

## **Impressions While Reading:**

### ***God and the Evolving Universe, The Next Step in Personal Evolution***

**by James Redfield, Michael Murphy  
and Sylvia Timbers**

**(Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, New York, 2002)**

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The last three books on my reading list on this topic were Morris' *Life's Solution*, Ruse's *Mystery of Mysteries*, and this book by Redfield et al.

To my surprise, the Redfield book starts out citing several evolutionists. Having Ruse's and Morris' books on hand allowed me to check on the sources used by Redfield et al.

In Redfield et al., S. J. Gould's punctuated equilibrium hypothesis was cited as an example of an improvement on the original insights of Darwin. Checking Ruse on this topic, he said this wasn't really the case, Ruse said it was simply not found to be a useful concept for interpreting new information.

Morris is downright mean about the 'scientism' (my shortening of a long discussion) he sees in Gould's popular works. My interpretation of Morris' more elegant prose is that Gould and others who subscribe to a very mechanistic interpretation of evolution, who also write for a popular audience, unjustifiably rob people of the reverence and wonder with which they may have been appreciating life prior to being

**informed of their being the product of severely unlikely accidents compounding into a unique situation with no cosmic meaning or purpose. Redfield et al. don't go any further with Gould than to use him as an example of a post-Darwinian development, period. They never cited what Russo found so offensive in his works.**

**Stuart Kaufman, Theodosius Dobzhansky and Francisco Ayala are cited approvingly in Redfield et al., as is George Ledyard Stebbins. These scientists are cited saying things also said in a larger context by Morris, who (according to the name index) does not cite any of them except Stebbins. Ruse has whole chapters on Dobzhansky and Stebbins, however. They were both noteworthy contributors to evolutionary knowledge. Ruse also explains that Ayala was Dobzhansky's student. So, I feel that the Redfield et al. book is at least citing very credible people, leaders in the field of evolutionary science. Gould, though criticized a lot, with a lot of venom in the criticisms, is also given a chapter by Ruse who is critical, but respectful. Kaufman? Well, by association with these others, I trust him to also be a credible source.**

**So, what do Redfield et al. say about evolution using citations from these individuals? Simply that not all of the story is known, or will ever be known, but evolution is a fact, it involves random combinations and events but also adheres to as yet unelucidated but evident principles of self-organization. (Page 14, citing Kaufman).**

**On page 15 Dobzhansky and Ayala in particular are cited for their statement on natural disasters in the Earth's past that caused "evolutionary transcendence," meaning that old patterns were disrupted (dinosaurs dominated for example) and new patterns replaced the old (mammals entered the scene**

and quickly dominated). Ayala is approvingly cited as stating that: "In the same sense, biological evolution transcended itself when it gave rise to man," on page 15.

On succeeding pages the false starts and dead ends of evolution are also acknowledged as a prelude to where the authors are in lock-step with Morris: there is more to life than biology, teleology may also have a place in reality according to Morris, and Redfield et al. completely agree (even though their book came out a year before Morris' book, but I am just saying the books agree to an amazing point, thus far). Redfield et al. say on page 19 that:

At the core of this book is our belief that the universe has a telos, a fundamental tendency to manifest its latent divinity. Though evolution suffers many close calls and wanders at every level, it has given rise for billions of years to greater and greater capacities among the Earth's living things. To say that evolution appears to meander is not to say it has no direction. Indeed, many attributes of living things exhibit clear lines of progress *across* evolutionary domains.

The authors then suggest there is a continuity between "a single-celled organism's dim perception of the outside world, the improved human vision produced by sensory training, and the extraordinary visual acuity reported by certain athletes and mystics" . . . .

To me that sentence dangles over the precipice of credibility, even if only just a little bit, at both ends, but I agree with the subtler point. On page 20 there is a telling opening up of the agenda to be followed in the rest of the book. This was not,

**after all, a science book, but a book to inspire change in people.**

**One way to marry the idea of evolution and at the same time inspire change in people is to suggest that evolution provides evidence of past progress, but also points to the certainty of continuing, further progress. This may be where this book parts company with Morris' book in a big way. Morris also said, as I noted in the previous review, that evolution was not done yet. But predicting where it goes next is impossible.**

**Redfield et al. boldly proclaim that it is our purpose to now direct evolution. This makes Morris cringe when spoken by a practitioner in genetics. But what Redfield et al. have in mind may, actually, receive Morris' blessing if they would but ask for it. Where Redfield et al. are going with their improvement of the human race is not inside their cells but inside their minds, hearts and souls. Speaking of the evolutionary path just described they write (page 20):**

