughter intergenerational movie about the difficulty of learning to accept and love one another despite different values, experiences, and orientations. We might even say the story is about Evelyn initially being unable to cross the generational divide and accept her daughter, Joy, with her partner, but finally, as the movie closes, learning to be kind and to love.

Given all that takes place between these bookends that reveal a very traditional plot, it is to the filmmakers’ credit that the sentimentality and predictability work so well. I would argue, in fact, that this small, traditional, immigrant, intergenerational, family story works well for most viewers precisely because of the zaniness of the extended multiverse in the middle. The multiverse allows the film to escape being maudlin, or perhaps better, to be maudlin without audiences rejecting it. Likewise, the frenetic chaos of the multiverse (in which most everything that you can think of that could happen, happens) works because it is anchored in a family’s struggle to find meaning in life, a family that is not too different from that of any of its viewers. *The Atlantic’s* podcast, *The Review*, says it so well: “The essential magic of the movie is that the ridiculous multiverse plot is in service of the everyday story.”<sup>8</sup> The film never loses this more personal orientation.

## An Inter-textual Dialogue

Until recently in our culture, the “multiverse” has largely been limited to the abstractions of theoretical physics or to comic-book stories, where it has been used to explain major changes without undercutting the original. However, in

8 Townsend/Li/Sims/Kornhaber 2022.

EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE the multiverse functions differently. It becomes a carrier of primary meaning, a deeply affecting metaphor, a metaphor particularly suited to the Asian-American immigrant experience but also suited to the absurdity and chaos of contemporary life that we all feel. The multiverse functions for the Daniels as a gigantic symbol of life's vanity, its absurdity, which paradoxically throws viewers back on the need for kindness and love. Although life might present itself as absurd, we can choose to engage with it despite its uncertainty. It seems trite to say life is about answering the silliness of life with love, but EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE does just that, and such a redemptive and sentimental claim works for many of its viewers.

Having made such a claim about the film's center of power and meaning, let us turn to engage the film with others who have described life's meaningless meaningfulness similarly. Film criticism often uses an outside perspective, or critical theory, to gain insight into a film's story. Some use feminist theory, others queer theory or postcolonialism or psychoanalysis to help unpack a movie's power and meaning. However, one can also use inter-textual dialogue. We can be helped in our reflection on the Daniels' movie by putting EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE in dialogue with two "philosophers": first, Albert Camus, and secondly, Qoheleth, the anonymous author of the book of Ecclesiastes in the Hebrew scriptures. Like the Daniels, both struggled successfully to find life's meaning given its absurdity.

## Albert Camus

Albert Camus, the French philosopher and writer, presented a compelling case for the need for love given life's absurdity.<sup>9</sup> He won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1957 but, ironically, died while still in his forties in a car crash. As with the Daniels, he believed that the universe was absurd – irrational and silent. Nevertheless, even in a meaningless universe, he believed, we need to act in a meaningful manner. Our basic humanity should cause us to rebel because of the injustice and disrespect for the human condition that we experience around us. Rather than numb ourselves with entertainment on account of the futility of life ("eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die"),<sup>10</sup> he

9 For an overview of Camus' life and work see Zarotsky 2013; Meagher 2021.

10 This is a paraphrase typical of some Ancient Near Eastern writing, though in its particular wording it is a combination of two passages from the Hebrew scriptures, Ecclesiastes 8:15 and Isaiah 22:13.

argued that we should acknowledge the hopelessness of our condition but still choose to resist. To live, he believed, was to defy futility.

