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New Wine into Old Bottles? Or Time to Jettison the Bottle?

Adrian Ivakhiv

University of Vermont, Rubenstein Sch Env&Ntrl R,
153 So. Prospect, Burlington, VT 05401, USA
aivakhiv@uvm.edu

In 'Science as Sacred Myth?' environmental ethicist Lisa Sideris questions the use of science by colleagues in the field of religious environmental ethics. Complementing her earlier work (2003), which showed that many ecological theologians were *under*informed by science, here she argues that some among them, in contrast, cede 'far too much authority to science and its alleged mythic potential' (p. 137). This is the case in what she calls the 'New Genesis' movement, which posits science as a 'new sacred myth for our times' by promoting narratives under such labels as 'The Epic of Evolution, The Universe Story, Big History, The New Story, or The Great Story' (p. 137).

While Sideris does not quite put it this way, the advocates of these 'new myths' err, in part, by identifying science with only one of the forms it takes—that of *results* that have gained a kind of consensus recognition within the community of scientists. Evolutionary theory and Big Bang theory, to name two of the more obvious sources for these new mythographers, are *theories*—no more and no less—that have attained a certain status through the accumulation of supporting data, which their rivals are far from approaching. As theories, they are as good as scientific results can get, but they are not *all* that science *is*.

On the contrary, science, as social studies of science have shown, refers to many things. It is not only a set of established and accepted—but in principle always revisable—truths. It is also a form and style of inquiry, a field of professional practices and discourses, a community of practitioners, an array of popular understandings, and a congeries of trappings—tools, gadgets, discursive shorthands, institutional and

economic relations, and so on—which both constrain and enable the work that science *does* in the world that it studies and that, in studying, it alters (e.g., Hackett et al. 2008). If science is multiple, its relations with other domains—colonial legacies, religious institutions, political programs, cultural paradigms, and popular wisdom—are historically variable. What this broader view of science implies is that science may not be dependable enough to provide the kind of mythic meaning the proponents of New Genesis ask from it.

That is not to suggest that science cannot serve as a resource for new intellectual and cosmological perspectives. Sideris's complaints follow lines of critique she identifies with sociologist Robert Bellah and philosopher J. Baird Callicott. Bellah defends what could be called 'mythic truth'—and that the 'truth' of myths is of a different sort than scientific truth and 'must be judged by different criteria' (p. 141). The point is that truth, as philosophers have often argued, is not restricted to the correspondence between statements and the realities they describe; that is only one form of truth, and perhaps the less interesting one. On this line of argument, it is not clear how the truth of the Big Bang can be any more profound or valuable than the truths embodied in, say, Shakespeare's or Euripides's depictions of humanity in all its nobility, complexity, tragedy, and comedy. For humanists familiar with the millennial treasures of human culture, believers in the New Genesis may just be barking up the wrong tree—if only because they believe there *is only one* tree.

That brings us to Callicott, whom Sideris takes as representative of a 'reconstructive postmodernism' that allows for many truths and that critiques the 'epistemic arrogance' of those who propose any single, totalistic truth that would subsume all others. Different truths may have different criteria of 'tenability'—one might say, more coyly, different criteria of 'truthiness'. Sideris rightly critiques those who attempt to subsume all truths into one—and specifically into a correspondence theory of truth that, furthermore, seeks correspondence with the *current results* of science, ignoring both the fallibility, provisionality, and open-endedness of the scientific enterprise *and* alternative theories of truth—as identity, as coherence, as efficacy, as the event of unconcealment, and so on. She deems E.O. Wilson's 'consilience' proposal as a 'fully fledged "unification hypothesis"' (p. 144) that carries totalizing and hegemonic ambitions along these lines. For the record, I agree with her on that, at least as Wilson presented it in the book entitled *Consilience* (1998).

