

THE MIRACLE OF LIFE

EUGENE STOCKTON

SCIENTISTS SPECULATE on the possibility of life on other planets. Surely, they argue, given the billions of stars and planets throughout the universe, there must be some, like earth, with conditions favourable to the emergence of life. This is a statistical argument for probability based on the one known occurrence, namely that on earth.

It seems to me to be erroneous to reason this way from a singularity. It should first be applied to earth itself, which has enjoyed such favourable conditions, in many habitats, for four billion years. Why has life not broken out in many different places and different times on earth? It is known that all living species are related one to another in a family tree of life, so that it appears, as far as we know, that all life on earth stems from one common ancestor and from one occurrence. The emergence of life on earth, the breakthrough from inanimate to animate, is truly singular and as astonishing as the emergence of the cosmos itself or of self-consciousness in humans. These three breakthroughs, each emerging from the one before, are baffling to scientists in their nature and genesis. They are the prelude of the further breakthrough in history, the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ leading us through death to new life.

Biologists, working from empirical data and scientific method, are not comfortable in trying to comprehend life, or the living being, as a whole. Did life simply emerge from chaos, by chance? Leave such questions to philosophers! Biology works well in analysis, by breaking down the living entity into successively smaller parts and smaller processes. The reductionist habit of mind is uncomfortable with *the sum being greater than the parts*. It readily finds the answer to 'what' and even 'how', but balks at 'why'. Unwittingly the

language of science often resorts to anthropomorphisms in describing processes. For example, 'cause and effect' is an extrapolation from the human experience of causality ('I know I am the cause because I intended it'), so that when B is constantly found to follow A, A is said to cause B.

Again 'natural selection' derives from the human experience of freely exercising choice. In analysing a living being into its body parts, the instinctive question at each step is 'What is it for?'. Supposing that something has a purpose implies a prior intention. By whom, by what? Would it not be more scientific to suppose they occur by chance, with no purpose or reason? But then why do they occur constantly? It is no wonder biologists are often accused by other scientists of excessive reductionism, as if they are trying to skirt the big question of life, or of the living being, as a whole. A great exception, in my experience, was biologist Charles Birch, who readily reached out to philosophy and theology in his grand synthesis.¹ Some of his opinions are reproduced in what follows.

Another anthropomorphism which might be introduced into the biology lexicon is 'strategy'. In the evolution of the species, each species can be seen to develop according to a certain line of strategy: some go after speed, some look to protectiveness, some depend on prolific reproduction *etc.* Each tends to maximise its own speciality ('natural selection'). Again in its natural activity each individual tends to maximise its inherent advantage, as for example in hunting prey predators might use speed, or stealth or ambush. Strategy in hunting is strikingly apparent when a sudden change in circumstances occasions a switch in strategy. Strategy in species development or in a course of action may be put down to

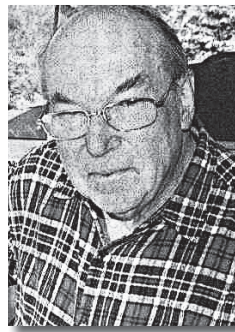
one's DNA which stores and passes on the necessary information. But the wonder is how a particular genome translates into action, which is akin to the wonder how the organic complexity of the human brain translates into lofty thoughts or masterpieces of art. As I understand it, DNA is not solely activated automatically or by self-generation, but in response to stimuli, *i.e.* inputs from the external environment (as the brain responds to sense perceptions, including those which carry information).

In any process or activity of a living creature there is an interplay of three factors: the laws of nature, chance, intent. As in a football match we have:

- a) The rules of the game (determinism)
- b) Chance situations, opening up windows of opportunity
- c) The players aiming to win a goal.

So, in nature, the course of action is not purely deterministic, nor is it chaotic or haphazard. The strategy of a living being or species is in seizing its window of opportunity to pursue its aim or intent. When the human observer stands back from nature he cannot help noticing that all living things, and even life itself, have a certain inexorable thrust, what Charles Birch called 'anticipation'. One can see this in the growing tips of a plant, the scrambling insect, the prowling lion, the injured bird—there is a common thrust throughout the whole of nature. It is the thrust to have life and to have it to the full. This we experience in ourselves, self-conscious living beings, and we readily project it onto other living beings, which are behaving in ways similar to our own. It is to admit, again with Charles Birch, a basic rudimentary subjectivity in all things 'from protons to persons', or at least in all living things. This subjectivity, however limited, makes each amenable to the outreach, or appeal, of another subject. As each being is drawn to transcend itself, to reach out to become what it was not before, it is responding to the lure of another.

