TEILHARD DE CHARDIN’S EVOLUTIONARY NATURAL THEOLOGY

by David Grumett

Abstract. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin develops, as is well known, a model of evolution as a convergent progression from primordial multiplicity through increasing degrees of complexity toward a final Omega point of spiritual consummation. I explore how Teilhard fuses Darwinian and Lamarckian theories of evolution in developing his own, and in particular his defense of the view that Lamarckism is fundamental to a proper understanding of evolution’s human phase. Teilhard’s scientific interpretation of evolution is inspired by Christian cosmological insights derived from patristic theology and contemporary Pauline scholarship and cannot be separated from them. His integration of science and theology provides the basis for a renewed evolutionary natural theology that supplants the traditional static models developed by William Paley and others. Teilhard’s natural theology also provides a framework for theological ethical reflection on how humanity should act in its capacity as created co-creator with God. In later work, he considers the implications of his evolutionary theology for the wider universe. Teilhard thus presents an invigorated natural theology grounded in evolution that confirms and completes a dynamic and teleological view of the cosmos.

Keywords: complexity; convergence; Simon Conway Morris; creation; Charles Darwin; evolution; Fall; incarnation; invention; James Jeans; Jesus Christ; Jean Baptiste Lamarck; matter; Jürgen Moltmann; Omega point; Paul; red shift; selection; technology; Pierre Teilhard de Chardin; theology

During his time teaching geology and paleontology at the Institut Catholique in Paris, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin complained: “Too many evolutionists have, in fact, committed the serious mistake of taking their
scientific explanation of life for a metaphysical solution of the world. . . . Zoologists have imagined that they have rendered the primal cause useless because they were discovering a little more clearly the general structure of its work” (Teilhard [1921] 1966a, 22–23). His response is not to oppose materialist cosmology with a simple creationist or intelligent-design view of the world. After the so-called Scopes Monkey Trial in Tennessee—which followed the enactment of the Butler Law early in 1925 prohibiting the teaching of evolution in schools—he protested that the case displayed a tendency to regard evolutionary theory as immoral because “in the name of natural selection it first justifies and then teaches a selfish struggle, the precedence of force over right” (Teilhard [1926] 1966a, 136). His point is that the evolutionary process, once correctly understood, itself provides evidence supporting the proposition that the world is intelligently designed.

**DARWIN, LAMARCK, AND TEILHARD**

Many prominent theological commentators on Teilhard’s evolutionary cosmology have supposed that he embraces a purely Darwinian, or even neo-Darwinian, notion of evolutionary change. Jürgen Moltmann, for instance, bases his critique of Teilhard on the association of evolution with selection, asserting that “evolution always means selection” and the survival of the “most effective and the most adaptable” of beings (Moltmann 1990, 294). Teilhard actually argues specifically against this equation of evolution with Darwinian selection, promoting another evolutionary theory to complement the Darwinian one. At the dawn of the twentieth century Darwin’s ideas were famous throughout the Anglo-Saxon world, but they became widely disseminated in France only during the controversies that followed the publication of Henri Bergson’s *Creative Evolution* in 1907 (Farber 1999, 84–97). Even then, Darwinism was never accepted in France as fully as in the English-speaking world, Russia, or Germany.

The true context for Teilhard’s study of evolution is not Darwinian but Lamarckian (Roberts 2000, 115–18). Jean Baptiste Pierre Antoine de Monet, Comte de Lamarck, the Napoleonic deist heralded at the base of his statue in the Jardin des Plantes in Paris as “Fondateur de la Doctrine de l’Évolution,” argued that all organic evolutionary change is governed by a primordial *sentiment intérieure* situated within an overarching teleology provided by a universal power that orders the universe (Lamarck [1809] 1984). These immanentist notions appeared to many of his contemporaries as a sceptical challenge to the natural theology of William Paley and the English deists, who believed that divine providence was necessarily expressed by a static universe whose creation was complete.