This also is Evelyn's eventual stance following her experience of the multiverse, and also Waymond's. Joy had hoped her mother and father could show her something that would refute the meaninglessness of our universe. Having fallen at one point in the movie into a universe that was inhospitable to life, the mother and daughter, Evelyn and Jobu Tupaki, become talking rocks. Joy/Jobu tells her mother,

Small stupid humans. It's like our whole deal. For most of our history, we knew the earth was the center of the universe. We killed and tortured people for saying otherwise. That is until we discovered that the earth is actually revolving around the sun, which is just one sun out of trillions of suns. And now look at us, trying to deal with the fact that all of that exists inside of one universe out of who knows how many. Every new discovery is just a reminder we're all small and stupid. And who knows what great new discovery is coming next [...] to make us feel like even smaller pieces of shit [...]. I've been trapped like this for so long [...] experiencing everything (01:40:42–01:41:47).

Absurdity of absurdity. All is absurdity. Yet, when Joy adopts nihilism because of the multiverse's absurdity, believing that eventually it all just goes away, Evelyn refuses to let Joy go. Although Joy might be stubborn, aimless, and a mess, just like her mother, Evelyn loves her and wants to be her mother. "Stop calling me Evelyn", she tells Joy as she reaches out to hold her (02:03:00–05). Joy tries to resist, but a tear also slides down her cheek (fig. 4). It does not make any sense, but Evelyn wants Joy with her. The movie ends with laughter, a raccoon, and a kiss. Absurdity may be king, thought Camus, "but love saves us from it".<sup>11</sup>

In his journal, Camus noted that if he "had to write a book on morality, it would have a hundred pages and ninety-nine would be blank". On the last page he would write, "I recognize only one duty, and that is to love."<sup>12</sup> For him, love was more than a confrontation with the world's absurdity; it was a refusal to be broken by it. This also is Evelyn's stance. Having been challenged by the nihilism of Joy's "everything bagel", Evelyn nonetheless chooses to love her family, Waymond and Joy.

11 Albert Camus, *Notebooks 1935–1942*, quoted in Lombardi 2020.

12 Albert Camus, *Notebooks 1935–1942*, quoted in Lombardi 2020.



Fig. 4: Evelyn and Joy hugging as the movie ends. Film still, *EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE* (Daniel Kwan / Daniel Scheinert, US 2022), 02:08:59.

Camus' best-known essay is on the myth of Sisyphus, a metaphor for the absurdity of life.<sup>13</sup> Sisyphus pushed a boulder up a hill knowing that it would inevitably come rolling back down. Here, for Camus, is the human condition. There is nothing we can do to change life's constraints. Nevertheless, there remains the need for what a eulogist labeled Camus' "stubborn humanism".<sup>14</sup> Given the silence of the world, unintelligent and indifferent, we must choose to love as an act of rebellion. Even if life remains pointless and futile, for Camus, as for Evelyn, Waymond, and Joy, we must continue to love.

## Ecclesiastes

Life's futility, its absurdity, is also a central motif for the writer of Ecclesiastes, though as with Camus and the Daniels, this is not the end of the story.<sup>15</sup> The anonymous author of this book in the Hebrew scriptures calls himself Qo-

13 Camus 1991, 1–24.

14 John Paul Sartre's eulogy for Camus, quoted in Sherman 2009, 207.

15 See Fox 1986, 409–429. See also Johnston 1976, 14–28; Tamaz 1996, 28–42.

heleth, or the Teacher/Philosopher. If we realize life's meaninglessness, argues Qoheleth, we paradoxically can discover its meaningfulness. He believes that all life is absurd *and* that joy in life is both good and possible. As with Camus, there is both an extended negative evaluation and a positive call. Although life might be useless, "a living dog is better than a dead lion" (Eccles. 9:4).

In making his paradoxical case, "vanity" – or "absurdity" – is the framing device for Qoheleth, the organizing center, just as it is for the Daniels. It is that which gives Ecclesiastes its unique character. In this way, Qoheleth invites conversation with EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE, where the multiverse's "absurdity" functions similarly.<sup>16</sup>

"Vanity of vanities", begins the Teacher (Qoheleth), "Vanity of vanities. All is vanity" (1:2). *Hebel*, the word in the original Hebrew translated as "vanity", has two clusters of meanings: "absurd, useless, empty, meaningless" and "fleeting, ephemeral, fragile", "a chasing after the wind" (1:14). Repeated by Qoheleth several dozen times in just a few short pages, *hebel* is the key to unlocking the book's meaning. It is similar in EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE, where the multiverse and its primary symbol, the everything bagel, lead the Wang family to discover their true portion in life.

