

Big History: The Modern Creation Myth and Its Contribution to Global Ethics

by Lindsey Dean

If we survey the current threshold of complexity, there is no question as to the demand for innovation—technological, political, and moral—in this precarious hour of our species’ evolution.¹ And although the defining issues of the millennium give cause for alarm, we need not succumb to a debilitating despair. For I believe that we can affirm, as does Eric Chaisson, that in the present era “the direct continuation of the evolution that led to the origin of the human species on earth lies in the hands of human beings themselves. They can either destroy this stage of evolution, or they can organize themselves into a higher form of common living than before, and advance evolution further.”²

¹ This paper was first delivered as a presentation titled “Big History, Big Questions: The Role of the Modern Creation Myth in Forming a Global Ethics” at the inaugural conference of the International Big History Association (IBHA) at Grand Valley State University in Grand Rapids, Michigan, August 2-5, 2012.

² Eric J Chaisson, “Ethical Evolution,” *Zygon: Journal of Religion & Science* 34(1999): 265-271. Print.

The project to contribute to the advancement of our evolution through the construction of the guideposts for moral identity and ethical action in the globalized era can be seen in the Big History endeavor, the aim of which is, in the words of IBHA, to “help nurture the development of the empathy and cooperation that are part of our social nature” so as to contribute to the formation of a “more perfect human community.”³ If the Big History endeavor is to make good on this promissory note, there are certain issues that scholars and educators must be willing to address before the resources have become available to make the 13.7 billion year history of the universe accessible to all. The most urgent of these issues include the potential for particular presentations of the narrative to perpetuate the difficulties already associated with meta-narrative projects, the possibility for the story to contribute to the commonly referred to “crisis of meaning” associated with the modern era, and the capacity of this material to aggravate the so-called culture war between science and religion, which in turn will alienate listeners and inevitably stall the entire Big History undertaking.

³ The International Big History Association, “Big History Seeks to Understand the Integrated History of the Cosmos, Earth, Life, and Humanity,” The International Big History Association, 17 May 2012 <<http://ibhanet.org>>.

Modern Creation Myth and the Cultivation of Ethical Consciousness

Since the development of the capacity to communicate through language, human beings have been equipped to symbolically bind together a collective, establish its connection to the environment, and locate its relation to the cosmos through the medium of stories. Mythic consciousness runs deep in our evolutionary heritage; it has become the primary means for understanding who we are, where we come from, and where our future might lead.

David Christian acknowledges the role of narrative in both identity formation and moral agency in his assertion that “creation myths provide universal coordinates within which people can imagine their own existence and find a role in the larger scheme of things. Creation myths are powerful because they speak to our deep spiritual, psychic, and social need for a sense of place and a sense of belonging.”⁴ It follows for Christian and presumably most Big Historians that the telling of human history within the context of cosmic, geological, and biological history is “the creation myth of modern human beings, educated in the scientific

⁴David Christian, *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004, 6. Print.

traditions of the modern world.”⁵

Thus the perceived power of this myth to transcend our regional and “tribal differences” has been cause for optimism amongst Big Historians, the manifestation of which has been eloquently expressed by Eric Chaisson:

We are now entering an age of synthesis such as occurs only once every few generations. The years ahead will surely be exciting and productive times in the world of science, largely because the scenario of cosmic evolution will give us an opportunity to systematically and synergistically inquire into the nature of our existence—to mount an integrated effort to build a modern universe history *that people of all cultures can adopt...*

As we approach the end of the millennium, such a coherent story of our origins—*a powerful and true myth*—can act as an effective intellectual vehicle to invite *all our citizens to become participants, not just spectators, in the building of a whole new legacy*. We are indeed on the road toward becoming wise, ethical human beings; *we are beginning to experience ethical evolution*.⁶

⁵Ibid., 6-7

⁶ Italics added. Chaisson, "Ethical Evolution," 271.

Approaching the Issues

Yet if Big History is to realize its assumed potential to contribute to a foundation for a global ethical tradition, the urgent issues that arise on account of the very nature of this project must soon be addressed. Above all, an awareness of the inherent complications of meta-narratives is required, as is an acknowledgment of the moral issue that arises in assuming that people of all cultures can, or *will*, adopt a narrative that is predominantly coming out of the Western traditions of history and science. To claim *universal validity* for a particular worldview (even if it is a cohesive story about our origins that is grounded in science) is nothing less than a form of cultural imperialism and surely an epistemological stance that honest educators and Big Historians should seek to avoid. Much work remains as to articulating the approach that will be successful in moving “all our citizens” beyond spectator-hood and into participatory engagement in the construction of this ethical project.

