

20 THIS AND THAT

“Well?” I hear you say, and it is an interesting question. What is it all about?

I intend to approach this broad question with a broad brush, starting from the position that reasoned theories, however tentative, are the only credible basis of knowledge. From this perspective, the multitude of ‘beliefs’ still profoundly held in today’s world are to be seen as genuine but simplistic interpretations of the widespread sense of the numinous, which has always been a major part of the human psyche – always seeking a credible form of expression.

My theory is that it is rational to infer the whole object of being, its peak purpose, to be the expansion of the field of understanding by conscious life of the cosmos of which it forms the key component. It follows that any life which expands this field by one tiny jot will have been well spent, and - directly or indirectly – I suggest that most conscious lives can claim to meet this modest criterion.

In presenting my theory the first thing to clarify is the nature of our life and of its cosmic environment as we can now see it – still mistily, but a great deal more clearly than ever before in the history of life, or at least life on earth. To assist us we have two interlinked categories of information. Firstly, the numinous, accessible at all cultural levels. Secondly we have factual information about the material cosmos, in some sense accessible to all with eyes to see and ears to hear. Both categories provide information which appears to be solid, but both are very clearly apt to be misleading - did we not once assess the earth to be flat?

The basis of the numinous is the profound but simple “religious” feeling of oneness with all things, which is common to every race of mankind - both primitive and sophisticated. Just look at the gleaming eyes of believers of all faiths. The feeling may be nebulous or precisely directed, but its experience is a universal fact. Not surprisingly, humans have interpreted it in formats appropriate to their local cultures, and have fashioned its expression to meet their needs, which of necessity are biological and socio biological as well as ‘free-floating’. This is where problems start, because once the tummy is full and society organised (ie the biological requirements have been attended to), the most pressing of these needs is to achieve the best possible understanding of the altogether amazing - but usually distinctly uncomfortable - material world.

It is not the sense of the numinous but these human formats which have caused religion to become a disaster area. The formats are many and various, but all have tended to elevate erroneous factual interpretations to the status of dogmas, culturally condition successor generations into their unquestioning acceptance, and generally integrate themselves into the tribal nature of society. In the light of today’s factual knowledge most dogmas are clearly no more than myths, and cultural conditioning plus tribal organisation are outmoded tools of human convenience – yet all remain deeply entrenched and a source of constant problems.

Despite this, as the first generation with access to any real understanding of the night sky, the deep structure of matter, and the workings of life we are today hugely privileged, and our personal task is to get this factual knowledge - and the gaps in it - as straight as may be in order to provide a reliable basis for the overarching explanation sought by conscious life.

As babies we open our eyes and perceive a land, a sky, people and so on. We have other immediate senses - we can hear what goes on, we can touch things, smell them and taste them. Are we now in possession of all the factual information we need for an assessment of the material world? We are not. If we try, the best we can manage is to invent myths, or believe myths which are fed to us.

Later, though, we discover we can use tools to scratch this material world. We might not all graduate to radio telescopes, electron microscopes and particle physics, but as our brains adolescence we can listen to what others have learnt from them and from many other advanced studies. Our factual knowledge of this material cosmos has acquired an immensely firmer foundation than was available in our childhood – and in the childhood of our species. And who can deny that in attempting to understand a situation it is useful to be as fully briefed as circumstances permit?

Whatever our answer to the “Well?” question, though, it has to go not only for ourselves but for a great host lacking our factual knowledge, for the silent ancestors, for around six billion other humans today, for so many past and future life forms that their number is unguessable – not to mention the quasi-life forms. Is a white blood cell a life form? Are we mammals colonial animals like jellyfish? Life looks like a churning caldron throwing out all shapes and sizes of organism at a variety of levels, of which just now humans are amongst the winners. The ‘Well?’ question must apply to all.

One of the lessons of our researches is that the scale of our daily life is smaller by many orders of magnitude than that of the cosmos in which it is lived, and larger by many orders of magnitude than the particles of which it is composed. We need a major adjustment to our concept of scales.

Another lesson is the dominance of contingency. The components of today’s individual self conscious brains are likely to have been fabricated in a hyper-nova explosion, and could very easily have ended up in another galaxy, in the core of a neutron star, in a earthly grasshopper, or distributed amongst all three, moving interminably from form to form over the aeons. We need to adjust our concept of the importance of any particular present state. The odds against any particular individual being born are so great as to be near impossible, yet we - accidental but structured collections of cosmic dust - are supremely confident of our particular self identity. And on the biological level we need to be.

The more we delve, the more we appear to find ourselves placed in a most improbable situation which seems to have been tailored precisely to the emergence of self conscious life. We appear with a complex physical structure based on the matter of the cosmos as organized through the ancestors, live lives of various sorts as part of a super-organism we call human society, then physically disappear leaving our effect on future lives as our legacy.

On an evolutionary level it is the misdeeds of its anti-social elements which keep human society constantly on the hop to reorganise itself to cope with them; that is to say a degree of constant disruption (‘evil’) is an unfortunate but necessary adjunct to development of the human condition as it has become. Technologically we are today moving with increasing speed, but it took modern man close on a hundred thousand years to haul himself out of the Stone Age – he clearly had a sufficient need of any available boost to be non-squeamish about methods.

All, as we are repeatedly reminded, are built of dust and return to dust. In human terms it sounds a bit tough. But what is this dust? It is the base material of the cosmos, and as immortal as the cosmos itself. When its constituents are arranged as organised through the ancestors it has an inbuilt power to turn into random but self-conscious individuals. This is another way of saying that the base material of the cosmos has a capacity to come alive sufficiently to begin the process of understanding itself. Those countless billions of clouds and clumps of intergalactic gas out there all contain the same material with the same potential to do the same thing.

