Editorial

THE EVOLUTIONARY EPIC

Thirty years ago, in his book *On Human Nature*, Edward Wilson wrote that "the evolutionary epic is probably the best myth we will ever have" (1978, 201). In the years since, an enormous amount of attention has been given to constructing this myth. Such efforts commonly go under the names "evolutionary epic," "epic of evolution," or "epic of creation." A Google search of "epic of evolution" finds this brief definition: "The epic of evolution is the scientific story of the universe told in a meaningful and empowering way" (Wiserearth 2007).

The epic of evolution is an attempt at natural history, to be sure—telling the story of the universe, zooming from this macrostory to the microstory of planet Earth and the human species. Even the macrostory, however—from Big Bang to the formation of the planet Earth—is about us. By including ourselves in the story, we make clear that human history is a phase of the history of nature; at the same time, we thereby make the epic an attempt to give meaning to our own lives, even when it is sometimes asserted that our lives are but a passing moment in natural history.

Just what does this storytelling say about us? It presents us with a narrative of *Homo sapiens* in which the matrix of terrestrial evolution comes to the fore. There is a subtext underlying this narrative that is about our innate, even obsessive, insistence that there is a meaning to things. The macro- and microstories of the evolutionary epic are expressions of this quintessentially human desire to make sense of the world. Neuroscientist Terrence Deacon writes that we are an "evolutionary anomaly," "the only species that has ever wondered about its place in the world, because only one evolved the ability to do so." We live in a "shared virtual world" of ideas, and no other species on earth seems able to follow us into this world (Deacon 1997, 21–22). A theologian would likely say God has created us to be seekers after meaning, to be creation's storytellers. Interpretation goes hand in hand with storytelling, justifying the belief that, whether by God's hand or by the blind processes of evolution, it falls to us to interpret the creation and our place in it. We recognize that interpretive storytelling is not a task for

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stenographers receiving dictation from an outside authority; rather, it is a mandate to the imagination, entrusted to the earthly creature who is preeminently capable of imagination.

The stories we construct aim to speak of the deepest or ultimate meaning of nature and our place within nature. We do not abandon reason as we put our stories together. Reason is exercised to the utmost, particularly in bringing the relevant scientific knowledge to bear as we construct the natural history that stands at the core of the epic. Nevertheless the stories we tell in the epic of creation speak of that which we cannot know and about which we cannot be certain. They go beyond science and dare to speak of the ultimate ground of the cosmos, whether they speak explicitly of God or not. They insist that this natural history has meaning and purpose, that human history has meaning and that purposes guide our lives. Our stories insist that there is a moral dimension to natural history that is frequently expressed in terms of our accountability. At times that accountability is to God, the Creator, while at other times we speak of accountability to fellow humans and nature itself. Our stories about the evolutionary epic are redolent with ultimacy.

When we tell stories of ultimacy, we speak of the destiny of the cosmos and thereby enter a realm that surpasses our comprehension, and as a result our stories are stories of faith. They require us to take a leap of faith in talking about these ultimate themes of purpose, meaning, and destiny. Even more, they are stories of faith because we allow our epic stories to guide our living—we rest our existence on these stories.

There is another reason why our stories press us toward the depth dimensions of ultimacy. Martin Rees, president of the British Royal Academy of Science, describes it this way: Even though we are a transient phase of the world's history, "this century may be a defining moment. It's the first in our planet's history where one species—ours—has the earth's future in its hands." Our place in the natural history lays a task upon us to make decisions that will determine the future of our species and of our planet. These decisions require that we ask questions of destiny when we know full well that we possess neither the knowledge nor the capabilities to act with certainty in the face of destiny. In making these decisions, which are integral to our natural history, we come face-to-face with the depth dimensions of reality that force us to proceed finally on the courage and faith that carry us beyond the limits of our knowledge and strength. We hear the echo of classic religious affirmations that describe the human journey as a "venture of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden."

Stories of ultimacy are, finally, mythic stories. The evolutionary epic is not science; it is scientifically informed myth. We must be clear about this. For more than four millennia, humans have never ceased speaking in the face of those realities that are too large, too deep, and too unfathomable for their minds and spirits to encompass. They have given testimony to

their experience of ultimacy, wrestling with mystery, freedom, grace, failure, and suffering, to the point where their own life was threatened with death. Their testimony comes to us in the only forms that are capable of expressing the inexpressible, speaking the unspeakable: metaphor, analogy, poetry, art, music, and all forms of myth. When Wilson wrote that "the true evolutionary epic, retold as poetry, is as intrinsically ennobling as any religious epic," he also understood and proposed that the epic be incorporated into mythic religious formulation (1978, 206–7).