The origins of Lamarck’s theory of evolution are, however, broadly identifiable as elements of Aristotelian and scholastic natural-law theory (Sloan 1999, 52–83). Lamarck adopted and modified the cosmology of Charles Bonnet, which posited a ubiquitous force penetrating and animating all
matter in the universe and conserving it by a process of continuous cre-
ation, sustained by a God who is the cause of all motion (Bonnet 1783,
sec. VI.ii, I:262–65; sec. XVII.ii, II:174–78). Lamarck asserts:

We cannot conceive the production of . . . the presence and continuance of the
movements constituting active life, unless we imagine a special exciting cause of
these movements, a force which animates the organs, controls the activities and
all the organic functions,—a spring, in short, of which the permanent though
variable tension is the driving energy of all vital movements. ([1809] 1984, 211)

Lamarck, as has already been suggested, did not develop a specifically theo-
logical cosmology, being an inheritor of the strict separationist view of the
relation between nature and God that had persisted through the long era
in France when high scholasticism reigned supreme. In a curious way,
however, his cosmology was no less “religious” than that of his deist theo-
logical contemporaries in England, as neither perceived any need to present
an account of continuing divine action on the material world.

Teilhard explicates the theological implications of Lamarckism in order
to compensate for the deficiencies he finds in Darwinism. The clear con-
trasts he identifies between Lamarckian evolution and its Anglo-Saxon
equivalent first need to be noted. Darwin had believed humanity’s exter-
nal natural environment to be the fundamental factor determining its ev-
olution, whose dynamic consists, in Teilhard’s words, in the “automatic
selection of the more stable (or progressive) groupings among the immense
number of combinations fortuitously and incessantly produced in Nature”
(1947 1964, 199). “Automatic” selection implies that evolution is externally governed and operates randomly, thus generating out-
comes that statistical laws are able to predict. Lamarck, in contrast,
maintained that the internal motivation of beings performs a decisive func-
tion in their evolution, which is “being conceived and ensued by psychic
forces analogous to our human power of invention” ([1947] 1964, 199).
In other words, evolution is not governed by solely external factors, being
a partly intentional process and not an entirely random one.

The positive achievement of both Lamarck and Darwin was to free natu-
ral history from the “cold, abstract Linnaean categories” that classified a
fixed order of species by observing the external appearance of their mem-
bers. Nevertheless, Teilhard asserts, the theories of both men contain a
“great deal of defective explanation and false philosophy.” In particular,
neither includes in its explanation a primal transcendent cause of material
existence or evolutionary change (1925; 1921) 1966a, 81, 7, 25). Darwinian theory suffers from an additional serious shortcoming,
which is its concept of the survival of the fittest. This suggests, on the basis
of observation of the natural world, that the surviving beings will be the
ones best fitted to their environment. Teilhard criticizes this hypothesis on
the grounds that it presupposes a “tenacious sense of conservation, of sur-
vival” for which random processes alone are not able to account (Teilhard
The notion of survival fails to provide a convincing explanation of the desire of beings, especially human beings, to persist in being and develop greater organic complexity, which Teilhard often describes as a “zest for life.” He accepts that, among the human species, natural selection remains the dominant motivating force of evolution. Selection is nevertheless complemented by the power of what he calls invention. A purely biological theory of evolution that allows no place for this spiritual initiative “diminishes” and “dethrones” humanity by failing to account for the power inherent in specifically human evolution (Teilhard [1952; 1950] 1964, 298, 293). Inventive capacity is, as I explain later, ever more clearly manifested in modern technological achievements that are enabling humanity to take control of its own evolution and that of the world as a whole.

Teilhard’s critique of Darwinism could be challenged on the grounds that Teilhard fails to recognize the extent to which Darwin himself comes to accept his indebtedness to Lamarck. Teilhard, in common with many of his most trenchant modern critics such as Peter Medawar and Stephen Jay Gould, accepts uncritically the classic view of Darwin as defending the view that selection by external natural processes provides a comprehensive and sufficient explanation of evolutionary change. In fact, Darwin acknowledged the pioneering work of the “justly celebrated naturalist” Lamarck on the descent of species, including the human species, from other nonhuman species in his preface to the third edition of the Origin ([1859] 1964, xiii). Particularly notable is that the concept of “pangenesis”—which refers to the tendency of biological life to create new forms by means of inherited characteristics, generated internally and independent of external selection pressures—recurs in Darwin’s works. This lends weight to the suggestion that he never effected a complete break from Lamarckism (Darwin 1899, II:349–99; 1871, 502–3; Hodge 1985, 207–44). Near the beginning of The Descent of Man, Darwin accepts Lamarck’s opinion that acquired characteristics are axiomatic to evolutionary theory, stating peremptorily: “I have elsewhere so fully discussed the subject of Inheritance, that I need here add hardly anything” (Darwin 1882, 27). He does, in fact, spend the next twenty pages expounding the importance of inheritance to evolutionary theory.

