Big History and Big Questions

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In his essay, “Children of God,” Alan Culpepper tells us how cosmic consciousness raises existential questions: (1) Who are we? (2) Who is God? and (3) What is the meaning of life? Strictly scientific accounts of cosmology and evolution cannot answer these questions. However, a biblically based theology offers answers that begin with affirming the role of a Creator, a divine purpose for human life, and the place of humanity at the apex of the created order, “a little lower than the angels” (Ps 8:5). The cosmos has meaning, and so does our life within this cosmos. This is because the cosmos is the creation of a loving and gracious God.

If we would employ Paul Tillich’s method of correlation, we would contend that these existential questions are already buried within scientific accounts of our cosmos and the evolution of life. What the theologian does is dig them out. The theologian needs to excavate the scientific landscape and uncover questions of origin and meaning hidden just below the surface.

Curiously, some scientists or, better, science aficionados put up no-trespassing signs. They wish to keep their top soil in place. They object to theologians digging around and exposing these existential questions, questions which science alone cannot even pose let alone answer. The situation is even more delicate, because all too frequently genuine science is hidden beneath a layer of ideology. When actual science is buried beneath an overlay of naturalism, materialism, and reductionism, then existential questions about origin and meaning remain smothered, inaccessible, unaskable. Science per se is not resistant to asking existential questions, but an ideology of naturalism is. It takes a perceptive theologian to see the difference. It takes a courageous theologian to climb the fence, enter the plowed field, and dig beneath the surface.

1 Science vs. Scientism in Big History

Just a little shuffling of the trowel will reveal that some science is covered over by scientism. Genuine science attempts to describe the world we live in with as little ideological overlay as possible. Genuine science is the friend of the

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theologian who appreciates the intricacy and magnificence of God’s creation. Scientism is another matter. Scientism is an ideological overlay that hides authentic science under a blanket of naturalism, materialism, and reductionism. “Scientism,” according to Michael Dodds, “is fundamentally the transformation of the methodology of empirical science into a metaphysics, a move from the quantitative investigation of nature to the assumption that being is always quantitative. While the former is a legitimate methodology, the latter is mere ideology.” The theologian’s first soil turnover should uncover the difference between science and scientism.

In this instance, the theologian dare not obey the no-trespassing signs put up by naturalists. The theologian needs to climb over the fence and into the plowed field with shovel in hand. By digging beneath the surface, eventually existential questions become exposed. Then, the theological task becomes clear: make this scientific field fertile for divine revelation and human meaning.

Now, let’s apply what we have just said to the growing university discipline of Big History, which is becoming increasingly popular in television documentaries. Like waving a red muleta in front of a bull, Big History challenges the theological toro to snort and charge toward the threat. The muleta may look like science; but hidden beneath it is the matador’s estoque or sword. That sword, a naturalistic scientism, could mean death for the theologian’s meaningful worldview. Much is at stake in this corrida de toros ring.

Having mixed my metaphors between digging beneath the surface and fighting a bull, I would like in what follows to describe the challenge to the theologian posed by Big History and related debates regarding the relationship between authentic science and naturalistic ideology. Genuine science is the theologian’s friend. Philosophical naturalism is the top soil covering over what science can actually say about our universe; it is the sword hidden beneath the red muleta.

Big History looks like science. It’s not science, exactly. Even though it looks like science, it is actually a brand of scientism. Big History is a constructed story of the history of our physical universe that is purposefully based on current scientific knowledge. It tells a physical story and places the human chapters of this story within a larger natural description of reality. The human story becomes one chapter in a larger story of nature. This story is big. It’s dramatic. It’s almost overwhelming. It appears at a time when our generation of young people are ready to see themselves within the context of a near unfathomable 13.8 billion year story.

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