

Jakob von Uexküll and Right Livelihood — the current actuality of his Weltanschauung¹

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I am humbled by your invitation for I can offer neither personal reminiscences — as I never met my grandfather — nor scientific expertise about his work. My school education in the natural sciences was very patchy. The teacher was a failed mining engineer whose chemistry lessons I remember only because he managed to set the classroom on fire. His knowledge of biology was even less impressive. So, while my grandfather stood out — from the descriptions of his widow and children — as a remarkably warm and fascinating human being, my attempts to understand him took much longer. When I first read his *Theoretical Biology* I felt I was entering a new and very complex world.

When the Right Livelihood Awards became well-known, I found myself in the embarrassing situation of people coming up to me and asking me to sign copies of *Theoretical Biology*, assuming me to be the author. I also started getting letters from authors who had written books which they told me had been inspired by my grandfather's work. Two of these were entitled *Understanding Understanding* and *The View from the Oak*. They covered very different fields and made me aware of the width and depth of my grandfather's worldview and influence. So I went back to his writings, hoping that his perspective on life would also help me understand why, despite our material progress, we feel so lost and are doing so badly in meeting the challenges facing us.

I am a generalist interested in practical results. I sold my business and set up the Right Livelihood Awards to identify exemplary individuals and initiatives, “projects of hope” showing us that solutions exist to practically all the current crises and that we have the resources to implement them. But something in the ruling worldview holds us back. And what can be more paralysing than to be told that our lives are meaningless, that we are just

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chance creations of “trial-and-error” mutations, alone and disconnected in a hostile, silent universe and dependant on constant struggle to survive?

This terrifying story is the one we are born into. Perhaps no one captured the stark drama of this materialist worldview better than Bertrand Russell, one of the most respected and influential philosophers of our time. I quote a passage from his essay “A free man’s worship”:

That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and the whole temple of man’s achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins — all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. (Russell 1957 [1910]: 107)

If matter is the deepest (or only!) reality, then the only meaningful statement we can make in life is to accumulate as many material possessions as possible and shopping becomes our key cultural activity.

Our ancestors regarded selfishness and greed only as acceptable and natural in extreme situations — otherwise they were condemned, while service to the community, respect for life and the common good were prioritised. If our ancestors had lived as selfishly as we do, we would not be here as the earth would be uninhabitable by now.

But, we are told, modern science has proved that selfish greed is “natural”. You may struggle against it but ultimately nature wins. This is the legacy of Darwinism as it is commonly understood and taught. Its power is unprecedented — it rules not just in biology, but determines our economic, educational, social, psychological and other paradigms and policies. Some argue that this is not what Darwin really meant. His writings are contradictory and partly obscure, perhaps because his own thinking was unclear, or because he did not want to offend his followers. Books with titles such as *Darwin’s Lost Theory of Love* (David Loye) argue that Darwin saw human evolution not as a struggle for survival but as a struggle for moral growth.

But this is not the Darwinism ruling us and the majority of Darwin’s teachings underpin a very different worldview — one which both my grandfather and my uncle Prof. Thure von Uexküll found not only dangerous but deeply scientifically flawed.

In his recent biography of Thure, Rainer Otte writes: “In the teachings of Darwin, Jakob and Thure von Uexküll recognised the forerunners of the catastrophe which showed clearly what happens to the world when the struggle for survival and the survival of the fittest is raised to the status of

universal law.” My grandfather foresaw that Darwinism helped legitimise the modern institutionalised irresponsibility in science and politics, for the rule of chance destroys all values. He developed his biology and worldview in dispute with Darwinism, to which he provided a deep and broad alternative. He rejected determinism — both scientific and religious — arguing that science has the duty to make sense. Decades of studying the sensitive universes of animals and humans convinced him of the survival of the normal: that life functions according to a natural plan, not chance. He ridiculed the Darwinists’ search for elusive “missing links” to prove that all animals are related as “playing games, not science”. He was scathing about the narrow perspective of mechanists like the astronomer Eddington who claimed that humanity is “an error in the cosmic machine”, describing this view as the “horrific and ridiculous result of an astronomic fly environment”. His challenge went even further. Thus, in a letter to his friend Dr. Theiss, he asserted that “the time will come when everyone will be regarded as uneducated who does not believe in immortality”.