Teilhard does not pursue his own critique of Darwinism via this revisionist route. He emphasizes Darwinism’s distinctiveness from Lamarckism, arguing that the principal distinction in evolutionary theory is between the external transformation of species by natural selection and their internal transformation resulting from invention (Teilhard [1950] 1974, 203). He believes strongly that the human phase of evolution is qualitatively different from anything that has preceded it on the grounds that humanity, a spiritual being as well as a material one, is able to direct evolution.
He therefore connects Lamarck’s *sentiment intérieure* with the advent of self-conscious human life and the stages of evolution preparatory to this.

Teilhard elucidates the relation between the two evolutionary theories in an important footnote in *The Human Phenomenon* in defense of his hypothesis that modern evolution possesses a “fundamental impetus.” This digression should be quoted in its entirety:

There inevitably will be those who, in one aspect or another of the following explanation, manage to find the thought too Lamarckian (with exaggerated emphasis on the influence of the “inside” on the organic arrangement of bodies). But the fact should not be overlooked that I have left a fundamental part in the “morphogenic” action of instinct, as I understand it here, to the (Darwinian) play of external forces and chance. Life proceeds not only by strokes of luck, but by strokes of luck that are recognized and grasped, that is, psychically selected (as I have shown above). Understood correctly, Neo-Lamarckian “antichance” is not merely the negation, but on the contrary, the utilization of Darwinian chance. There is a function of complementarity between the two factors—a “symbiosis,” one might say.

Let me add only that as soon as we allow a place for the fundamental (although seldom observed) distinction between a biology of small and of large complexes (just as we have a physics of the infinitesimal and of the immense), we notice there is reason to separate out two major zones in the unity of the organized world and to treat them in different ways: with, on the one hand, (a) the (Lamarckian) zone of very large complexes (above all, the human being), where antichance visibly predominates; and, on the other, (b) the (Darwinian) zone of small complexes (lower living things), where the only way this same antichance can still be perceived beneath the veil of chance is by reason or conjecture, that is, indirectly.

(TEILHARD [1940] 2003, 97–98n)

Teilhard later employs “Lamarckian evolution” as a synonym for “human evolution,” in which “biological evolution, from being passive, becomes active in the pursuit of its purpose” ([1950] 1974, 203). He does not mean to argue, whether here or elsewhere, that evolution is entirely purposive, which would amount to a denial of the role in evolution of unconscious growth and the other forms of passivity over which humanity has no control (HOUPT 2005, 5–20). Rather, evolution is the outcome of the shifting combination of a selective external principle with an inventive inner one. Teilhard describes these dual principles of specifically human evolution as *le dedans* (the “inside” or “within”) and *le dehors* (the “outside” or “without”). In the coexistence of the two tendencies in human evolution, external selection dominates interior invention, which despite its apparent inferiority to selection nevertheless comes to assume decisive importance. Reflecting on selection, Teilhard states:

Compared with this immense passive field (the Darwinian) it may seem that the (Lamarckian) ground gained by our inventive efforts amounts to very little. But let us make no mistake about it. However slight the growth may be, however small the seed, it is precisely here that the power of renewal and rebounding of the living world is concentrated. ([1950] 1974, 201)
Invention by no means liberates humanity from its dependence on random selective processes. It does, however, offer to humankind the means of intervening in and harnessing those processes in order to promote its own flourishing.

Later I offer a practical example of how this may occur. In the remainder of the article I consider the theological implications of this cosmology as Teilhard expounds them in relation to the different stages of the evolutionary process.