Wilson's and Dawkins's arguments provide easy targets, even if they are 'gaining currency in the broader culture' as Sideris suggests (p. 144). It is not clear to me that all the proponents of the New Genesis follow Wilson and Dawkins in this reductionist endeavor. What's more

interesting for me is that the hypothesis of 'disciplinary consilience' is so little thought through, both in Wilson and his New Genesis followers and in Sideris's article. The question of whether and to what extent there is 'disciplinary consilience' is an *empirical* question that requires more investigation: Wherein lies the consilience between biology and physics, let alone between nonlinear dynamical theory, landscape ecology, cultural anthropology, and environmental ethics? Making the case for such consilience takes a lot of work, including building fragile alliances across multiple discursive communities. Applying evolutionary theory to literature or religion is an interesting enterprise, but it is far from becoming hegemonic in literary or religious studies.

Of the models Sideris subsumes into the New Genesis rubric, the field of Big History offers something of a model by which such transdisciplinary work *should* be performed. Historians like David Christian seek overarching themes across the accounts of the natural and social sciences, and when Christian finds one in what he calls 'the endless waltz of chaos and complexity' (2004: 10), this, to my mind, is a theory worth pursuing—worth supporting, debating, and forwarding into multiple disciplinary milieus for critique, refinement, and development. In his synoptic *Maps of Time*, Christian writes, 'The many detailed stories of the past already taught in our schools and universities ensure that a modern creation myth will emerge not as a single monolithic story but rather as a large and ramshackle cycle of stories, each of which can be told in many ways and with many variants' (2004: 10). Such a story might be more like Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990) than the monomyth Sideris fears. Even if a field like Big History could arrive at a working consensus version of the story of the universe, it is hardly equipped to perform the functions traditionally fulfilled by religious narratives because it lacks the contexts of practice, communal ritual, and so on, of religion. Ethnographers of religion generally know this, but theologians and philosophers may sometimes forget it.

I see this debate as a reworking of ground that had been insightfully trodden by Alfred North Whitehead almost a century ago. In *The Concept of Nature* (1920), Whitehead had isolated as the intellectual problem of the modern world what he called the 'bifurcation of nature' into two:

> …the nature apprehended in awareness and the nature which is the cause of awareness. The nature which is the fact apprehended in awareness holds within it the greenness of the trees, the song of the birds, the warmth of the sun, the hardness of the chairs, and the feel of the velvet. The nature which is the cause of awareness is the conjectured system of molecules and electrons which so affects the mind as to produce the awareness of apparent nature (Whitehead 1920: 31).

Any viable theory of reality, he argued, must account for both of these without diminishing either into the category of lesser truth or sheer illusion. Dawkins, Wilson, and their followers might be able to provide causal accounts for the mechanisms *underlying* subjective experience—the conjectured system of causes—but their accounts are less satisfying at presenting the richness of that experience itself. The meanings of green, warmth, softness, and birdsong are hardly exhausted by evolutionary accounts; they are merely explained by them. To be adequately rendered, they must also be experienced, felt, and incorporated into personally and collectively meaningful narrative. Answering the question 'why is that birdsong beautiful?' with 'because evolution made it that way' or 'because evolution made us want to *perceive* it that way' is no better than saying 'because God created it thus'. Both beg an infinite regress of 'and why that, and that?' Why is there anything instead of nothing? To answer that, I'll have to tell you a story.

The New Genesis narratives, in their diverse inflections, provide a *start* for feeling ourselves as inhabitants of a planet that circles a sun in a cosmos we have barely begun to understand. They catch us up with three hundred years of scientific research that is yielding insights that ought to be of interest to people. To the extent that they conflate 'all that is real with whatever is scientifically known or knowable', I agree that they may have the effect of disparaging 'as *unreal*' the 'lived experience of the natural world' (p. 147) or indeed of any world. That conflation is a risk, and New Genesis advocates would be wise to steer away from it.

But narratives are helpful and necessary, and the search for consilience—when humbled by an acknowledgment of one's own, and science's, limits—is also a necessary part of the way forward. To succeed, that search may have to relinquish its goal posts and starting assumptions, including those that judge one narrative to be more 'true' than another. That would take us into a space of high risk and no guarantees, a space of shifting grounds where the only new genesis to be crafted is one that no one can claim as their own: not science, not (a) religion, not even the Human as we know it (him and her), but the crafting of a *post*-Anthropocene.

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