Board Forum:
How Grand a Narrative?

Editor's note: With this "Board Forum" we launch the first installment of what will become a regular feature of this publication. The format is simple. A question (as here) or a contributed essay is circulated to board members of the Epic of Evolution Society, and short responses are solicited for publication. For this first Board Forum, I put forth a question that had been on my mind for some time, and for which I had not yet drawn a satisfactory answer. Thanks to the ten respondents, I and all readers of this publication have been offered a rich feast of ideas to which we can turn for guidance. (Responses are printed in their entirety and in the order of their receipt.)

QUESTION:

WHAT IS THE STATUS AND REACH OF THE STORY OF THE UNIVERSE AS RENDERED AND CONTINUALLY REFINED BY SCIENCE?

Edward O. Wilson wrote in 1978, "The evolutionary epic is probably the best myth we will ever have." Do you agree? If so, how is the word "best" to be understood, and who is "we"? Alternatively, is this Epic of Evolution simply the newest creation story invented by a particular group of humans? Should its reach be limited to its culture(s) of origin? Overall, how do we navigate between scientific imperialism and cultural relativism when presenting the Epic?

Larry Edwards: I think these are great discussion questions. Just the other day Brian Swimme was telling me that, in his experience, the two main objections to the Epic are first, the question(s) you raise about cultural relativism, and second, that the Epic is a product of a patriarchal culture and therefore not valid, tainted in some way by association.

So I think it would be a very good discussion. It would get the Board involved and some thoughts flying.

While I am responding, let me give some of my own thoughts on the questions. First, I quote Thomas Berry's definition of the purpose of an origin Story. "To provide a context in which life can function in a meaningful manner." So, I consider your questions within that understanding of the purpose of the Epic of Evolution.

I think the key word then is "we." Who is the "we"? Whose life is not functioning in a meaningful manner and therefore needs to be changed? I am firmly convinced that we should think of the "we" as Westerners, not the human species.

Our Western culture is not functioning in a meaningful manner; but many cultures are. The Epic, then, is not to be the new creation myth for all peoples, just Westerners and those cultures which have adopted the Western Way. (Now that is a lot of people, because that includes all people who are culturally dominated by the Western industrial view. For example, that includes many

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Japanese. The key criterion is how the people view the Earth. If they view the Earth as a commodity to be used by humans, as a collection of objects whose value is determined by the use that humans put it to, then they are Westerners in that respect. If they view the Earth as sacred and see themselves as deeply interwoven into the processes of the Earth, then they are non-Western and have no need for a new cosmology.)

So I have answered a question you did not directly ask: "Do we believe that the Epic is for all cultures?" That is the real question involved in the issue of scientific imperialism and cultural relativism. And my answer is no. If I were asked (and I haven't been) which cultures I thought "should" adopt the Epic as their fundamental referent, then I would distinguish between those cultures which are spiritually and materially (i.e., economically and environmentally) sustainable and those which are not. If a culture is, it has no need for the Epic. If it is not, then the Epic is probably the best foundational myth that culture could have.

Now given that the "we" is us Westerners, then answering the questions you do pose is pretty easy, because the "other" Epic that it is to replace is the Genesis Story and all the embellishments of that story (including the mechanistic scientific view) over the past 2,500 years. That story is no longer functional—that is, it does not provide a context in which our western life can function in a meaningful way. The Epic can, in my opinion, provide such a context.

Lauren de Boer: Thanks for the opportunity to respond to your proposed questions. Let me begin by commenting on cultural imperialism. I'd like to use Islam as an example because I think the relationship between the Islamic world and the West is going to be one of the most crucial in the coming decade. The Christian emphasis on "love" and the Islamic emphasis on "knowing" also presents intriguing possibilities.

When I first started volunteering my time editing *EarthLight* under Paul Burks's editorship four years ago, one of the pieces I contributed was a "contrasting perspective" between the thought of Thomas Berry and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, noted Islamic scholar. The differences are intriguing, but so are the similarities. Without going into too much detail, I can say that Nasr has a profound distrust of Western science as mechanistic, reductionistic, and desacralizing. Of course, Thomas agrees with this but has more faith in the belief element at the ultimate reaches of the scientific experience. Nasr sees evolutionary theory as a vain attempt to prove that higher biological forms emerge from lower ones. The disagreement with Thomas is obvious here. However, the two share significant common ground when it comes to hubris and the self-aggrandizement of the human. Nasr advocates an ethic of self-restraint out of reverence for the divinity in the created world—divine because it was created so by the Divine.