**PRIMORDIAL MULTIPLICITY AND THE FALL INTO COMPLEX BEING**

Teilhard’s evolutionary cosmology often is presumed to apply solely to the planet Earth and not to the wider universe. Actually, during the final decade of his life, Teilhard argued that the evolution of the universe can be accounted for by the same fundamental principles. Indeed, it is at these origins of Teilhard’s evolutionary cosmology that the foundations of his principle of convergence are laid. He questions the view that red shift—the phenomenon of the reddening of the galaxies—is due to their movement away from an initial explosion in which space was created and to the corresponding decreased frequency of the light waves rather than to other processes such as photon decay ([1951] 1978a, 283). He advocates instead the view of the Big Bang associated with James Jeans, that the world in its earliest period consisted of a diffused atmosphere of extremely low density, which he terms a “primordial chaos.” Because this atmosphere was subject to gravitational instability, and as the result of a slight disturbance to its composition—a contingency that was bound to arise—it began to disintegrate into parts that formed immense clumps from which galaxies were born. The same disruptive process then operated within the individual galaxies, generating smaller clumps out of which stars were born, and so on, creating progressively more complex entities.

Teilhard develops this theme of creation as an intensification of the density of being theologically by drawing on an interpretation of the Garden of Eden narrative in the homily of Gregory of Nazianzus “On the Theophany, or Birthday of Christ,” which he says “explains the expulsion from Eden as the fall into a ‘denser’ form of life” (Teilhard [1947] 1974, 191n7). Of Adam’s rejection from paradise, Gregory states: “For his sin he was banished, at once from the Tree of Life, and from Paradise, and from God; and put on the coats of skins . . . that is, perhaps, the thicker [sic] flesh, both mortal and contradictory” (Gregory 1961, sec. 12, 348; see Genesis 3:21).

The standard translation of this passage presents the coats of skins as signifying the “coarser” flesh, but this imputes to them a penitential status and thereby imposes on the passage a moral sense that is not Gregory’s principal concern. The image of “thicker skins” (Winslow 1979, 68–69)
is closer to what Teilhard correctly believes the essential meaning of the expulsion from Eden to be: not a fall from a sanctified spiritual state into sinful embodiment but a change in the nature of embodiment and an increase in the weight of the flesh.\textsuperscript{5} This echoes suggestively Jeans’s conclusions about the origins of the universe in matter of extremely low density forming progressively larger masses. It is a more useful image for Teilhard of the origins of life because it avoids the suggestion that the act of creation is localized at a single infinitely small point of space and a specific originating point of time. That is closer to the imagery he employs to portray the end of evolution.

Any theological account of creation is inevitably bound up with the question of the origins of sin. Teilhard understands sin as primarily a state of necessary multiplicity, plurality, and ontological deficiency. That is, sin does not originate in a contingent event within creation that might not have occurred but is rather a condition for creation. This conception of an original fall into being provides the launching point for his theory of evolution, which describes a creative and redemptive process in which the world is drawn toward an ever-closer unity and self-consciousness that it originally lacked. Sin is the “essential reaction of the finite to the creative act” and the “reverse side of all creation.” In his unpublished journal, Teilhard thus writes of sin:

It isn’t an act committed within the universe; —It is an event which accompanied the formation of the universe, so as to mix itself completely with creation, before all time and all space. Original sin is implicated in the initial creation of the world. —As far as we can see, behind and around us, everything is under sin—but also under Christ. —It corresponds to a fall into being, to a universal materialization which Christ’s influence causes to emerge into spirit.\textsuperscript{6}

Sin therefore makes possible the subsequent emergence of complex beings. Only following the creative act of which the reverse side is sin may any subsequent events involving complex created beings occur.