Whatever nonsense you can think up, somewhere out there in the multiverse it exists. What this means for the Daniels, as Joy concludes, is that "everything gets washed away in a sea of every other possibility" (01:29:40–55). The multiverse is "just a reminder", as Joy graphically puts it, that "we're all small and stupid" (01:40:42–01:41:18). Our attempt at making our lives meaningful, as Qoheleth comes to realize, is simply "an unhappy business" (1:13); there is "nothing to be gained under the sun" (2:11).

Those familiar with Ecclesiastes will have already recognized some of this article's repeated usage of Qoheleth's observations on life, for they summarize EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE well. Like this movie, Qoheleth believed life to be absurd. It did not take the multiverse to make him aware; a careful observation of creation, together with a reflection on the opening chapters of Genesis, was enough. According to this biblical sage, you will fail if you believe life is a problem to be solved. Rather, it is a fragile gift to

16 After a draft of this essay was delivered at Gonzaga University, Matthew Ringe sent me his insightful article "Falling (into) Meaning: *Everything Everywhere All at Once* and Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes)", which has now appeared in *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*; see Ringe 2024. Although we develop the inter-textual dialogue somewhat differently, Ringe's conclusions are largely consistent with mine, also finding in Qoheleth a dialogue partner for EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE.

be appreciated and enjoyed. Qoheleth's paradoxical view of life finds our attempts to create meaning in life to be meaningless, even absurd. Nevertheless, life is simultaneously "meaningful". Qoheleth, like both Camus and the Daniels, has a battered optimism.<sup>17</sup>

Any pretension to produce meaning by our own efforts as Qoheleth understands it is undercut by at least three factors: first, by the universe's seeming indifference and amorality – too often wrong is rewarded and right overlooked (3:16; 4:1–4; 7:15–18; 8:9–14; 11:14). Secondly, though life suggests order, we are unable to know what is good for us or what will follow. Although God "has put a sense of past and future into [our] minds [...] [we] cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end" (3:11); "[...] who knows what is good for mortals while they live the few days of their vain [ephemeral] life, which they pass like a shadow" (6:12; see also 11:5). Thirdly, our common destiny is death (2:15–16; 3:19–21; 6:6; 8:7–8; 9:2–6). Amoral, unknowable, short – the perfect trifecta. For Qoheleth, life's meaninglessness is a given. Certainly, this is also true for both Evelyn and Joy, their journey into the multiverse only confirming this judgment, while also pushing them beyond their understandable pessimism and cynicism.

It is Evelyn who first finds through her experiences of the multiverse reason to accept with kindness and love her small portion of life in the United States, her family and laundromat. Joy (despite the irony of her name) struggles until the end with her portion in life (it seems but a "speck"). Nevertheless, even Joy appears to tear up as the story ends and her parents show their love to her. In *EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE*, a deep humanism ultimately triumphs. Evelyn's overlooked husband, Waymond, is partly the reason for this ultimate transformation, though he recognizes, "I was too sweet for my own good." (01:44:30–01:46:30) As Ecclesiastes is aware, it does not work to be either too good or too bad (7:15–18).

Central to Evelyn's conversion is the spotlight that the multiverse shines on her family and laundromat. Evelyn's foray into the multiverse helps her see Waymond for who he is, someone who has chosen kindness over "fighting" as his strategy for living authentically. When Waymond says, "In another life, I would have liked just doing laundry and taxes with you", Evelyn finally can hear him for who he is and responds by giving her husband a hug. Similarly, after Evelyn tells her daughter, "I will always want you here with me", and Joy quizzes her mother, "Why? You can be anything anywhere ...