Was he (mainly) right, ie. has science since his time (mainly) provided evidence for his worldview or for that of his Darwinist opponents?

The “official” position is unambiguous: In 1959, the institute carrying on his work in Hamburg was closed by the university because his type of research was regarded as obsolete. The human cost of this dogmatic shortsightedness has above all been moral. The Darwinists’ justification of ruthless selfishness has been described by one critic as “an incitement to crime” (Stove 1995: 74). In Darwin’s time it justified chaining children to machines. Hitler found it helpful: “By means of struggle, the elites are continually renewed. The law of selection justifies this incessant struggle by allowing the survival of the fittest” (Midgley 1985: 119³).

A few contrarians have tried to link my grandfather’s ‘holistic’ biology (the whole being more than the sum of the individual parts) to the justification of euthanasia etc. But an understanding of the underlying unity of life leads, on the contrary, to a desire to preserve it everywhere. My grandfather was deeply conservative and made his abhorrence of Nazi ideology clear on several occasions. And it was of course Darwin who complained that “excepting in the case of man himself, hardly anyone is so ignorant as to allow his worst animals to breed” (Darwin 1874: 205).

But even if Darwinism is morally inferior, it is claimed to be underpinned by such strong evidence as to be scientifically irrefutable. Thus, Darwinists usually reject the scientific credentials of their critics.

This fundamentalism is doing great damage to the creditability of science. For the scientific case against Darwinism is very strong. (I refer of course to his “General Theory”, not to obvious adaptations within the same or closely

³ Quoted from H. Trevor-Roper (1953), *Hitler’s Table Talk: 1941–1944*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson.

related species.) The “missing links” are well and truly missing. The more technology enables us to study life on the micro-level, the stronger the evidence for it's irreducible complexity and intelligence becomes.

The way in which most Darwinists ignore, suppress, dismiss and ridicule such evidence — trying to lump it with religious determinism — is one of the greatest scientific scandals of our time. The ramifications are even more important today than in my grandfather's time. For the scientific hubris with which narrow specialists now meddle with the blueprints of life to overcome the genetic barriers between unrelated species would not be acceptable if we understood life as an intelligent plan — about which we still know very little.

Randomness is irreconcilable with the interactive and dynamic structures and functions of living organisms. Genes are not “selfish molecules” acting independently but have many different functions activated in different ways. Genetic engineering not only speeds up genetic changes by about a billion fold — far too fast to ensure safety before release — but also changes their goal from evolutionary success to economic profit. Genetic manipulation, far from being the pinnacle of industrial modernity, is actually industrial primitivism, applying a reductionist and mechanistic mindset to living systems that do not work that way.

Craig Venter, who set up the private company which sequenced the human genome, has since concluded that we simply do not have enough genes for biological determinism to be right. “The wonderful diversity of the human species is not hard-wired in our genetic code. Our environments are critical”.⁴ The company he created has so far lost almost three quarters of a billion dollars. The fact that one gene can give rise to multiple proteins, depending on the dynamic of the entire organism, has destroyed its theoretical foundation. But the scientific community stubbornly ignores experimental results which contradict the central dogmas of molecular biology, causing the editor of *Science in Society*, Dr. Mae-Wan Ho, to lament “the intellectual decline symptomatic of the degenerate research programme that's neo-Darwinian biology”.

Strong words — but justified when celebrated Darwinists like Richard Dawkins “explain” the supposed random evolution of life by the random behaviour of computer programmes. Unable to fit the desire for adopted children into his “selfish gene” theory, Dawkins believes that “mothers deliberately try to deceive naive young women into adopting their children” (Dawkins 1979: 110). With spokespersons like this, no wonder Darwinists shy away from debating their opponents.

For, as Prof. Michael Behe points out in *Darwin's Black Box*, no scientific publication has described how the molecular evolution of a real complex biochemical system occurred or could occur. Irreducibly complex systems

⁴ Quoted in “Science in Society”, edited by Dr. Mae-Wan Ho (<http://www.isis.org.uk/HumangenTWN-pr.php>).

(e.g. bloodclotting) cannot be put together piecemeal. Every step requires several separate developments. Attempts at gradual evolution are a recipe for extinction. The selective public presentation of the fossil evidence to promote evolutionism is a serious abuse of public trust. The fortuitous accumulation of beneficial mutations via natural selection is as plausible as a tornado blowing through a scrap yard assembling an aeroplane. In the fruit fly experiments of Thomas Hunt Morgan, the mutated flies, when left alone, reverted to normal after a few generations...

