

Modern Biology as a Cultural Expression

By Fatos A. Koplaku

We are taught that in principle we know how the world and ourselves work and came to be, everything that really matters has been figured out. The biologist Richard Dawkins wrote his book *The Blind Watchmaker* ‘in the conviction that our own existence once presented the greatest of all mysteries, but that it is a mystery no longer because it is solved. Darwin and Wallace solved it, though we shall continue to add footnotes to their solution for a while yet.’¹ The aura of the mystery of existence of the universe too is wearing thin, Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow tell us: ‘[J]ust as Darwin and Wallace explained how the apparently miraculous design of living forms could appear without intervention by a supreme being, the multiverse concept can explain the fine-tuning of physical law without the need for a benevolent creator who made the universe for our benefit.’² This is *The End of Science* for John Horgan (and the title of his book), and while there are still uncharted territories there is going to be no radical revision because our scientific version of reality ‘is in many respects true,’ he says.³ However, for scientists like Rupert Sheldrake the view that science already has the main answers is ‘the biggest scientific delusion’. Rooted in a materialistic philosophy it is a view that took shape in Western Europe and finally hardened by the 19th century, and according to Sheldrake it is responsible for holding back science itself.⁴

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¹ Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1986), xiii.

² Stephen Hawking, Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design* (New York: Bantam, 2010), pp. 123-124.

³ John Horgan, *The End of Science: Facing the Limits of Knowledge in the Twilights of the Scientific Age*, 2nd ed. (New York: Basic, 2015), xiii.

⁴ See Rupert Sheldrake, *The Science Delusion: Freeing the Spirit of Inquiry* (London: Coronet, 2012); U.S. Title: *Science Set Free: 10 Paths to New Discovery*.

We will trace the source and the development of our current view of science, and by extension modern biology. How did these developments affect biology and its outlook, and why this came about in the West (and not elsewhere)? To answer questions these we will have to start back in Ancient Greece.

One Thing Led to Another

Similar to other traditions, past and present, the ancient Greeks had primarily a symbolic approach to nature, the latter understood as a theophany and a support for contemplation.⁵ For example, in Plato's *Timaeus* (27-30) we read the following:

...if this world of ours is beautiful and its craftsman good, then clearly he looked at the eternal model... it follows by necessity that this world is an image of something... let us lay down that the universe resembles more closely than anything else the Living Thing of which all other things are parts, both individually and by kinds. For that Living Thing comprehends within itself all intelligible living things...⁶

The contemplation of nature was essential for the transformation of the soul as, in the words of Plotinus (d. 270 AD), it enables it to 'become all a vision' which in return 'produces another vision: just as when a particular art is complete it produces a kind of another little art in a child who is being taught it...'⁷ In Abrahamic terms, it had a salvific aspect. This kind of understanding of nature, however, was already being gradually eclipsed even at the time of Plato. For people like Anaximenes of Miletus (d. 526 BC), nature and its phenomena had already been reduced to 'thickening and thinning,' the only difference in quality being difference in quantity.⁸ The fading of symbolic understanding was followed by naturalism and cosmolatry, that is, idolatry of nature. When Christianity came to the Greco-Roman world it emphasized love

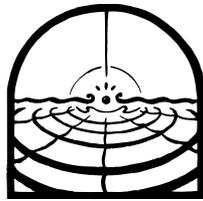
⁵ *Religion and the Order of Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) from Seyyed Hossain Nasr deals with the worldviews that people in different traditions saw and approached nature.

⁶ *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. intro. & notes John M. Cooper, assoc. ed. D. S. Hutschinson (Hackett, 1997).

⁷ Plotinus, *Enneads* III, 8.5, trans. & intro. A. H. Armstrong (London, 1953).

⁸ See Francis M. Cornford, *From Religion to Philosophy: A Study on the Origins of Western Speculation* (London, 1912), pp. 144-159.

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