Islam is a case where I think trying to make inroads with evolutionary theory is going to be a rocky road at the very least and perilous at worst. This leaves me to believe that evolution and the story, as much as it may be based in fact and the material nature of the universe, does not hold much promise with a religion as hierarchical and transcendent in nature as Islam. And yet both Berry and Nasr are committed to healing the relationship between the human and the natural world.

The West is primarily responsible for the discouraging state of Earth. I think it is largely incumbent on the West to find its way back to a life-affirming cosmology. The Epic of Evolution is the last best chance. But is it the answer for all cultures in all places?

At the World Religions and Ecology conference in New York City in October 1998, one of the most interesting dialogues took place when John Grim posed two questions: "Does the Epic of Evolution serve as a unifying story for humans to see themselves as part of nature, not apart from it?" and "What values in your religious traditions would significantly enhance human-earth relations?"

Nasr was the only one on the panel to strongly call into question the entire notion of evolution, especially survival of the fittest. I don't think this can be ignored (even though I personally find it incredible for someone of Nasr's intellect). One of his statements was that "grace flows through the arteries of the cosmos." Nature is a reflection of the supernatural.

One of Nasr's strongest responses was that the West determines the agenda for the rest of the world. I think he sees the evolutionary paradigm (and I think he perceives it only as such, not as "truth") as a type of cultural imperialism, at least where Islam is concerned. I think this calls into question the evolutionary story as a unifying myth for the entire human race. It may be that it is the story that will bring the wayward West back to the fold which affirms life. But to think that it will somehow unify all human thought is incredibly ambitious, and probably unrealistic.

Even Native American spirituality, which shares a happy harmony with Thomas Berry's work, is not evolutionary at its essence; it is cyclical. Oren Lyons's response to the same question at the conference did not directly affirm or deny evolutionary theory. He mostly spoke about the importance of gratitude and reverence. To force Western science onto a Native American ontology would be unthinkable to most proponents of native cosmology. And yet, as Brian Swimme has pointed out, the young within Native American communities can get excited by the way the scientific story can affirm their own cultural values.

The West is primarily responsible for the discouraging state of Earth. I think it is largely incumbent on the West to find its way back to a life-affirming cosmology. The Epic of Evolution is the last best chance. But is it the answer for all cultures in all places? Given the omnipresence of the Western world in all parts of the globe, this still makes the articulation of an environmental ethic through the devices of the evolutionary story paramount in importance. But practitioners need to watch the hubris factor closely.

I have much more to say on the debate over modernism and postmodernism. But I'm lagging a bit and I feel I need to get this off to you soon. Essentially, I agree with both Charlene Spretnak's and Ken Wilber's critiques of postmodernism. And Wilber's assertion that the Modernist differentiation of art, science, and spirituality has to be brought into sync with the Great Chain of Being has my attention. It has my attention because it lays less blame with the way things have proceeded in the West and sees it as a necessary departure from undifferentiated consciousness. Without it, we would never have evolved culturally. Spretnak and Wilber are among our best critics of postmodernist self-delusion. It's too bad Wilber comes down so hard on Spretnak.

Ursula Goodenough: I don't think it makes sense to say that one cultural tradition is "allowed" to keep its creation myth because it's earth-friendly and another can't because it isn't—not to mention the obvious difficulties inherent in dictating such proscriptions in the first place. It seems far simpler to go ahead and say that the Epic is a fantastic myth, that it happens to be true in terms of the material universe, that other myths are true in terms of their cultural meaning, and that there's absolutely no problem with holding more than one story, just as there's no problem with viewing the sunset in terms of planetary rotation and spectra and nuclear fusions one moment and as visual splendor the next.

Peter Richerson: Scientific accounts of origins, as with so many other fields of knowledge, are much superior in terms of objective verisimilitude. I remember once as a young fellow trying out the idea that other forms of esoteric knowledge were equivalent to modern science on a hard-nosed philosopher of science friend, Marjorie Grene. I was (briefly) a precocious postmodernist. The immediate cause was my reading of Carlos Castaneda's first book, *The Teachings of Don Juan.* Of course, Castaneda's work is now generally believed to be fiction. Marjorie tore me up pretty badly.

The epistemological power of modern science is truly like nothing humans have ever used before. Take a simple example like maps. Before the developments of modern cartography, maps were sketches or exercises in imagination. The developments of geodesy—first latitude, then longitude measuring, and finally accurate definitions of the earth's true shape (it is not a perfect sphere)—allowed classic map makers to make maps with errors measured in meters. The latest techniques get the accuracy to millimeters. It is hard to think of any scientific field that is not like map-making.