Teilhard defines complexity in terms of both essence and relation. Beings need to be understood in themselves but also in terms of their connections with other beings. Complexity depends “not only on the number and diversity of the elements included in each case, but at least as much on the number and correlative variety of the links formed between these elements. It is not, therefore, a matter of simple multiplicity but of organized multiplicity: not simple complication but centered complication” ([1944] 1964, 105). Teilhard presents this complexity as a consoling antidote to a view of the cosmos as a vast, inhospitable realm in which the whole of planetary life, including human life, is no more than a brief interlude between primal soup and eternal death. A proper appraisal of the importance of complexity requires, he affirms, a “complete reversal of values and perspective” ([1944] 1964, 108). The Pascalian fear of the great, infinite and primitive spaces of the cosmos is answered, he suggests, by the fact of
the existence of localized entities and communities of entities. Consider the largest objects in the universe, composed of simple combinations of nuclei and electrons such as hydrogen, in which material evolution is unable to progress much beyond a simple atomic series. In the face of such a void as this, any complex life, let alone human life, might appear meaningless. On planets, clearly far smaller entities, however, there can occur the “mysterious ascent of the world into the sphere of advanced complexity” ([1944] 1964, 109). The highest current manifestation of complexity is human life, which is characterized by consciousness, reflective capacity, and personality. It is in smaller formations that the real significance of complex life, in both essence and relation, is to be uncovered.

**CONVERGENCE, HUMANITY, AND CHRIST**

The detailed paleontological research underlying Teilhard’s theory of evolutionary convergence has to a considerable extent been superseded by more recent research in the fields of paleobiology and genetics. Many of the theories Teilhard develops nevertheless remain strikingly apposite to current debates. He writes, for instance, that one “sign for the naturalist of the origin of a living branch is a certain convergence of that branch’s axis with the axis of neighbouring branches” ([1940] 2003, 125–26). In the course of his many years of research and excavation, especially in China, Teilhard realized that the range of actual evolutionary mutations was small in comparison with the number of possible ones and recognized the rapid speed with which evolutionary change occurred. Both of these factors suggested to him that something more than purely random processes was at work in generating evolutionary change. Teilhard’s perspective is supported by the array of evidence recently presented by Simon Conway Morris (2005; 2006) in support of the ubiquity of evolutionary convergence in a universe of exuberant biological diversity. Conway Morris portrays evolution as unfolding according to a necessarily preordained path, but he draws, as will be seen, very different theological conclusions from this fact.

The implications of convergence and complexity for natural theology are underdeveloped in current debates both within the philosophy of religion and in the field of science and religion. The conclusions that Teilhard draws from his combined scientific research and theological reflection have the potential to reinvigorate the discourse. He insists that God should be conceived not as a static pole of consistence governing a stable world but as a prime mover *ahead*. He proposes: “The Higher Life, the Union, the long dreamed-of consummation that has hitherto been sought *Above*, in the direction of some kind of transcendence: should we not rather look for it *Ahead*, in the prolongation of the inherent forces of evolution?” God the pole of consistence becomes, in Teilhard’s theological cosmology, God the “Prime Mover, Gatherer and Consolidator, ahead of us, of evolution” (1966b, 121).
In light perhaps of statements such as these, Arthur Peacocke has noted the tendency of “Teilhardian theologians” to “extrapolate into the future from the past” (1979, 338–39, 349), but Teilhard’s own concept of the God Ahead is derived principally from the God Above rather than from the Bergsonian notion of an original primordial unity possessing quasi-theistic attributes. A profound continuity certainly exists between the God Ahead and previous evolutionary history. Nevertheless, looking at the matter from the temporal human perspective to which Peacocke refers, the God Ahead provides the evolutionary dynamic with a source that subsists in the future and draws the world toward its final consummation.

This concept of a God of the Ahead has implications for an understanding of the person of Jesus Christ. Teilhard is determined to develop a clear and dynamic alternative to modernist Christology, which had its basis in the historical criticism of scripture. Pope Pius X’s 1907 encyclical Pascendi dominici gregis charges the modernists with calling into question the divine nature of Christ by “not sparing even the person of the Divine Redeemer, whom, with sacrilegious daring, they reduce to a simple, mere man” (Papal Encyclicals 1990, III:71, sec. 2). Teilhard’s position supports this critique. The reading of scripture, he believes, is not a purely exegetical activity but a synthetic one. Personal faith, church tradition, and the various fields of scientific research all bring crucial insights to bear on our reading of the sacred texts. The modernists failed to accept this basic principle, but so did the church authorities attacking them. Teilhard protests: “One cannot remain true to Catholicism and be content with a mediocre explanation, a limited outlook which represents Christ as an accident of history, isolating Him in the Cosmos as if He were an episode without proper time and place” ([1919] 1976, 23).