This may as yet be unproven in the strictly scientific sense, but it has the status of a preferred, almost unavoidable, conclusion. If not, pray what other conclusion can be drawn from the available facts (as opposed to our wishes)? If accepted, what is to be inferred?

Firstly, 'life potential' as a quality of matter is an attribute in a sphere so far beyond the four dimensions of the physical that it seems not unreasonable to regard it as being something of the nature of a 5th dimension, or perhaps an all-pervading force associated with matter and analogous to the recognised physical forces

Secondly, it is not surprising that individuals made of such a curious substance as matter have access to an uplifting sense of the numinous – the sense can rationally be understood as our components linking back to our origins. Its rational understanding, though, becomes relevant only when an attempt is made to codify the experience. There is proof aplenty that one does not require to be rational to sense the numinous, and it is a wholly reasonable inference that one does not even need to be human. Just as all this dust has a common origin and a common facility to grow into life, so it is shot through with a common sense of unity.

Thirdly. Those of us humans alive today belong to a most favoured group which has seen not only a huge upgrading of our knowledge of the physical context but - in parallel - a huge upgrading of the neural wiring of our own successive generations. Biologically we may be the same animal, but we have changed ourselves from a standard automated organism into an animal with an entirely novel capacity, an ability to assess and upgrade the rationality of its approach by communal effort. At the same time we have to recognise that there remain huge unknowns on the borderlands of our rapidly expanding knowledge. We are getting there but have yet to arrive.

Despite this upgrading, we remain as automated as any bog-standard animal, even though self-consciousness may appear to confer on us the power of free will. Free will consists simply of doing naturally what comes naturally, that is to say what we have been programmed to do by our neural network as devised by our genetic inheritance and modified by the culture of our times. All the complexity of our thoughts and actions, including both the noble and the ignoble, flow from these two influences, no doubt mixed with an element of randomness.

We are self-conscious robots with many mal-functions but increasingly able to sense our most unlikely cosmos in the round. We are fitted to this function not only by our special neural wiring but by our highly flexible manipulative bodies. The mal-functions arise from the necessary evolutionary route which we followed, ranging from the problems of a nagging appendix to the much more serious outbursts of group and cultural aggression, initially useful goads to emerging technology but increasingly incompatible with that technology.

Curiously, when the chips are down, a rational thinker can basically go no farther than a primitive shaman or a charismatic priest in his conclusion that there is a mechanism 'out there and in here' which makes things as they are. The shaman will, without validatable evidence, produce human names and myths to support his case; the rational thinker will avoid human analogies and see the mechanism and its results as the overarching reality. Neither shaman nor thinker can as yet produce a credible explanation of how it comes about there is something rather than nothing in here and out there.

In all cultures, conventional peer wisdom has always been that linking with the background mechanism, ie the current view of the numinous, is the object of living. A contemporary rational thinker cannot demure from this assessment, although he may see the mechanism differently and seek different ways of formulating the linkage.

The only other candidate for 'object of living' is the pursuit of physical pleasure, but this is no more than to elevate the biological motor of life to the status of its own justification. For survival, it is important for all animals to attempt to satisfy their necessary instincts, but one requires no human brain for such a pursuit.

Regrettably, humans are inevitably bogged down by the heavy baggage of their own evolution. For progress in understanding, conscious life needs a much lighter form of pure unencumbered intelligence. If all things are one thing, is it not reasonable to expect this intelligence to be sympathetic to other elements of its own self. Humans have evolved to achieve their status largely by virtue of being ruthless killers, and it is questionable if their neural wiring can now be adequately modified to produce such an intelligence from their own species, although they may, if willing, soon be able to manufacture it.

There is, though, plenty of time. Several thousands of millions of years as far as Earth is concerned, and a lot longer in the many elsewhere.

In the meantime we have, as biological organisms, to live and survive in our particular biological niches. We need to be citizens of two loci – the wonderful wonderful world of time and space, and the wonderful wonderful cosmic principle which inhabits it, which is us and everything else.

Like the ancient shamans who saw a flat world enclosed below the painted bowl of the sky, we have a need to take some sort of view, if only provisional, based on such information as is available

To sense the numinous, whether in the context of religion, music or whatever, seems to be on the right track. To link this to particular mythologies seems to be neither here nor there except insofar as they provide help on the sociobiological plane. For the recycling self-conscious elements of the cosmos to increase their fundamental understanding of what is occurring is conceivably a visible validation of the whole set-up.

In the meantime it behoves us, in all modesty, to be tolerant of other world views. Simplification and anthropomorphism may indeed lead away from the cutting edge, but are at least in line with the essential sociobiological needs of the basic animal lurking below the surface, sometimes deep buried but more often pitifully rearing its head to roar, weep, implore, luxuriate or obfuscate. In the interests of its animal happiness it needs to be allowed space to do so, but for the general comfort it needs training not to trespass unduly on the space of others.

ADDENDUM

One final thought is that the situation with which conscious life finds itself coping is so unlikely that, with perhaps some exceptions, no explanations can be ruled out. It is even feasible that random life forms, once they have fashioned themselves from the unity in a form determined by their genetics and environment, can acquire some sort of 'other dimensional' status, rather as if they crystallise. It's at least an interesting speculation which is not far adrift of other speculations, albeit a bit tarnished by the brush of wish fulfilment!