It is also important for us to be critical of the assumption that in order to experience ethical evolution we *must* do so in accordance with coming to know the world through the scientific method. As Craig Benjamin has asserted “the modern creation myth becomes a powerful rationalist argument in favor of scientific

paradigms,”⁷ and indeed it does. Privileging the scientific method as the ultimate road to truth is an orientation known as scientism, which eclipses alternative cultural paths towards wisdom by deeming them inadequate responses to reality and ultimately “false.” Scientism also engenders the supposition that individual moral progress entails acting in the world as rational, disengaged subjects who, in adopting the so-called “view from nowhere,” reach moral maturity in shrugging off the presumably fantastical, deluded hopes of one's religious past.⁸

Ideally, our students will be positioned to learn that as a metaphysical orientation, naturalistic materialism is not necessarily the apex of human intellectual and ethical development. My hope is that they will come to know that while scientific theory can serve as a culture-independent worldview about how many things in the universe have come to be, once it has been integrated into narrative form, it can no longer claim complete objectivity. What may follow in both the hearts and minds of students who struggle with the potential conflict between science and religion is a personalized reconciliation between the two systems, an outcome that will require

⁷ Craig Benjamin, “The Convergence of Logic, Faith and Values in the Modern Creation Myth,” *World History Connected*, April 20, 2012
<<http://worldhistoryconnected.press.illinois.edu/6.3/benjamin2.html>>.

⁸ See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007. Print.

educators who tend towards naturalistic materialism or scientism to be as sensitive and open to our students' religious inclinations as we hope our students will be towards scientific theory.⁹

In light of the issue regarding the culture clash between science and religion, it is helpful to turn to Robert Bellah, renowned scholar and author of *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*, as he is quick to remind us that “scientific explanations are concerned with the causes and functions of the activities under study; (where as) humanistic understanding is concerned with their meaning.”¹⁰ If this crucial distinction is legitimately considered by educators and students alike, then we are positioned to see that when scientists move into the realm of human meaning making by asking questions about ultimacy, meaning, and purpose in light of the cosmos (while also claiming as Chaisson has that theirs is the one true myth)—methodological boundaries are being crossed and scientists have entered into an expression of practice that is more akin with the sphere of the humanities—and as Bellah leads us to consider, perhaps they have even moved into the realm of religion

⁹ Craig Benjamin, an atheist, discusses his experience with the pedagogical approach in “The Convergence of Logic, Faith and Values in the Modern Creation Myth.”

¹⁰ Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011, 113. Print.

itself.¹¹

I would also like for Big Historians to consider our challenge to avoid spinning the story in such a way that our students are delivered unto cosmic pessimism, an existential response to the grand narrative that is aptly epitomized by Steven Weinberg's famous quote that “the more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it seems pointless.”¹² In addition to being aware of the potential for naturalistic materialism to become a powerful ideology, it is important for us to recognize its capacity to transform a meaning-endowed cosmos into a meaningless, material universe in which humans are perceived as nothing but a millibreath in an utterly absurd and indifferent cosmic yawn. Keep in mind that our students will be learning that the sun will cease to burn about 5 billion years into the future and, as Fred Spier reminds us, that “Human stewardship of Earth will probably not last more than another few million years, perhaps much less, before our species goes extinct...”¹³

In regards to this particular issue, Biologist Ursula Goodenough has aptly pointed out that “our response to accounts of the *workings* of Nature (can be)

¹¹ See Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution* 44-49 for a more detailed exploration of this issue.

¹² Ibid., xiii.

¹³ Fred Spier, *Big History and the Future of Humanity*. Chichester, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, 192. Print.

decidedly less positive (than our response to natural beauty). The scientific version of how things are, and how they came to be, is much more likely, at first encounter, to elicit alienation, anomie, and nihilism, responses that offer little promise for motivating our allegiance or moral orientation.”¹⁴ If we recall the ethical aim of Big History, we see that the pessimistic response to the narrative and its subsequent stifling of moral motivation is perhaps one of the greatest challenges we are called to meet.

Contributing to Big History's Potential

While the materialist and particularly a reductionist understanding of the universe may have the potential to generate cosmic pessimism, there is an alternative response which can meet the need for meaning in the modern era without recourse to theism (such a response might be particularly attractive to students who fall into the “spiritual but not religious” camp, as well as for those who have, at the present moment, stepped away from the faith of their childhood). This orientation is known as religious naturalism and is grounded in the emergentist perspective of evolution.

¹⁴ Ursula Goodenough, *The Sacred Depths of Nature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, xvii. Print.