Some postmodernists as well as premodernist fundamentalists want to deny the scientific enterprise hegemony over the knowledge of material causation. As far as I can see, they haven't any legitimate basis for doing so. Critiques of modernism should be based on some sounder foundation than challenging science on its home turf. For example, the rampant consumerism of modernity is a big problem both ecologically and spiritually. (Economist Robert Frank has written three fine analytical books showing how the competitive pursuit of possessions that satisfy positional wants can be quite pathological.)

The one area where science is not successful is in the management of human lives. Don Campbell, in his Presidential Address to the APA, noted that ministers were still at least as successful as psychologists in healing broken lives (*American Psychologist* 30:1103–26). Religious beliefs affect the emotions and aspirations of ordinary people in a way that scientific practices cannot. Scientific stories are not as accessible as religious myths perhaps. They are highly abstract and at their worst only accessible to a few highly trained specialists. Scientific stories do not come with a recipe for living integrated into a system of beliefs and practices.

I take it that one mission of the EES is to explore making scientific accounts more like traditional myths. Those of us who practice science are often awestruck by the power of science to explain the world, and even more by its power to generate mysteries. The more we have learned, the more we realize we don't know. Many thoughtful scientists are nature mystics deriving from the emotional charge that comes from creating an elegant solution to one problem only to find that it reveals more mysteries. This aspect of science is under-appreciated, even by most scientists. Whether science-as-mystical-practice will ever make it a useful religion or adjunct to religion in the recipes-for-life sense is an open question, it seems to me. At any rate, at the present time science has no warrant to be hegemonic in this regard. Rather, it still must come hat in hand to traditional religions to seek to understand how they work.

There is no reason why you can't be a member of a tribe and a scientist at the same time. You don't have to "really believe" your tribal myths unless you come to feel they have some deep conflict with your science. It is easy to treat them as literary and political fictions that are useful for purposes of tribal solidarity

All religions of the great religions type are hegemonic, at least to some degree. They claim to be universal in appeal and seek converts. Some claim a monopoly on the truth. Science, while not a religion exactly, certainly does make universal claims on matters of material causation. Universal aspirations always lead to conflicts. The bitter disputes between Buddhists, Taoists, and Confucians in China are an example. The conflict between biblical inerranists and scientists is just one in a long train of such disputes. While tolerance is certainly common as well, I don't see any general solution to the competition of universalistic thought systems for "souls." All we can do is keep it gentle. At least with such folk, there is no need to apologize for being hegemonic!

The other sorts of religions are tribal (and of course universalistic religions tolerate tribalism, e.g. Irish Catholics). They seek not converts but a definition of separateness. Judaism is a classic example. These are less of a problem for science, I think. There is no reason why you can't be a member of a tribe and a scientist at the same time. You don't have to "really believe" your tribal myths unless you come to feel they have some deep conflict with your science. It is easy to treat them as literary and political fictions that are useful for purposes of tribal solidarity—heartwarming to entertain in public rituals, but not fundamental truths. Their emotional impact comes from their generating feelings of solidarity with tribal fellows. In this case, science is in no position to make hegemonic claims, as with the recipes-for-living aspect of religion.

Of course, tribes sometimes misbehave. No one is a cultural relativist to the degree that they will tolerate the extremes of tribal misbehavior (e.g. Nazi Germany). Science is an excellent tool (as is critical history) for debunking the myths of tribes that need to be taken down a peg or two. Tribal ideologists also sometimes make very silly claims and push them aggressively, as in some recent mythmaking about African history. Worse, they sometimes harness tribal ideology to very nasty policies, such as the "ethnic cleansing" of current notoriety. I personally think that one should never rub the noses of well-behaved tribes in the mythical (objectively untrue) nature of their defining beliefs. On the other hand, I don't see any reason not to take potshots at the myths of misbehaving or aggressive tribespeople.

Bill Bruehl: The question about narratives interests me very much. The difference to me is that the old cosmological stories are metaphors while the Epic is history. I'd like to collect some of the old stories, present them as poetry, make the point that poetry in its own way has the same authori-

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ty as rational prose (or should), and also offer how some of those old poems can be parsed in a way that shows their intuitive insights to be very like the factual history developed by science.