The coming of Christ into the human world is not completed in the birth of Jesus in Palestine. Rather, this particular historical event inaugurates the entry of the whole created order into Christ. Incarnation, far from being confined to a discrete event at a particular point in historical time, is an ongoing movement that transforms the world and creates the historical reality it enters. Although exemplified by the entry of Jesus Christ into the human world to assume human form, its final purpose is the redemption of the whole cosmos. Teilhard affirms: “The Incarnation is a making new, a restoration, of all the universe’s forces and powers; Christ is the Instrument, the Centre, the End, of the whole of animate and material creation; through him, everything is created, sanctified, and vivified” ([1916] 1968a, 58). The divine nature of Jesus Christ, his eternal birth in the Godhead, and his work of redemption and salvation transform material life through the whole range of its levels of being. In order that the world be redeemed, it is necessary for Christ to “enter into contact with every one of the zones of the created, from the lowest and most earthly to the zone that is closest to heaven” ([1923] 1974, 71).
CONSOMMATION AND OMEGA

A wholly naturalistic explanation of human evolution, whether Darwinian or Lamarckian, would fail to take account of the full significance of the incarnation for material life. In an early encyclopedia essay, however, Teilhard excludes a purely natural evolutionism on different grounds: that it would be incompatible with essential axioms of church teaching.

We conclude by rejecting necessarily an evolutionism which, linking humanity in the fullness of its being to inferior life forms or to matter, regards it only as the product of a transformation—whether from like to like, by the reshaping of primitive compounds—or from lesser to greater, by increases (which were due to a divine source), that will not culminate in an unanticipated and profound reordering, a rending of the vital current, placing humanity in a region of transcendence and stability. (Teilhard [1912] 1924–28, sec. 505; my trans.)

Intrinsic to Teilhard’s belief that the universe will undergo this final consummation is the theology of the cosmic role of Christ, developed by Paul in order to take full account of the implications for humanity and the cosmos of the fact that the whole fullness of God dwells bodily in Christ, who is “He in whom everything is reunited, and in whom all things are consummated—through whom the whole created edifice receives its consistency—Christ dead and risen, who fills all things, in whom all things consist” (Teilhard 2004, 84). Teilhard thus insists on the necessity of both of Christ’s natures—the human and the spiritual—describing Christ, in words that gloss perhaps four scriptural passages, as

the Alpha and the Omega, the principle and the end, the foundation stone and the keystone, the Plenitude and the Plenifier. He is the one who consummates all things and gives them their consistence. It is towards him and through him, the inner life and light of the world, that the universal convergence of all created spirit is effected in sweat and tears. He is the single centre, precious and consistent, who glitters at the summit that is to crown the world, at the opposite pole from those dim and eternally shrinking regions into which our science ventures when it descends the road of matter and the past. ([1921] 1968b, 34–35)

This salvation that Christ-Omega accomplishes is at once spiritual, being a transformation of material life according to a nonmaterial principle, and cosmic, affecting the entire created order. The end that it presents to history and that gives history its linear direction contradicts the cyclical models that prevailed in pre-Christian philosophy (Benz 1966, 67–68). This view of historical development characteristic of modernity is, in other words, established by Christian theology and made a reality in the unceasing redemptive action of Christ on the world.

Teilhard finds particular inspiration for this christological reading of the modern linear concept of historical progression in some of the Greek Fathers, who transpose the “evidence of Revelation into a universe of the non-static type.” He appropriates, more specifically, the cosmology of Irenaeus of Lyons, which he describes as an “astonishing anticipation of
It must be emphasized that the type of progress that Irenaeus conceives is
progress only because it is informed by a spiritual principle that constitutes
and affirms human life and in so doing transforms that life. Omega is, in
theological terms, the point at which “Christic faith comes in to take over
from and to consummate faith in humanity” ([1948] 1975, 203). It is the
point at which the unsatisfied hopes and uncompleted projects of humanity
are gathered up and consummated in Christ, not an endpoint of his-
tory attained by human effort alone.