Before turning to religious naturalism, however, it is necessary to recall that “emergent forms in evolution cannot be reduced to or even fully explained by the entities of which they are composed: new forms of organization give rise to generally new and irreducible complexities.”¹⁵ Thus, the “emergentist thinks that many phenomena have properties that are genuinely new...and cannot be understood except at their own level...”¹⁶

It follows that the emergentist perspective in the form of religious naturalism (particularly as it is developed by Goodenough and her colleague, biological anthropologist Terrence Deacon) will position people to celebrate where we have come from while adopting the practices that will ensure the preservation of our planet and the further evolution of all life. The cardinal virtues of this tradition include a humble acceptance of the mystery that any of *this* even exists (which is also connected to living in an enchanted universe), reverence and gratitude in light of the understanding that our planet has provided for the “Goldilocks” conditions from which life has been able to form and evolve, and awe in knowing that the rudimentary emotions we share in common with our primate ancestors have evolved into higher

¹⁵ Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 99.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 114.

order emotions such as awe itself.¹⁷

In regards to meaning and purpose as it is perceived in the religious naturalism tradition, it is important to note Goodenough and Deacon's explanation that, "For some, to think of purpose as an evolved emergent capacity is to destroy the very meaning of purpose; for others, purpose so understood is rendered meaningful, even sacred, for the first time. For some, to understand human-specific mental and emotional capacities as emergent is to violate their sense of self; others celebrate all that has gone on before us as setting the nothing-but stage for these spectacular something-else lives that we live."¹⁸

Such insight positions us to consider the complexity involved in the potential responses to the narrative, and we must be situated to rise to a situation in which religious naturalism may serve as a valid option for some of our students. Perhaps most importantly, however, is being prepared to address the fact that the majority of students (at least in the United States) will need to be assured that the modern

¹⁷ For a discussion of emergent emotional experiences, see Terrence Deacon and Tyrone Cashman, "The Role of Symbolic Capacity in the Origins of Religion." *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature & Culture* 3 (2009): 490-517.

¹⁸ Ursula Goodenough and Terrence W. Deacon, "The Sacred Emergence of Nature," ed. Philip Clayton and Zachary Simpson, *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 866. Print.

creation myth can coexist with humanity's existing wisdom traditions.¹⁹ Keep in mind that even though evolution is an established scientific theory, it has yet to be widely accepted by the American public. One of the latest figures from the Pew Research Center reveals that just 32% of the American public accepts that humans and other living things have evolved over time and that evolution is the result of natural processes such as natural selection.²⁰ Big Historians from China and Korea have also voiced concern around the acceptance of evolutionary theory and the modern creation myth by the larger public. In light of this information, it becomes apparent that we are responsible for enabling our students to see that it is possible for the evolutionary epic to inform “our global concerns while we continue to orient our daily lives in our cultural and religious contexts.”²¹

¹⁹I am not suggesting that we proselytize in the name of Religious Naturalism, yet I do believe it is an important element to introduce to our students as a potential non-theist, religious response to the cosmological narrative. This is particularly so in the case of students who are seeking for a naturalist position that has room within it for a sense of and appreciation for the human quest for meaning and purpose.

²⁰The Pew Research Center for People and the Press, “Public Praises Science; Scientists Fault Public, Media,” 9 July 2009, The Pew Research Center, 15 April 2012 <<http://www.people-press.org/2009/07/09/public-praises-science-scientists-fault-public-media/>>.

²¹ Goodenough, *Sacred Depths*, xvi.

Big History Alongside Established Wisdom Traditions

Part of the reason why it is so important to encourage the move from the universal in the form of the Big History narrative back to the particular in the form of our already established traditions is that the enhancement of ethical consciousness and the development of virtue are not cultivated through the location of one's self in a creation myth alone (particularly if this story is being encountered for the first time at the high school or college level). Indeed, our ethics are channeled and given shape through the medium of a perceived order of existence that includes symbolic representation and therefore narrative form—but stories and their morals must be enacted, lived out, and embodied in daily practice in order to become a tangible force in the world of human affairs and it is in this regard that religion serves as an additional, if not the primary, moral resource to draw upon in the present time of trial. That being said, surely it would be practical for Big Historians to consider amplifying the role of religion in discussions centered around human cognitive and cultural evolution.

I realize this is intimidating terrain, particularly when Big History is thought to serve as a corrective to the tribalism associated with humanity's inherited religious systems, yet it must nevertheless resist the temptation to supplant existing religious and cultural traditions. This is because as a praxis (and, as Bellah has stressed, we

must understand religion not so much as a matter of belief but first and foremost as a way of life), religion has tremendous potential to contribute to the ability of the human person to engage in “beyonding,” the capacity to see what Alfred Schutz called the World of Daily Life—a culturally conditioned common-sense conception of the world informed predominately by utilitarian concern, sometimes referred to as the world of Darwinian survival—in terms of a reality beyond it.²² Religious practitioners are conditioned to live in light of an understanding of an alternative reality (i.e. there is something *more* than meets the eye—as in the naturalistic interpretation of the world—and this *more* serves as the foundation for one’s relationality to a community and the environment), and this is accomplished through prayer, meditation, and ritual, even through one’s membership in a community that itself transcends time and space.