What drives myth and the ineradicable human tendency to engage in myth? It is the refusal to give up on the insistence that the natural world and our lives in the world have meaning and purpose. The insistence on meaningfulness is as deeply ingrained in human nature as any of our other traits, and it will not go away, which is to say that it is as much a part of us as our cells, our neurobiology, or anything about us. Poet Richard Wilbur has called this the "heart's wish or life," which is both boundless and "peremptory." It is in his words "an endless claim" that humans stake in the vastness of the evolutionary epic (1969, 20–21).

To stake such a boundless and peremptory claim is on its face strange—all the more when we stop to consider in what territory the claim is staked: the concrete processes of nature and history. Our minds are rooted in our brains, a gray mass of biotic material encased in our skulls. We claim, however, that this neurobiological engine can not only explore its neurobiology—that's science—but also perceive the underlying causes of things and chart the fundamental principles on which all of nature rests—that's religion, morality, and philosophy.

Think for a moment. The scientific enterprise is carried out by an infinitesimally tiny creature on an insignificant planet in a very ordinary galaxy. In the face of the knowledge that there are billions of billions of stars, one of which is the sun of our solar system, that the cosmos at 13 billion years of age is only in its youth, and that the cosmos is too large even to measure or communicate across, this tiny creature of finite mind and senses nevertheless presumes to probe the origins of the cosmos, its history, and the fundamental laws of its behavior and to dream of travel beyond our planet and contact with other creatures. I liken this to the audacity of one of my blood cells if it could conceive the project of understanding me—my history and present activity—and then decide to change its own location, while remaking my body to suit its own tastes.

The evolutionary epic, when viewed in this context, is nothing if not an act of irony—that we creatures so small undertake stories with a claim so great and wager our lives on our stories. Literary scholar Harold Bloom has termed this ironic act a "juxtaposition of incommensurables," and he finds it throughout the history of human thinking and writing (Rosenberg and Bloom 1990, 25). The evolutionary epic would be unthinkable except as a work of irony.

Why do we persist in making these peremptory claims that nature in and of itself does not validate? Because we are creatures of hope. We do not just tell stories; our stories resonate with hope, and our telling of the evolutionary epic is no exception. As creatures who are distinctive in evolution, as Deacon argues, for our ability to tell the stories of evolution, we are also creatures who live in irony and hope.

The evolutionary epic fills a large space in the domain of religion-and-science, which is to say that this is also a domain of myth—scientifically informed, to be sure—as well as a domain of irony and hope. If this be true, the next question is: What must we do in religion-and-science in order to do justice to evolution in its dimensions of myth, irony, and hope?

The offerings in this issue are grouped in four sections. The first presents a symposium on philosopher Owen Flanagan's recent book *The Really Hard Problem: Meaning in a Material World.* The commentators, to whom Flanagan himself responds, are religious studies scholars: Ann Taves, Gregory Peterson, and Donald Wiebe. "Voices from Medicine" is the title of the second section. Medical researcher John Carvalho provides another installment in his emphasis on medical science and the common good, while Ryan Fante, medical student, reflects on the ontology of health. The other piece in this section is an unusual commentary on women's experience of breast cancer by theological student Megan Eide and Ann Milliken Pederson (religious studies).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, martyr and theologian during the Nazi period of the twentieth century, is a towering figure, but little attention has been given to his thinking about science. In the third segment of articles Larry Rasmussen (theology) opens an intriguing window on Bonhoeffer's correspondence (from prison) with his brother, Karl Friedrich, who was one of Germany's most renowned physical chemists. Rodney Holder, astrophysicist and Anglican priest, gives us an analysis of Bonhoeffer's thinking about religion and science.

We bring the issue to a close with a symposium on the thought of Michael Oakeshott, noted twentieth-century British philosopher of politics and history, who thought and wrote deeply about both religion and science. Leslie Marsh, guest editor of this segment, provides an introduction in which he suggests that Oakeshott propounded an earlier and more profound version of the "non-overlapping magisteria" view that Stephen Jay Gould expressed in his work. Six Oakeshott scholars contribute to this symposium: Elizabeth Corey, Tim Fuller, Byron Kaldis, Corey Abel, and Efraim Podoksik.

Like the efforts to elaborate the evolutionary epic, each of these articles represents a facet of our ongoing effort to relate the larger and broader meanings of life with scientific knowledge. We always invite our readers to join in this effort.

—Philip Hefner

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