

Reinventing the Sacred

Summary of talk to Remuera Sea of Faith Network 21 February 2010
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The title of my talk is taken from the 2008 book, *Reinventing the Sacred: A New view of Science, Reason, and Religion*, by eminent biologist and complexity scientist, Stuart Kauffman.

Spirituality

Sacredness is part of human spirituality which I take to mean sensitivity to certain non-material aspects of human experience. It can range from the simplest understanding that “we do not live by bread alone”, through the occurrence of spontaneous transcendent or peak experiences, prompted, for example, by a piece of music, to profound mysticism. Spirituality is an innate quality quite distinct from religion. Like all subjective experiences it is a quality which lies in a non-material domain. If we want to have a coherent world view, we have somehow to reconcile this awareness of the non-material with our understanding of the universe, of the nature of reality.

Reality and science

Some take the view that reality consists only of the objects which can be studied by science. This has led to the view that everything from societies down through people, our organs, cells, and the molecules of chemistry, is ultimately to be explained in terms of the movement of atoms. This is “Reductionism” and leads to nihilistic statements such as that from Steven Weinberg, “The more we understand the universe, the more pointless it all seems”, a view of reality which offers nothing constructive for our living. But the “laws” of science are not immutable and science can claim no monopoly of the language we may choose to describe the universe. However, whatever language we choose, our descriptions must withstand being tested against our experience.

Cosmic evolution as a progression in relationship

We can choose to view cosmic evolution as a succession of creative processes. Starting from the big bang, we see the formation of primordial hydrogen, the evolution of stars and galaxies, and the synthesis of the heavier chemical elements by stars, the appearance of planets and complex molecules, and on to the emergence of life. On this view, each one of us embodies the whole history of the cosmos, an awe-inspiring thought!

I like to describe this as a progression in *transcendent relationship* in which things at one level of complexity have combined to form new things whose properties may be quite different from those of the constituent parts. Each new entity carries the potential for further complexity and diversity by changing the environment for everything else. There is ceaseless and endless creativity which derives from the nature of all the inter-relationships present.

This story of the evolution of the universe and planetary life in terms of transcendent relationship, in contrast to the nihilistic view, helps us to relate to the whole of creation in a world in which everything is connected. It is told in a different language from that of reductionist science but such a language is necessary for the story to make sense in terms which are relevant to our living.

The role of love in human evolution

At the human level our relationships are a major factor in our wellbeing, at its best when love, compassion and justice are present. Darwin recognised the role of love in human evolution. In his second book, *The Descent of Man*, he referred frequently to love, moral sensitivity, and cooperation, and hardly at all to “survival of the fittest”.

The same point is developed strongly by H Maturana and F Varela in *The Tree of Knowledge*. They describe love as the biological foundation of human living. Without love, without acceptance of others living beside us, there is no social process and, therefore, no humanness.

Complexity and the emergence of life

Stuart Kauffman has written extensively about the behaviour of highly complex systems of molecules, cells, and organisms, and their role in the evolution of life and the biosphere. Increasingly, scientists are accepting that physics can't explain all the properties of such complex systems which may exhibit self-organised order with the appearance of new and sometimes unpredictable properties. Such properties are said to be *emergent*. (Life itself is perhaps the most obvious emergent property.) They don't break any laws of physics but can't be deduced from the properties of the components. There seem to be laws of organisation which apply to complex systems, in particular to the evolution of the biosphere. Self-organised structures can evolve without evolution in the Darwinian sense having always to feature.

Paul Davies is another who emphasises the significance of life, consciousness, and mind, as fundamental emergent features of the universe. He favours the view that the universe is somehow destined to bring forth conscious life, that it must be such as to give rise to observers who then become participators. The universe may even have engineered its own self-awareness.

Mind, consciousness, and reality

The pinnacle of the evolutionary process so far is the emergence of conscious minds in the higher animals. Consciousness is a major unsolved mystery. In spite of the progress in neuroscience nobody can say how brain states can give rise to the sensations of our mental experience. (Brain is not identical to Mind.) Some philosophers of mind attempt to escape the problem by saying we only think we are conscious! It would seem more reasonable to take consciousness as a given because no human experience can happen outside it. Perhaps Descartes should have said, "I experience, therefore I am".

Our thoughts and attitudes can lead to change in ourselves and in the external world. We are agents of change. Kauffman writes, "While life, agency, value, and doing, presumably have physical explanations in any specific organism, *the evolutionary emergence of these cannot be derived from or reduced to physics alone*. Thus life, agency, value, and doing are real in the universe". It follows that our reality contains material and non-material elements, the physical things we infer as existing outside us and the non-physical qualities of our mental experience, including our spirituality.

Reinventing the sacred

Kauffman has written extensively about the need to move away from reductionist science. In his recent book, *Reinventing the Sacred*, he writes that part of this will be "...to heal the wound derived from the false reductionist belief that we live in a world of fact without values, and help us jointly build a global ethic". Kauffman finds reverence in the ceaseless and unpredictable creativity in the unfolding of nature, a creativity which he says is "God enough for me". He also writes.... "I also feel parts of the religious person's sense of awe. I sense the solace that prayer to a transcendent God brings. But I don't believe in a transcendent God. I do believe in this new scientific worldvieweven without talking about God, this new scientific worldview brings with it a sense of membership with all of life and a responsibility for the planet that's largely missing in our secular world."

This new understanding of science leads naturally to the recognition of spirituality as a feature of reality which we don't have to consign to some other-worldly realm. Spirituality belongs naturally within an holistic world view. Our sense of the sacred may be an expression of a deep inter-connectedness with all that is. It is hardly surprising that people, when contemplating the wonder of creation, have felt the need for gods to explain it.

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