The question of "hegemony" is also interesting and connected to the above. That is to say, I think an argument can be made that Religion and Science are two different ways of answering the questions, "Who are we and where did we come from?" These two ways are only in conflict when religionists insist that their holy books and traditions be taken literally rather than metaphorically. When religion absorbs scientific discovery, as the RC Church finally did with Copernicus, there is no problem. They used to think the Bible's talk about the sun standing still had to be taken as literal fact. Now such statements are seen as metaphorical.

John Davis: Yes, I agree with Wilson, but I probably understand "best" quite differently from what Wilson means. The Evolutionary Epic will prove to be modern humanity's best myth, I believe, because it will do more than any other creation story, I think, to convince people (*Homo sapiens*) to begin living with Nature once again, rather than living against Nature as we have in recent centuries. I suspect that the Evolutionary Epic is also empirically truer than other myths, but (unlike Wilson) I doubt we can ever know this for sure. My faith in the Evolutionary Epic will be more than amply rewarded, nonetheless, if this our new cosmology makes Nature preservationists of those who formerly were destroyers of Nature. If the Evolutionary Epic can reverse humanity's war against Nature, we should judge it the greatest of myths—even if darwinian selection is no more than half a truth. (Indeed, I don't think the Evolutionary Epic should be tied too closely to individualistic, darwinian theories of natural selection.)

"We" in Wilson's bold assertion is intended to be humanity, I presume. Being less enamored of the Enlightenment and human notions of progress, I'd say "we" means the cultural and political elite of modern society. Unfortunately, these are the people—indeed, the beings—who will have the greatest influence over the future of life on Earth, for the next nine months or so anyway (come 2000 "CE," all bets are off).

Nor should the Evolutionary Epic stop at its original boundaries. That is, evolutionists should try to spread the gospel far and wide, so long as they do not intrude where indigenous cultures already have life-affirming myths, or where religious groups are remembering that care for creation is among their principle precepts and thus have their own green stories.

In sum, make the narrative grand and visionary but not imperial. A great strength of the Evolutionary Epic is that it is really much more than one myth or story; it's a vast web of interrelated stories, all of them upholding the intrinsic value of individual species as well as the biosphere itself (not to mention the entire cosmos or universe, on one end of the scale, and biomes, landscapes, ecosystems, communities, populations, individuals, genes, and various expressions thereof, going in the other direction).

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Mary Coelho: I think the reach of the story is very great and that it can potentially provide a significant increment in ecological understanding and human self-understanding worldwide. It is indeed a remarkable story that I trust accurately represents in its broad sweep the origins of the earth and of life, even though questions about the beginning are not adequately understood.

But there is a most important caveat which should cause us to be very modest in our claims at this juncture. It is that as yet the story is not articulated with a broad enough scope to incorporate a range of human experiences that are of great importance to people. Lacking adequate recognition and explanation of archetypal experience in dreams and myth, mystical experience occurring interior to the person and in nature, the forms of contemplative meditation and prayer including unitive experiences, and paranormal experience including sudden or rapid healing, it cannot attract the allegiance of people whose religions and cultures are highly developed in these areas. These types of experience should not be designated as part of cultural relativism, because they are human experiences of singular importance found worldwide. They cannot be neglected in our story because they are the ones that so greatly enhance personal knowledge of the depth of human participation in the earth and cosmos in a felt, conscious manner. They touch deeply into the roots of human identity and carry great meaning for individuals, so their incorporation will only strengthen the power of the story.

Our physical participation in what we call matter, which is well described by the epic of evolution, is also compelling. But without full articulation of the various types of consciousness and how they are integral to the story, the non ego-centered types of consciousness seem to be left out and devalued. To accomplish this incorporation, western science will have to continue to move beyond its sometimes too narrow conceptions of matter, as many physicists have already done, and explore more deeply the realms of consciousness. Fortunately, work in this area is in progress. The work of David Bohm, David Peat, Lawrence LeShan, Anthony Stevens, and Brian Swimme come to mind, as they have all made very valuable contributions in this regard.

John Surette: Is the Epic of Evolution "the best myth we will ever have"? I hesitate to use the word "ever." I mean that the Universe appears to be such a mysterious realm. We know so little about it. No doubt there are many crucial questions that have yet to even enter our imaginations. Certainly some fifty and one hundred years from now our present telling of the Epic will seem quite primitive. I would want to leave the door open to the possibility yet unperceived that there might be some other more primordial epic which encompasses our present one.

Having said all this: Yes, I agree with E. O. Wilson that it is the "best." It is so captivating, so satisfying, so inclusive, so unifying. I agree with Teilhard de Chardin in feeling that evolution is "like an unsatisfied hunger, like a promise held out to me, like a summons to be answered."