**Taken as a whole, such advances suggest that evolution is influenced by purposes or agencies that to some extent transcend and subsume the mechanism presently recognized by mainstream science. The multibillion-year development of such capacities suggests that nature indeed has a telos, a tendency to go beyond itself, a drive or attraction toward greater ends.**

**If this universal tendency does indeed exist . . . it must be with us still. Humans have long sensed that something transcendent calls us on, often framing their intuition in myth, poetry or philosophic speculation. In the next chapter, we will see that this intuition has developed since the Stone Age.**

**And at this point the book leaves the realms covered by Morris and moves into "A History of Human Awakening" that includes a review of the development and roots of the religious sensibilities now reflected in our major religions. This history of religio-spiritual development from the Stone Age to modern times was an interesting read, but I am not going to report on it in detail.**

**The authors go out of their way to accentuate the positive in each religious system and the other spiritually significant developments they discuss. But they also acknowledge the evils and cruelties done in the names of some of these traditions. At the end, where they sum this chapter up, they mention the exclusion of women from intellectual life through the ages as something that is now being corrected. The lifting of that veil of oppression is a noteworthy sign of progress. But the reason for this chapter on socio-spiritual evolution and the previous chapter on physical evolution is to prepare the reader for a program of directed, personal evolution.**

**I will not, just as I didn't in the chapter on cultural/spiritual evolution, go into detail on the types of personal, societal and spiritual developments they suggest we should pursue. I like some of what they suggest can and should be done to increase personal capabilities and insights. Some of what they encourage speaks to my own experience, experience that changed me for the better in ways they describe. So, I feel they are by and large making good suggestions for people to follow.**

**There were some ideas that reminded me ever so faintly of the disdain for the body, or at least impatience with its limitations, that were common among those seeking to be 'holy,' especially in the Medieval time period. But I was probably being too**

**sensitive on a topic I feel strongly and negatively about, Medieval (and modern) spirit-body dualism.**

**But I want to touch on some items of special interest to my present quest to gain understanding regarding human sentience. I agree with Morris, if we only look to science for answers on these types of issues we will remain much more ignorant than we need to be. Hence here I am looking also in Redfield et al.'s book.**

**Several ideas in the Redfield et al. book seemed to address the nature of human sentience:**

- 1. Page 19, as already cited, suggests there is a 'telos' in the universe, "a fundamental tendency to manifest its latent divinity." The strong suggestion there is that this tendency is driving evolution to produce creatures capable of self-knowing, which can in turn then accelerate the process of making manifest this latent divinity. Thus, there is a purpose to evolution.**
- 2. Page 75 wraps up the cultural evolution toward our present state, very different from our Paleolithic state, and promising "another evolutionary leap" to come which are previewed on page 79 to include:  
... further expression of our latent abilities. Our capacity for luminous perception and mystical knowing; our powers of volition; our abilities to communicate; our vitality; and our very identity can blossom into the greater life many of us sense in moments of inspiration.**

**The point that ends page 79 is that these things  
...reflect a part of human nature not yet actualized, which, we believe, can become the norm for every human being.**

- 3. Where we appear to be discussing the nature of sentience in an oblique way is on page 129, after many chapters and sections on super-normal experiences the chapter that begins here starts with:**

**Taken as a whole, the extraordinary experiences described in this book seem to form a pattern. When viewed in their entirety, they appear to be attributes of a single but many-sided nature pressing to be born in us. Each of them, it seems, points toward—and carries the seed of—the greater integration. . . . [calling] us toward a more inclusive and abundant nature overflowing with joy, meaning, and purpose.**

**Note how they use the same words as Morris: meaning and purpose were among the things Morris found ubiquitous in humans but hard to explain scientifically.**

- 4. The next section of the book takes on the idea of transforming culture while we transform ourselves. Then comes a chapter on the afterlife (interesting and refreshingly open to the idea that there is a lot of contradiction in after-life claims) and finally one that speaks more directly to my subject of interest right now: Chapter 15: "Luminous Embodiment." Here we will quote at some length.**

**Page 200:**

**In our planet's first organisms there existed the potential for consciousness. And our earliest human ancestors carried seeds of the self-surpassing capacities we have described in this book. Here we want to propose yet another potential that would, if actualized, carry forward evolution's stupendous advance. We have already had a few glimpses of it. It is inherent in the mysterious relations between our soul, our mind, and our flesh.**