The evidence of Darwinist evolutionism dissolves once we evaluate it fairly and avoid the deceptive language of its proponents. For evolutionists have filled the gaping hole in their theory by turning “purposeless evolution” and even “chance” into active agents with godlike powers. Their theory also presupposes that evolution has enough numbers to work on, i.e. it requires a very high percentage of child mortality. Darwin believed that

every single organic being around us may be said to be striving to the utmost to increase in numbers; [...]; that heavy destruction inevitably falls on the young or old, during each generation or at recurring intervals. Lighten any check, mitigate the destruction ever so little, and the number of the species will almost instantaneously increase to any amount. (Darwin 1966 [1859]: 66–67)

He also believed that “many more individuals of each species are born than can possibly survive” (Darwin 1966 [1859]: 5). But these amazing claims have no basis in reality. (For a detailed discussion, see David Stove’s “Darwinian Fairytales”, Essay V.)

I very much welcome the opening of the *Jakob von Uexküll Archive* because I hope it will help biology and other sciences, currently trapped by Darwinism, to liberate themselves — as more researchers gain access to my grandfather’s writings. I hope that this symposium will be followed by others, debating the many aspects of his work. There would be no lack of distinguished scientific speakers, e.g. — apart from those already mentioned — Dr. Rupert Sheldrake (who acknowledges the influence of Jakob von Uexküll in his work), Dr. Mary Midgley, Prof. Lynn Margulis, etc. The actualité of such a debate is evident. For, to quote my grandfather, “In a world where men are reduced to machines, all sense of allegiance to higher principles is lost. Only the crude mechanism of the market continues to demand obedience”.

Jakob von Uexküll speculated that the key discoveries of the coming decades would be made “diessaits” rather than “jenseits” ourselves, i.e. in our inner universes. Much has been discovered, but blinded by mechanistic dogmas, we have diminished rather than enhanced ourselves. There is no scientific reason, which forces us to explain our highest achievements in terms of their neurotic perversions. Yet we choose to do so. Similarly there is no science requiring us to turn our genes into our gods, whose adaptation is described as “designed”, “organised”, “precisely calculated”, etc. — i.e.

endowed with intent and purpose. Yet we choose to do so due to our current cultural conditioning.

Science claims to be exempt from such conditioning, yet in my practical experience the opposite is the case. In almost 25 years of highlighting “alternative” thinkers and doers through the Right Livelihood Awards, I have found the scientific establishment to be surprisingly dogmatic and intolerant. In democratic countries today, you are less likely to risk your reputation and your livelihood (or even be physically threatened!) if you disagree with the political mainstream than if you are a scientific dissident.

If you deny that life is “but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms” (Bertrand Russell), and especially if you do not just deny it but insist that it is unscientific nonsense, as my grandfather did, then your work is likely to end up in the university cellar where his archive has languished for 45 years. It might still be there, if Estonia had not regained its freedom, enabling Prof. Kalevi Kull and his colleagues to create the Tartu Centre ...

One of my grandfather’s short stories describes a rich American who found that his focus on making money had destroyed his ability to appreciate beauty. When he achieved his life-long dream of coming to Naples, he could only see stones and water. He became depressed and drank himself to death ... Darwin himself complained bitterly in old age that his churning out natural laws had destroyed (what he called) his higher faculties, including his ability to enjoy poetry...

The consequences for us today are even more serious. Wise men, like former President Vaclav Havel call for a new “ethos, emanating from a rediscovered sense of global responsibility” but how can such an ethos be built on a human story which portrays us, with all the authority of science, as chance products of purposeless mutations?

As the historian Jacob Needleman pointed out, there is a great difference between a Universe which exceeds us in size alone and one which exceeds us in depth of purpose and intelligence. The first excludes and crushes us. The second places us.

It is inconceivable that a society based on the Uexüllian — rather than Darwinian — worldview would have made such a mess of our inner and outer Umwelt, would have created a world in which the survival of most living species is under threat and anti-depressive drugs are increasingly given to children from the age of two.