Furthermore, such habituation serves to position the individual practitioner to experience self-transcendence, perhaps one of our greatest adaptive capacities of all.²³ To understand the significance of transcendence, we can turn to an exploration into Being Cognition—a term coined by Abraham Maslow to designate a mode of

²²See Bellah, “Religion and Reality,” 1-18 and “Conclusion,” 573-597 in *Religion in Human Evolution* for a detailed description of multiple and overlapping realities.

²³Obviously, transcendence can occur outside of the “religious” sphere. The argument that I am trying to make is that religious and spiritual *practice* greatly enhance the capacity for such experiences.

perception through which we “relate to the world by participation, not manipulation; we experience a union of subject and object, a wholeness that overcomes all partiality²⁴ that results in “experiences of the general rightness of all things, and personal well-being.”²⁵ What is particularly useful in thinking about the implications of this for ethics is the inclination of one who has had a profound transcendent experience to then act on account of the Whole.

The insight into a space of reality which then instills in one a sense of ethical responsibility is tied to an emergent cognitive and cultural capacity, *theoria*, a Greek term that is translated as “contemplation” and the origin of our word for theory. As Bellah argues in his work on the subject, *theoria* completes the Axial Age transition during which a tradition of criticism was first established whereby religious and philosophical seers would challenge the validity claims of political/religious authorities, particularly the ideologies that were used to legitimate the normative order of the social-political sphere. Mythic culture and its ritualistic roots could now be criticized in light of the perceived objective moral order, giving rise to what was considered to be, for the first time in human history, an ethical universalism. Moral agency was and

²⁴ Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 5.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

continues to be defined in light of transcendent principles that in turn establish a soteriological bridge between the World of Daily Life and an alternative realm of reality that, if crossed, would result in Salvation, Liberation, Release, or Enlightenment.²⁶

If connected to Big History, we can infer the potential of tying discussions around *theoria* (because experiences of *theoria* “provide an insight into reality so deep that the whole empirical world is called into question” and “they can lead to a radical questioning of the way things are, that is, the world is relativized in the light of an all-encompassing truth”²⁷) and Being Cognition (because of its capacity to enhance one's circle of moral concern) as cultivated by religious and philosophical practice to the attempt to inform a global ethics in which individualistic and nationalist motives become secondary to the species imperative. As of now, this is an area that has yet to be given its due in the Big History narrative and will require further discussion in regard to the subject's implementation within the context of the classroom, yet one that is ripe with potential. Ultimately, my hope is that those of us who are engaged in the attempt to contribute to the underlying ethical endeavor of this project will

²⁶For a concise, in-depth summary of this topic, see Robert Bellah, “What Is Axial about the Axial Age?” *Archives Europeennes de Sociologie* 46 (2005): 69-87.

²⁷Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 591.

understand that Big History cannot stand alone as the modern creation myth. It must enter into a dialogical exchange with the particular—including both lived beliefs and embodied practices that comprise the repertoire of our species' moral resources and the wellspring of capacities that humanity has cultivated as both the methods and means for our fitness and flourishing.

I would also like to point out that deepening our understanding of the Axial Age in particular will situate us to learn from the successes and failures of the very first project to establish a universal ethics in light of the challenges that accompanied a rise in increasing complexity. In addition, engaging an inquiry around the role of religion in humanity's evolution will position us to participate in the movement for the establishment of a deep pluralism that recognizes and respects various religions on their own terms, not ours.²⁸ This would dramatically contribute to the effort on behalf of Big Historians to invite all citizens to become participants in the emerging legacy, as it demands that Westerners turn to alternative approaches to the “global village” project. This, in turn, leads to the exciting opportunity for cross-cultural discourse regarding the insights from a variety of cultural traditions that can be woven into humanity's emerging universal narrative.

²⁸See Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 603-608.

Moving Forward

The hope of Big Historians is that the internalization of the cosmological narrative will indeed cultivate global consciousness in our students but the ultimate aim does not end here as it extends to include its influence over policy makers who must come to acknowledge that the whole cannot flourish apart from the health of its parts. Christian himself desires that when the world's leaders are called to the United Nations, they will act in part as citizens who have transcended national interests alone by considering their responsibility to all living organisms, the biosphere included. But this cannot be accomplished through acceptance of or belief in the Big History narrative alone; it must entail the type of *praxis* that can contribute to the cultivation of virtues required on behalf of today's global citizens.

The task at hand is not an easy one, but so long as we are aware of the contours of our project and are active in addressing the issues that arise in the attempt to establish a global ethical tradition, our hope need not be in vain. We do have, at the very least, the potential to draw upon our cultural resources as well as the Big History narrative so as to further advance our ethics, and therefore, our own evolution.

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