**In short, we propose that our emergent capacities, which alter our physical functioning to some degree whenever they make their appearance, can gradually give rise to a new and more luminous embodiment.**

**The quote goes on to say this is a radical idea, but to keep reading. Under a heading of "The coevolution of mind and body" the authors suggest that (still page 200):**

**New abilities among our animal ancestors were made possible by changes, whether large or small, of their bodily structures and processes, and we can suppose that analogous changes in us—developed through practice rather than natural selection—will accompany and support a lasting realization of our emergent attributes. This supposition is supported by recent scientific discoveries and by contemplative lore regarding the bodily changes involved in the expansion of consciousness.**

**For fifteen pages the authors provide examples from 'contemplative lore,' concluding on pages 214-215 that:**

**As we have seen, the various attributes of animal organisms have developed in concert since life appeared on Earth, and they have continued to do so among human beings. Mind and body have coevolved since our primate ancestors began their advance to Homo sapiens and can, we believe, continue to advance toward forms of embodiment as luminous as the spirit we know in our highest moments. It is impossible to say how long it might take for such transformations to unfold, but the prospect of further advance they give us could inspire**

**new creativity, determination, and excitement among those of us drawn to the evolutionary adventure.**

**The next chapter is all about transformative practices, has lessons to follow, suggests further readings, etc.**

**This luminous body, according to pages 202 to 211, was foreshadowed in Christian scripture and Catholic spiritual discourse where the body of the resurrected state was the subject. In that context, it is very interesting, to me, that one of my favorite books of all time is mentioned on page 262 in the suggestions for further reading: *The Denial of Death* by Ernest Becker. It seems to me that the ‘luminous body’ idea, in the context of likening it to the ‘resurrection-body’ idea, is an example of what Becker’s book is all about according to Redfield et al.: "A Pulitzer-prize winning exploration of the psychological grip of death in our lives, and its role in stimulating art, creativity, and heroism."**

**I don’t mean to be sarcastic. It comes naturally. But I do have a sens of agreement floating around in me on several ideas urged by Redfield et al.: there is a ubiquitous force in the Universe, whether conscious or not I don’t know, seeking to continuously expand expression of itself through self-aware beings, and we are not yet at the end of the evolutionary program the Universe is embarked on. Why not see that as an integral part of that urge the idea is to have self-aware intelligent beings accelerate the process? But ‘luminous embodiment’? I am not a convert.**

**Back to the chapter on the afterlife. If there is an afterlife, if there is reincarnation as Redfield et al. say there is, what does that imply for advancing human evolution? I have heard it said that over time the spirits sent to Earth will be ‘older’ and**

**great things will happen in terms very much like those explained to be possible in this book. I have heard, and read, that, but what do I read on this subject in Redfield et al.?**

**On page 184, in this context, these authors write:**

**Most doctrines and lore of the afterlife are consonant with our belief that the evolutionary advance of human nature can continue in realms beyond this one.**

**Then after describing several types of and accounts of experiences with other 'extraphysical' worlds and their denizens, as proof of an afterlife, the authors conclude (page 198) that:**

**If through the integration of our greater attributes we are indeed helping evolution advance, then we must consider the possibility that this process can lead us as physical beings toward an ever-greater alignment with higher realms. If evolution has brought us, as we have seen, from inorganic matter to life and embodied consciousness, then in its next stages it might bring us further yet—to a condition perhaps that joins this world with those beyond it, in which our bodies increasingly manifest the glories of spirit.**

**So, are those "higher" realms populated by disembodied entities? According to page 205, where Saint Thomas Aquinas is approvingly cited and discussed, the statement is made that**

**. . . it is against the nature of the soul to exist without its physical counterpart . . . . Soul separate from body is *imperfect*.**

**I mention this only because both ideas seem, though based largely on Catholic influences, to be very much in harmony with what I was taught as a believing Mormon. Man is that he may have joy, and though it is possible to live only as spirit, a fulness of joy requires the presence of a body as well, but a glorified one.**

**Redfield et al. make a transition from here into the 'Luminous Embodiment' chapter discussed above. And I will also transition at this point. I will close on this book review project now. Valentines Day 2004. I will cogitate on what I have read, for a while, and write a "bottom-line" page on what I think I believe, as informed by these varied readings.**