THE FUTURE OF EVOLUTION

Teilhard portrays humankind “now standing upon its own feet” and “en-
tering into a new era of autonomous control and self-orientation” ([1948]
1975, 181). What does this mean in practice? The best example of the
human appropriation of natural forces that occurred during Teilhard’s life-
time is nuclear fission. Reflecting on this technological advance, he avers
that humankind “has succeeded in seizing and manipulating the sources
commanding the very origins of matter” ([1946] 1964, 142). This is clearly
an ambivalent achievement, containing the potential to generate energy to
preserve human life as well as to construct weapons capable of obliterating
that life.

Teilhard expresses similar ambivalence over genetic manipulation, ob-
serving how humankind feels itself to be “on the verge of acquiring the
power of physico-chemical control of the operations of heredity and mor-
phogenesis in the depths of its own being” ([1947] 1964, 197). “As a
direct result of its socialization, humankind is beginning, with rational
design, to take over the biological motive forces which determine its
growth—in other words, it is becoming capable of modifying, or even of
creating, its own self” ([1948] 1975, 181). Biological realities no longer
provide a fixed set of conditions within which humanity makes moral de-
cisions. They are more likely to become products of those decisions which
themselves construct the human subject and thus condition his or her sub-
sequent moral choices. The classic order of a shared conception of static
human nature generating an ethic that epistemologically grounds a moral
framework and motivates adherence to it no longer applies: “Material
determinisms cease to provide the skeleton of the world; they are merely a

Teilhard believes passionately that theological and ethical principles need
to be developed to enable modern humanity to make sense of its tremen-
dous powers over matter and to exercise those powers responsibly and con-
structively. Moral questions surrounding the use of technology to intervene
in biological processes have evidently become more sharply focused since
his lifetime, simply because they are a product of the ever-increasing num-
ber of technologies actually available or under development. Teilhard’s
general analysis of these questions nevertheless remains pertinent and is in places prophetic. Humankind’s production of new technology is, he observes, “more and more patently exceeding its powers of absorption and assimilation” ([1931] 1969, 36–37). Jürgen Habermas, in the course of making a similar point, describes this progressive estrangement of material production from consciousness as “dissonance of intention” and argues that what is needed to counteract it is a renewed understanding of the fusion of nature and soul (2003, 60–64). Teilhard expresses a corresponding belief in his frequent statements that the ordering of nature by soul is needed to provide the cosmos with its telos ([1917] 1968a, 168; [1921] 1968b, 29–30). The organization of technical production in accordance with moral and religious principles is, in other words, a real possibility, and moreover essential for the future flourishing of the human species. Modern technology, far from being a Promethean theft from the deity of a power that is rightly its own ([1946] 1964, 147), promotes a necessary sharing by humankind in God’s creative power. To foster human cooperation in this divine action is the new task for theology and theological ethics.

Teilhard reflects much later on the likely course of the evolution of concrete human life in the more distant future. There is no reason, he argues, to suppose that life will not evolve more complex forms than its present ones ([1944] 1964, 113). Nevertheless, humankind also contemplates its finitude and fragility, the prospect of decline and the possibility of disaster. This more pessimistic and obscure strand in Teilhard’s thought about the future is based on an appraisal of the human condition rather than on any specific events. It must be remembered that he is writing before the mass production and stockpiling of nuclear weaponry and prior to humankind’s awareness of the rapid pace of global environmental change. He is brought to contemplate the death of the human species simply because it is dependent on the Sun, which is a “heavenly body whose days are ultimately numbered” ([1944] 1964, 121). He responds with skepticism to the possibility that a future ability to colonize other planets will make human existence everlasting, regarding the technological obstacles of travel to suitable destinations as insurmountable, not to mention the difficulties of generating the basic elements required for survival once in a new location. In any case, he continues, if interstellar travel by conscious material beings were possible, the Earth would probably already have been invaded and colonized by other such beings. Teilhard speculates that the future for the universe will be a death of the materially embodied dimension of human life in which humankind’s spiritual component will become detached from the planet Earth and unified with the Omega point on which not only Earthly evolution converges but the evolution of the entire universe as well ([1944] 1964, 122–23).
The principal shortcomings of Teilhard’s evolutionary cosmology are to be found in his theological analysis of its universal dimension. He regards the existence of complex, intelligent life on some of the other planets in the immensity of the universe as a virtual certainty—after all, the diameter of Earth’s orbit compared with that of the universe is in the same order of proportion as that of a pinhead on the surface of the American continent (Teilhard [1953] 1974, 231; [1944] 1964, 101). This raises the question of the status of Christ as universal savior: Was the coming of Christ on Earth sufficient to extend the possibility of salvation to the entire universe? Teilhard regards his single earthly incarnation as indeed sufficient for the whole universe: “For the universe is so perfectly one that the Son of God has only to enter into it once in order to occupy and permeate it in its entirety with his filiating grace. . . . He had to be born but once of the Virgin Mary to make his own and divinize the whole of creation” ([1953] 1974, 235, n11). It would, perhaps, be more convincing to argue that while the eternally begotten Son, existing beyond time and space, would be a feature common to Christian faith on any planet, the historical person of Christ would be incarnated separately on different planets. This would preserve the unity in diversity for which Teilhard strives while ensuring that the person of the incarnate Christ was similar to that of all possible beings with faith in him and thus able to share their life in meaningful, tangible ways. An entirely separate problem surrounding the single-incarnation view is how the revelation of Christ on Earth could be communicated from Earth to other parts of the universe by natural means. The skepticism with which Teilhard regards the possibility of interstellar travel has already been noted.