Since arriving in the Caribbean it is the "we" that has captured my attention. There are so many beautiful people in this beautiful place who have not progressed beyond primary school. They have never heard of a proton or a proto-galaxy, a gene or a gravitation attraction. In this they are like many in other so-called Third World countries. The telling of the Epic as I have been accus-

tomed to telling it is certainly not available to them. They are not part of the "we."

Yes, Thomas Berry says that a good story can be told in one page or one thousand pages. Our Epic is a good story! I am just beginning to work on ways of telling it that use few or no scientific terms.

A major bit of good news in all of this is that the Jamaican people appear to have an innate experience of and congruence with some aspects of the Epic. For example, to ask them to share about how everything is different from everything else, how everything has a within as well as a without, and how everything is connected to everything else, is to invite a spontaneous and energetic flow of lengthy responses.

So I think I would conclude by saying that, in spite of all the communication problems, the "we" is in reality a "universal we" because the Epic is already within each teller and hearer of the tale.

Tyler Volk: The best? Absolutely! And no small part of what makes it the best is the fact that we can faithfully know that in the future the epic will become even more the best.

Along these lines, note that the epic uniquely contains the procedure for its ongoing improvement—the working process, and not just the results, of science. Thus the epic sets forth as part of its grand narrative the subplot of how its betterment takes place over time.

What, then, shall become of the other, more ancient myths that were woven by the world's various and glorious cultures? We would do well to preserve these myths, but not as museum pieces, as kinds of mythic fossils—rather as creations still vital for nourishing our minds. Although they no longer can be taken seriously as literal records of the outer world, they still hold power to stimulate the inner world. These ancient myths were successful, for millennia in some cases, specifically because they can tap into and call up archetypes of human consciousness. They do so by means of heroic journeys, battles both human and cosmic, sublime forces of nature, transformations of self, and achievements of wisdom. They can still help our psyches unfold.

Consider what Einstein once said to a mother who asked for advice to prepare her child for a life in science: "Read fairy tales." "And after that?" the mother asked. "Read more fairy tales."

Philip Hefner: I encounter rather frequently the suggestion that the Epic of Evolution is simply another hegemonic imposition. Often it is voiced not so much as a suggestion as a charge against the Epic. Three considerations shape my reflection on this issue:

First, of course the Epic is rooted in a particular group of people at a particular time, in a particular kind of culture. Who could deny that? Who would want to? (These are real questions and worth reflecting on, but not just now.) Furthermore, as scientific as the Epic may appear, it is not a direct transcript of either nature or science, but is an interpretation constructed by particular people. Thus, the relative position and character of the Epic is established, beyond doubt.

Second, the Epic is also very close to a set of scientific accounts that are based on careful research and which represent a consensus among many scientists today. This facet of the Epic stands in tension with the particularity and relative character of the Epic, and this tension must be preserved, both by those who espouse the epic as their story and also by those who are skeptical of it. Today, even though we like to collapse this tension, either in the direction of objectivism or total relativism, we must learn to live it. After all, relativism is just as much a relative proposal as that of objectivism.

No narrative, or story, can claim to be the Big Story for all people at all times. But each story speaks to some people and makes a contribution to the whole commonwealth of narratives.

Third, no narrative, or story, can claim to be the Big Story for all people at all times. But each story speaks to some people and makes a contribution to the whole commonwealth of narratives. It is important that we share our stories as broadly as possible, not because we have hegemonic intentions, but because in the sharing of stories we get a better understanding of what *the* (or *a*) Big Story might be that encompasses all particular stories. After all, some stories will, in the encounter with others, prove to be inadequate for the commonwealth, while others will catch on far beyond the confines of their originating group. Every group believes that its story has some contact with a bigger story, else they would not take their own stories seriously. We share stories in order to get a sharper vision of that bigger story. In saying this, I am subscribing to the work of French scholar E. Benveniste (*Problèmes de linguistique générale*), who interprets conversation between persons as discourse between an I and a You who are distinct entities, neither of which can be solely the fabrication of the other, and the conversation takes place in a world, else there is no conversation. If the interaction of stories is real and not itself a fabrication, then the interaction similarly takes place in a world which is the subject of the Big Story.

What difference does all this make for me? It results, I hope, in a useful blending of confidence in the Epic narrative and also a humility that enables me to learn from other stories, just as I urge them to learn from the Epic. The Epic, after all, is a dynamic story, not a static, once-and-for-all narrative, and I want to participate in its ongoing development.

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