In *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*, Douglas Adams describes the “Total Perspective Vortex,” a machine that destroys the soul. It makes one see the whole infinity of creation and oneself in relation to it. The effectiveness of this machine shows that life cannot afford to have a sense of proportion.² Our contingency turns out to be frightening; we are not “at home in the universe.” The more we know of the vast universe, the more we become aware of the enormous incongruity of our own existence and the universe as a whole.

In this essay, *contingency* will be used to speak of two different issues, namely, *existential* contingency in the sense of being marginal and irrelevant (as with the Total Perspective Vortex machine) and, especially in the first two sections, *logical* and *natural* contingency as the alternative to logical and natural necessity. The “anthropic principles” discussed below can be seen as seeking to connect the two issues. Their advocates claim that we are not marginal by arguing that our kind of existence is not logically contingent but rather to be expected.

In this contribution, I will argue that any scientific understanding of the universe harbours certain assumptions. Thus, even though scientific explanations remove some natural contingencies by giving natural explanations, they do not make such contingencies disappear but rather re-locate them. Secondly, I will contend that arguments seeking to reduce existential contingency by arguing against natural contingency with re-
pect to human existence (e.g., by arguing that somehow the universe was made such that we had to come into existence) don’t hold water. Thirdly, I will offer some suggestions for reducing our sense of existential contingency not via science but with the help of human imagination.

The title of this essay has its ambiguities, and not only in the multifaceted term contingency. Adding “our” to “universe” seems superfluous—as if there could be more than one universe. By evoking homelike ideas regarding the universe, “our” is potentially misleading. And “cosmos” is a synonym for “universe,” isn’t it? Nonetheless, for the purpose of this paper, I want to use the terms “universe” and “cosmos” in such a way that it is not superfluous to ask whether our universe is the universe, and whether the universe is a cosmos.

The notion cosmos suggests something well ordered, beautiful, unified, intended. The term has a teleological or aesthetic connotation. By speaking of a cosmos we go beyond scientific language, which aspires to be devoid of any such value judgments. Cosmos evokes religious or philosophical views positively appreciating the reality thus referred to.

The term universe will be used to refer to the object as studied by the sciences—the collection of phenomena observable (and partly observed), describable (and partly described) in the language of physics, and partly already explained in causal and structural terms. Among these phenomena are bacteria and books, and hence, in principle, biology and social sciences should be considered to be branches of cosmology (the discipline which could have been labelled “universology”). However, usually we limit cosmology to the astrophysical study of the universe (with excursions into planetary sciences, astrochemistry and exobiology, but certainly not including the social sciences).

We speak of a universe. If we consider equivalent terms in related languages, we not only find variants of the Latin “universum,” with its association to unity, but also versions of “all,” e.g. in German (All) and Dutch (Heelal). These terms stress the all-encompassing nature of the universe; universe emphasizes coherence: the all is a whole rather than a mere aggregate of entities.

Adding “our” before “universe,” or capitalizing “Universe” as if it were the name of a particular entity (just like Mars, Venus, the Sun, Earth, the Solar System, or the Galaxy) suggests that there could be a plurality of universes—even though there is perhaps only one. This use of language somewhat resembles various Old Testament passages where the option of a multiplicity of gods is still open, though denied in