The new vistas and possibilities opened by technologies such as genetic manipulation are in any case far more significant for the future of humanity than the possibility of its colonization of other planets. Advances in genetic understanding enable humankind to reinvent itself as the co-creator of its future essence. The inextricable link between evolution and complexity, confirmed by faith in a personal deity, calls the Christian scientist to focus attention on current human life on this planet. This is where the depth, complexity, and future potential of life reside, ordered by Christ’s providential action in human creativity.

Teilhard’s determination to take the theological implications of complexity as seriously as those of convergence leads him to a more positive appraisal of the existential situation that evolution produces than the one recently suggested by Conway Morris, who infers that evolutionary convergence generates “inevitable humans in a lonely universe” (2005a). Teilhard, in contrast, considers the theological implications of complexity alongside those of convergence. Complexity makes possible new centers of consciousness and community that manifest their own creative capacity. The convergent universe is no longer lonely, Teilhard argues, having
created, in its comparatively recent past, complex beings and communities capable of communication, conversation, friendship, love, and praise.

Teilhard's evolutionary natural theology provides a constructive Christian response to Michael Ruse's call for a "kind of reinvigorated Lamarckism" to contribute to a restoration of the credibility of natural theology in the face of crude intelligent design arguments (Ruse 2003, 304). Teilhard unsettles simple modern oppositions, grounding his cosmology in faith, theology, and religious experience as well as evidence from scientific research, both his own and others. In *The Human Phenomenon*, he states of the Omega point: "I probably would never have dared to consider or form the rational hypothesis of it, if I had not already found in my consciousness as a believer not only the speculative model for it, but its living reality" ([1940] 2003, 211). This living reality was his faith in Christ, who reveals himself in evolution as the principle of the creation, conservation, and consummation of the universe. Teilhard's dynamic vision is far removed from the static cosmology of Paley, which remains the ubiquitous textbook example of natural theology. It provides suggestive openings for a more current and more arresting version.

NOTES

Teilhard’s works are referenced in the text with the date of writing a specific essay in brackets.
1. The defendant, John Scopes, a science teacher, was found guilty of infringing the prohibition and fined $100. See McGowen 1990.
3. The terms in parentheses are those used in the new and original translations respectively.
5. Retreat note of 25 July 1922 in Teilhard 2003, 101; see also extensive notes in unpublished Journal, 9–18 May 1921, cahier VIII.
7. Teilhard [1949] 1964, 263. The context makes clear that *Above and Ahead* are not being presented as mutually exclusive terms. Similar dialectics are identifiable in the discussion of the interrelations of creation, history, and eschatology in Moltmann 2003.
8. See notes in unpublished Journal, 1 January 1945, cahier XIII.
9. For the origins of this Christology in Pauline scholarship of the early twentieth century, see Grumett 2005, 114–16.
10. See Revelation 22:13, Colossians 1:17, John 8:12, Romans 8:22.

REFERENCES


Zygon