Now turning from science to theology, we



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have the Christian revelation that all things were created by God. Science has shown how wonderful is that creation in its understanding of evolution, both the evolution of the universe and the evolution of life from its most primitive forms to the diversity and complexity we know now. Modern Christians can now speak confidently of God's *continuing creation*. But earlier in the heated controversy between direct creation and evolution by natural selection, little notice was then paid to the formula proposed by Charles Kingsley 'God made things to make themselves'. Creatures, lured to transcend themselves, are co-creators with God.

This raises the question of the role of the Word in creation. St John's Gospel opens with the Hymn of the Word.²

In the beginning was the Word
and the Word was embracing God
and godly was the Word
He was in the beginning embracing God
All things through him came to be (Jn1:1-3)

'The Word', *ho Logos*, was an expression much in vogue in the Hellenistic world of the time. For Jewish Christians it was an allusion to the biblical *Sophia*, the Wisdom of God, who played a key role in the creation of the world (Prov. 8:22-31). For Gentile Christians, familiar with the Greek philosophers, it suggested the divine principle of reason, responsible for the intelligibility and order of the universe. So this Divine Person was seen as God's blue-print of creation, a kind of template, or one might say 'the divine strategy'. It is the Word who appeals to whatever

is subjective in creatures to break out and become what they were not before. The Word, the summation of ‘Truth, places before each living being the truth of its kind to be unerringly pursued. The Word offers to each a plan or model of emergence. It is a call to the thrust found in all living things, to their urge to live and live more fully. Jesus, the Incarnate Word, has said ‘I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly’ (Jn 10:10). It is he who imparts his own Spirit, for according to the biblical dictum ‘It is the Spirit who gives life’ (Jn 6:63).

What is true of all living things is pre-eminently true of human beings, whose subjectivity rises to the heights of reflecting on their consciousness (self-consciousness). To the woman by the well Jesus offered:

The Gift of God...the living water (that) will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life (Jn 4:10-14).

The Gift of the Spirit is assured to the one who approaches with yearning faith.

If anyone thirst, let him come to me
And let him drink, who believes in me.
As scripture has said
Out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.
This he said of the Holy Spirit that they would receive who believed in him (Jn 7:37-39)

The Word of God does not appeal to our reasoning and rational conceptualisation, but implants himself as the Seed of the Sower³ and

communicates his Spirit to the depths of our consciousness in a spiritual experience. The Spirit moves our deepest feelings, which become articulate in archetypal forms and wordless prayer, as the Word draws us to himself and to the light of the True, the Good and the Beautiful shining in the Word. So the Hymn of the Word continues to celebrate the creative Word.

All things through him came to be
and what has come to be in him was life
and the life was the light of men
and the light shines in the darkness
and the darkness failed to master it (Jn 1:3-5).

Here is a biblical sense of ‘life’, which, bypassing distinctions of natural and supernatural or of a state here or hereafter, reads more like a verb than a noun, as it expresses ‘becoming alive’. It can be translated as ‘liveliness’, sparkling with light that reveals the life-giving Spirit.

The one, in whom has germinated the Seed of the Word and who has been enlivened and enlightened by the Spirit of the Word, radiates a special splendour, the Fruit of the Spirit, the ensemble of the qualities of Jesus:

love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Gal 5:22).

This Fruit, first blessed in the womb of Mary (Lk 1:42), is now borne on the Branches of the Vine (Jn 15:1-11), as they persist in their liveliness to glorify the Father (Jn 15:8, 16)

As the fathers of the Church used to say: ‘The Glory of God is the human fully alive’.

NOTES

1. C. Birch, *On Purpose*, New South Wales University Press, Kensington 1990
2. Translation and commentary in E. Stockton, *The Deep Within : Towards an Archetypal Theol-*

- ogy. Blue Mountain Education and Research Trust, Lawson 2011 pp. 93-9
3. E. Stockton, *The Deep Within* 2011 pp. 84-9

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