What motivates a person to pursue a career in science? The distinguished American paleontologist, George Gaylord Simpson, claimed “Nothing learned [in high school] had any bearing at all on the big and real questions. Who am I? What am I doing here? What is the world? What is my relationship to it?” Later, in college, he had come to the conclusion that “life is the most important thing about the world, the most important thing about life is evolution.”

Such motivating questions inspired Simpson’s lifelong study of the history and evolution of life on Earth. By the late 1930s and early 1940s, Simpson, though relatively young, was already a distinguished paleontologist at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. His achievements included a Yale doctorate as a field assistant to William Diller Matthew, chairman of the department of paleontology at the American Museum. Matthew was one of the leading paleomammalogists, particularly known for his research on Cenozoic mammals and for his book Climate and Evolution (1915). He was also a leading student of horse evolution. By the end of the summer, Simpson had shown himself to be an energetic and highly successful field man, having made two unique fossil discoveries. The first was the skull of “dog-bear,” a heavy, large, doglike carnivore. The second was the skull, backbone, and rib cage of a Miocene “dog-bear,” a heavy, large, doglike carnivore. Lull was suitably impressed by these discoveries and permitted Simpson to study the Mesozoic-age mammals after all. Matthew, too, was enthusiastic, for he became Simpson’s informal off-campus advisor for his dissertation and my first inkling of how to go systematically about finding out such facts.”

University Years
After skipping several years in school, Simpson at age 16 entered the University of Colorado at Boulder in the fall of 1918. He thought perhaps he wanted to be a creative writer, but in his second year he enrolled in a geology course and was quickly converted, in part because of the enthusiasm and encouragement of his instructor, Arthur Tieje, the first teacher who recognized and challenged his formidable intellectual abilities. In his senior year, Simpson transferred to Yale, because Tieje advised him that if he wanted to be a geologist and paleontologist, Yale was the best place to study. Perhaps additional reasons for the transfer were his not getting the editorship of the college humor magazine he helped start and—insult added to injury—the new editor then stealing his girlfriend.

After graduation, Simpson stayed on at Yale for his doctoral studies where, in the basement of the Peabody Museum, he discovered a large collection of primitive mammals from Mesozoic age rocks of the American West that he wanted to study for his doctoral dissertation. But his advisor, Richard Swann Lull, told him that “those fossils are much too important...very delicate and highly significant...for a young graduate student.”

First Field Work
At the end of his first year of graduate work, Simpson obtained a position prospecting for Tertiary mammals in Texas and New Mexico as a field assistant to William Diller Matthew, chairman of the department of paleontology at the American Museum. Matthew was one of the leading paleomammalogists, particularly known for his research on Cenozoic mammals and for his book Climate and Evolution (1915). He was also a leading student of horse evolution. By the end of the summer, Simpson had shown himself to be an energetic and highly successful field man, having made two unique fossil discoveries. The first was the skull of an important link between ancestral Pliocene and modern horses. The second was the skull, backbone, and rib cage of a Miocene "dog-bear," a heavy, large, doglike carnivore. Lull was suitably impressed by these discoveries and permitted Simpson to study the Mesozoic-age mammals after all. Matthew, too, was enthusiastic, for he became Simpson’s informal off-campus advisor for his dissertation and
later an advocate for his subsequent
appointment at the American Museum.

But, in the beginning, the search for fos-
sils that summer was hardly promising. As
Simpson wrote to his sister Martha, "I’ve been
digressing all over the landscape…. Now &
then we find a fossil—every third day or so,
if small fragments count…. Poor Dr. Matthew
gets madder & madder [.] First…formation
in which I couldn’t find mammals.” Part
of Matthew’s chagrin was no doubt due to
Simpson’s initial clumsiness. Matthew had
found some important horse teeth and,
after treating them with shellac, laid one
of them on the ground to dry. Simpson
promptly stepped on the tooth, breaking
it into several pieces. Matthew glowered,
telling Simpson, “Go stand over there,” and
didn’t talk to him for several hours. But by
the next day the incident was forgotten.
Simpson received his Yale Ph.D. in
1926 and went to the British Museum of
Natural History in London to continue
his study of the then little-known, primi-
tive mammals by examining British and
European counterparts. The subsequent
two publications of his Yale research on
American Mesoicoic mammals and on
the British Museum fossils quickly estab-
lished his paleontological reputation.