Working in the World Bank some years ago, the Right Livelihood Award recipient Prof. Herman Daly was asked to comment on a planned publication by a colleague. In it he found an illustration showing the natural environment as a subsystem (box within a box) of the human economy. Daly pointed out that it is of course the other way round but the author disagreed and the book appeared without the illustration.

Now, the belief that our natural environment is a subset of the human economy may strike you as on par with the belief that the earth is flat.

Worryingly, the author holding this belief was Lawrence Summers, President Clinton's economic supreme and later President of Harvard University! I could give many other examples illustrating the extent of to which our decision-makers have lost touch with their Umwelt ...

The semioticians here may know that the US Government called their colleague Prof. Thomas Sebeok for advice on what signs to put on the sealed entrances of nuclear waste depositories, which future generations in 10,000 years and more would still understand to signify "danger". Prof. Sebeok did not think that such signs could be developed and proposed instead the creation of a hereditary priesthood charged with guarding these poisonous wastes, which we have created for a few decades of nuclear-energy-based comfort. I am sure Prof. Sebeok was well aware that no hereditary priesthood has lasted so long...

The priesthood propagating Darwinism will no doubt have a much shorter lifetime. His pioneering work has fossilized into an ideology. It is an ideology which serves the present global elite confirming as "natural" the competitive individualism which underpins their often ill-begotten wealth and power — and as "unnatural" (i.e. inferior) all our higher human values of generosity, solidarity, reciprocity, fairness, kindness, etc.

The ongoing human, social and environmental costs of this ideology are huge. For as Abraham Maslow, the founder of Transpersonal Psychology, noted it is difficult to practise love, generosity and solidarity in a society whose institutions, rules and information streams are geared to promoting lesser human qualities. The immense power of this ideology became apparent when even the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox hierarchies felt obliged a few years ago to accept Darwinism as a "fact". When I asked one of the foremost Orthodox intellectuals, Metropolitan John of Pergamon, what had led his church to this conclusion, he replied that it was necessary to be "optimistic" and that his church has accepted evolutionism for ecological reasons, i.e. to remind humans of their links with, and responsibilities for, the animal world! But, he added, his Church accepted evolutionism only in "its serious, rather than its risible aspects" — like the descent of humans from apes ...

One difference between an ideology and a science is that the former is only paid lip service to. Even its most prominent proponents rarely really believe in it. Thus, the high-level Soviet bureaucrats whom I met as an MEP in Moscow in 1989 hastened to emphasise that, while they were members of the Communist Party, this did not mean that they were communists... Similarly, even the most prominent representatives of the ruling global economic order often sound like anti-globalisation activists as soon as they have retired or been fired.

It would be interesting to investigate if the same discrepancy between public and private views can be found among the prominent promoters of "accidental" evolution.

Some years ago I came across the biography of the “Magus of Strovolos”, the Cypriot religious mystic and spiritual healer also known as Daskalos. There I found quotes from deeply respectful letters, revealing widespread agreement, to Daskalos from an (unnamed) “famous British philosopher who had the reputation of being an atheist”. The biographer confirmed to me that the writer was Bertrand Russell ... (Markides 1990: 64–65).

As anyone familiar with my grandfather’s writings knows, his private and “official” worldview coincided. He had no hesitation for example in stating publicly that the survival of the human soul was “beyond any doubt”. Today, carefully controlled studies, such as the SCOLE experiments in the UK and the work on Consciousness Survival of Prof. Gary Schwartz at the University of Arizona in Tucson are beginning to provide verifiable evidence for this claim. Naturally, we should be sceptical — but it is also time to become sceptical vis-à-vis the sceptics’ increasingly strident but poorly documented rebuttals.

Throwing away the crutches of Darwinism brings more new questions than answers. But admitting ignorance is preferable to propagating false knowledge. My grandfather showed that there is strong evidence that we are much more than machines and that we are parts of a living intelligent plan. The mechanists and evolutionists respond that you cannot have a plan without a planner — forgetting that you cannot have a machine without a builder. And, of course, machines do not recreate themselves.

Let me say in conclusion that, as a generalist, I do not claim the knowledge to provide specific answers on these issues. But I do understand enough about the state of our inner and outer worlds to know that we must start to ask different questions, guided by our highest values.

I warmly thank the University of Hamburg and especially its President, Dr. Lüthje, for the timely and courageous initiative of re-opening the Jakob von Uexküll archive.

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