17 Cf. Johnston 2004.

Here all we get are a few specks...”, Evelyn responds spontaneously, “Then I will cherish these few specks.” (02:06:25–02:07:35) Evelyn’s encounter with the meaninglessness of the multiverse paradoxically allows her to see her family in a new light. Even the reality that taxes remain the one sure thing in life cannot detour her.

Qoheleth also comes to believe, “I know there is nothing better for [us] than to be happy and enjoy [ourselves] as long as [we] live; moreover, it is God’s gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil” (3:11–13). It is a hard lesson, but like Qoheleth, Evelyn and even Joy are eventually able also to learn it:

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken (4:9–12).

As the Daniels end their movie, we see hands being held, husband and wife being reconciled. The couple kissing. A tear appearing in Joy’s eye. The family of three finding a new strength. Nothing matters. The family is surer about this than ever. Jobu/Joy is correct: “Eventually it all just goes away.” Yet, the “few specks” they have been given as their portion are to be cherished while they are present. Here also is Qoheleth’s advice:

Go, eat your bread with enjoyment [...]. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain [absurd/futile/useless/ephemeral] life [...] because that is your portion in life. [...] Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol [for the early Hebrews, the place of still darkness], to which you are going. (9:7–10)

## A Final Footnote

It is worth noting in closing the differences between Qoheleth, on one hand, and Camus and the Daniels, on the other. Qoheleth bases his optimism in a creator God, not simply in the human creature. Both Qoheleth’s

stance and that of the Daniels demand a faith in something beyond life's demonstrated absurdity. But while the Daniels, like Camus, find in the nature of the human a positive call, Qoheleth turns to the creation theology of the Hebrew scriptures, finding God (even if he remains mysterious and silent) to have created us and thus to have given us our innate value. Basing his reflections on the first eleven chapters of Genesis, Qoheleth wants us to "Remember your creator" (Eccles. 12:1). He believes we can eat our bread with enjoyment and drink our wine with a merry heart, "for God has long ago approved what [we] do" (9:7-10). Critics agree that here Qoheleth is referring to the Genesis account of the creation of the universe with humankind as its apex, where God looked at this creation and saw that "it was very good" (Gen. 1:31).<sup>18</sup>

However, while Ecclesiastes mines a religious impulse in writing what he does, the Daniels place their faith in a human sympathy. It is the common struggle of humanity (as Camus writes near the end of *The Fall*, "we are in the soup together"<sup>19</sup>), not eternity written in our hearts, that motivates Evelyn and Waymond's battered optimism.

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18 In Qoheleth's short treatise, there are perhaps a dozen references that can be traced to the opening pages of Genesis. One might even suspect Ecclesiastes to be a midrash on the first eleven chapters of Genesis. Like Genesis, for Qoheleth, light is "good" (Gen. 1:3-4); we come from dust (Gen. 2:7) and return to the ground (Gen. 3:19); we are inclined to sin (Gen. 3:1-13); woman is man's companion (Gen. 2:21-25); knowledge is limited (Gen. 2:17); work is tiring (Gen. 3:14-19); death is a tragedy (Gen. 3:19,24); God is sovereign (Gen. 3:5); and life is "good" (seven times in the first chapter of Genesis). In particular, one should note Ecclesiastes 9:7-10, where God is said to have "long ago approved what you do" (God created humankind and called it "very good", Gen. 1:31), and Ecclesiastes 12:1, where Qoheleth writes, "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth." Scholars also note that *hebel* ("absurd") has the same root in the Hebrew language as Abel, the name of Adam and Eve's son who is murdered by his brother. Cf. Dell 2021; in particular, see chapter 12, "Exploring Intertextual Links between Ecclesiastes and Genesis 1-11".

19 Camus 1962, 140.

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