American Museum of Natural History
On his return from England in the fall of
1927, Simpson joined the American Museum
as assistant curator of fossil vertebrates,
assuming a position left vacant when Matthew
moved to the University of California at
Berkeley. In the late 1930s and early 1940s,
Simpson’s work turned more theoretical
as he shifted his attention to more general
problems of evolution rather than focusing
solely on fossil mammals. Simpson pub-
lished Quantitative Zoology, co-authored
with his second wife Anne Roe, and he
completed two book-length manuscripts,
Tempo and Mode in Evolution, and Principles
of Classification and a Classification of
Mammals. He also managed to publish a
picaresque travel narrative of his first pa-
leontologic expedition to Patagonia in the
early 1930s where, upon arrival in Buenos
Aires, he found himself in the midst of a
revolution, barely escaping with his life.

In 1942, the new director of the American
Museum was contemplating major depart-
mental reorganization by putting the zoo-
ologists working with living groups with
the paleontologists studying their correspond-
ing fossils. Simpson resisted this plan and
considered leaving the museum altogether.
Instead, he enlisted in the U.S. Army in
December 1942, and was made a captain
in military intelligence. He surprised his
superiors by completing a six-week course
in intelligence methods in a single week.
He shipped out to North Africa, later mov-
ing on to Sicily and Italy, until 1944, when
he was sent home with a severe case of
hepatitis. By then, he held the rank of major
and had been awarded two Bronze Stars.

When Simpson returned to the museum,
the controversial reorganization plan had
been scrapped and a more attractive plan
was imposed, which included a department
of geology and paleontology of which he
was named chairman. He also accepted an
appointment as professor of vertebrate pa-
leontology at Columbia University. In 1949,
Simpson published a popular account of
modern evolutionary theory from the point
of view of the fossil evidence, The Meaning
of Evolution, which was subsequently trans-
lated into ten languages and sold some
half-million copies. In 1958, he resigned
the department chairmanship and soon
after left for the Museum of Comparative
Zoology and Harvard University.

The centennial of Darwin’s On the Origin
of Species in 1959 not only signaled a fresh
start for Simpson at Cambridge, but also
brought him further into the limelight as
a leading evolutionist. Conferences and
symposia marked the centennial, with
Simpson often present either as a contribu-
tor—as in Chicago where he gave a key-
note public lecture at the meeting of the
American Association for the Advancement
of Science, titled “The World into Which
Darwin Led Us”—or as an honoree—as
in London where he received the Darwin-
Wallace Commemorative Medal from the
Linnean Society, in whose meeting rooms
Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace
first announced their theory of natural se-
lection a century earlier. Nor was Simpson
ignored at home: in February 1966, he
received the National Medal of Science
from President Lyndon B. Johnson.

Final Years
In 1967, Simpson and his wife Anne Roe
retired to Tucson, Arizona. He continued
to work for the next decade and a half in
a small building next to his house, sur-
rounded by his research files and extensive
personal library, walls and surfaces scattered
with honorary degrees, photographs from
the past, and replicas of the many schol-
arily gold medals he had been awarded.

In the last years of his life, Simpson had
become a memory from the past, as often
happens, even to the most distinguished of
scientists. Most thoughtful students of pale-
ontology and evolution were aware of what
Simpson had contributed, but now took it for
granted. They looked instead to the writings
of younger paleontologists and evolutionary
biologists for new ideas. In a way, Simpson
had outlived his fame, and had become a
living, mostly ignored monument of what
had come before. A hint of his state of mind
is revealed in a posthumously published
work of science fiction (The Dechronization
of Sam Magruder, St. Martin’s Press, 1996).
Simpson tells the story of Sam Magruder,
who was experimenting on the “quantum
theory of time-motion” in 2162 A.D. when
he suffers a “time-slip” that puts him back
in the Late Cretaceous of New Mexico.
Helplessly lost in time and with no hope of
returning to the present, Magruder ekes out
a primitive existence for some years until a
fatal accident befalls him. Before his death,
Magruder manages to chisel out his experi-
ence and philosophy of life on eight rock
slabs that are recovered many millions of
years later; and so his story becomes known.

Always more comfortable in express-
ing his views in writing than in speak-
ing, Simpson appears to use this work of
science fiction to reveal his own, mostly
melancholy, views about life’s meaning and
purpose, the importance of adapting to
the here-and-now, and how historical
contingency controls subsequent outcomes.
Was Simpson speaking for himself when
Magruder declares “My real purpose in en-
graving these slabs is a search for compre-
hension…. I am exploring my own nature”?

In the summer of 1984, Simpson
contracted pneumonia during a South
Pacific cruise and was in and out of the
hospital several times over the next few
months. He finally succumbed on the
evening of Saturday, 6 October 1984, at
the age of 82. His remains were cremated
and dispersed in the Arizona desert.

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California Press.
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Evolutionist: Columbia University Press.

See also http://people.usc.edu/~laporte/simpson/index.html (case
sensitive).

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