

Survival of Bodily Death
An Esalen Invitational Conference
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How Reincarnation May Generate Complexity
Frank Poletti

Frank Poletti followed Wheeler by joking that the next Dawkins-esque scholar in the field of survival studies will likely publish a book titled "The Selfish Soul," in which the hypothesis is put forward that the most competitive souls are the ones most likely to survive in the bardo and reincarnate! More seriously, Poletti added a few observations about the evolutionary theory conference that he has helped organize before he vetted a theory of his own about the survival hypothesis to the group. In his brief presentation Poletti attempted to situate the evidence for survival within the larger worldview called "evolutionary panentheism," which has been described and developed over the years by scholars such as Hegel, Sri Aurobindo, Teilhard de Chardin, Michael Murphy, and Ken Wilber.

Drawing from an essay posted by Ken Wilber a couple months before the conference on his Shambhala website titled "Toward a Comprehensive Theory of Subtle Energies," Poletti noted that the core insight Wilber touts in his essay is that complex gross forms are necessary for the expression of higher consciousness and subtler energy. This means that Spirit (the Infinite, Eternal One, Ultimate Mystery, etc.) needs the material universe in order to express Itself, find Itself, and discover and explore Itself in and through millions of shapes and forms. Poletti said that even if we grant validity to this general idea that underlies evolutionary panentheism, Wilber's recent essay on subtle energies and reincarnation only describes what Spirit is doing with the evolving manifest universe. Poletti emphasized that he is interested in adding to that what by proffering a theory about how the universe may be accomplishing that awesome task.

To address the how aspect of the evolutionary panentheistic worldview, Poletti described a synthetic idea that combines insights from the Indian seer Sri Aurobindo and the complexity theorist Terrence Deacon. Poletti started by indicating that Aurobindo thought that philosophies of reincarnation should be considered within the context of the larger evolutionary intent of the universe. For Aurobindo, the evolution and reincarnation of human souls should follow the same general laws and trends that inform the evolution of matter, life, and mind. It's one universe; thus all its diverse manifestations should share in one general arc, even if it is difficult to spot it at first glance. Next, Poletti drew upon the central idea that Terrence Deacon had presented recently during a CTR conference on evolutionary theory, namely that biological life created (or emerged) closures, shells, and boundaries, which then have the capacity to re-enter information and learning (stored in DNA) into the larger ecosystem of life. According to Deacon's theory, this continuous process of "closure and re-entry" is the central mechanism that drives the rise of complexity from bacteria all the way up to humans. In other words, this process is the how at the heart of the rise of complex life forms. To make this idea a bit clearer, Poletti said that scientists know that in the early earth, DNA (which is a form of stored information and memory) somehow managed to get inside membranous enclosures called lipid sacs. Scientists still do not know exactly how this was accomplished, but the very fact that we are here today is evidence that DNA-based cellular life must have started at some point in the early earth. Millions of years ago, a tiny bit of learning was stored as memory in a few strands of DNA. That then found a protective enclosure in a cell-like lipid structure. This total structure was then re-entered into the larger ecosystem of life with its learning and memory intact. This process of continuous re-entry of past learning stored in DNA was then repeated millions of times. According to complexity scientists like Deacon, this bare minimum process of enclosed learning and re-entry drove the rise of complex biological structures. This is the how that corresponds to the well-known what (or mere observed fact) of complexity that exists all around us.

Poletti then drew a broad analogy from Deacon's biological theory of closure and re-entry to address the question of why the universe would invent a process like the reincarnation of souls. If (as Wilber's essay on subtle energies suggests) the evolution of the universe can be viewed as a process by which Spirit creates ever-more complex gross forms so that it can descend or embody into them, then the question arises: Why would the universe invent reincarnation? What purpose does reincarnation serve with respect to the complexification of gross forms?

At this point, Poletti speculated that if something like a soul does indeed come back and get re-entered into the system of soul-life, then reincarnation might be viewed as a higher iteration of the same process that drove the rise of complex biological life forms. In other words, the evolving universe created the reincarnating soul to accelerate learning and memory from life-to-life and thereby drive the rise of complex intelligence that spans across lifetimes. The very same process that drove the rise of biological life (closure and re-entry) may be responsible for the rise of complex mental life as well. In support of this potential homology between the evolution of life and mind, Poletti noted that Whiteheadian scholar David Ray Griffin has written about the unique features of the atom, cell, and human soul; they are novel emergent structures in universe. What distinguishes the soul is that it is an emergent form that allows memory to carry beyond and between precise physical structures (our bodies). The universe emerged souls that come back and reincarnate in different bodies with memory from past ones. A novel type of enclosure (the soul-body or subtle body) can continuously re-enter information into the larger system of mental life, or mind.

Poletti suggested we think from the very broad view of the universe: the universe may use a simple mechanism, closure and re-entry, in order to develop increasingly sophisticated embodied structures into which more of Spirit can descend and embody. Different types of enclosures allow for the storage and transmission of information (past learning and memory) from one generation to the next. This core process enables information at any level in the universe to be re-entered into the larger learning of the overall system, which could be an ecosystem in the case of biological life, or a soul-system (perhaps called "culture" or the "noosphere") in the case of mental life. Just as DNA acts as the unit of memory for biological life, so does the human soul for mental life. The main difference is that a soul harbors the capacity to remember across and between individual lives and is thus not limited to a single physical substrate.

After presenting the gist of his idea, Poletti suggested that his larger hypothesis about why the universe would invent the reincarnation of souls fits well with the central hypothesis put forward by Murphy in his book *The Future of the Body*—in particular, the suggestion that the vast record of mammalian evolution reveals a purposeful pattern in which embodied life is bringing forth the ever-enhanced expression of specific attributes (or abilities, capacities, faculties). According to Murphy, when viewed broadly and synoptically, the natural history of all mammalian species (stretching from rats to humans) reveals a number of attributes that can be found in a rudimentary form in all mammalian species and then later in a more sophisticated and refined form in humans. For example, early mammals had rudimentary forms of communication, the ability to empathize, the ability to generate internal warmth, and movement abilities. Today, all these same capacities can be found in richer and more developed forms of expression in both normal human and super-human functioning. Humans can communicate, empathize, generate warmth, and move with greater freedom and sophistication than any other species. As Murphy demonstrates in *The Future of the Body*, it is possible to see a broad pattern (one that stretches across several mammalian lineages and species) toward the greater richness, sophistication, and subtlety of expression of these specific attributes (Murphy lists 12 of them in his book). The general hypothesis is that these trans-species attributes are in some fashion "seeking out" or "discovering" (during the course of large time scales of mammalian evolution) increasingly sophisticated embodied structures through which to manifest. When the evolution of embodiment is viewed from this pan-optic perspective, Murphy speculates that the larger process of the evolution of embodied life in the universe may be gradually trying to manifest in ever-greater richness these specific attributes. What is central to Murphy's idea is that this process is continuing right now in latent forms of super-normal human functioning. What was once a mammal's dim perception of light and dark is now—after years of selective pressures in evolution—becoming the super-enhanced vision of mystics who can see auras and subtle bodies, or the extra-ordinary sight of golfers like Tiger Woods, who sometimes display an ability to "see" hundreds of yards away while on the golf course.

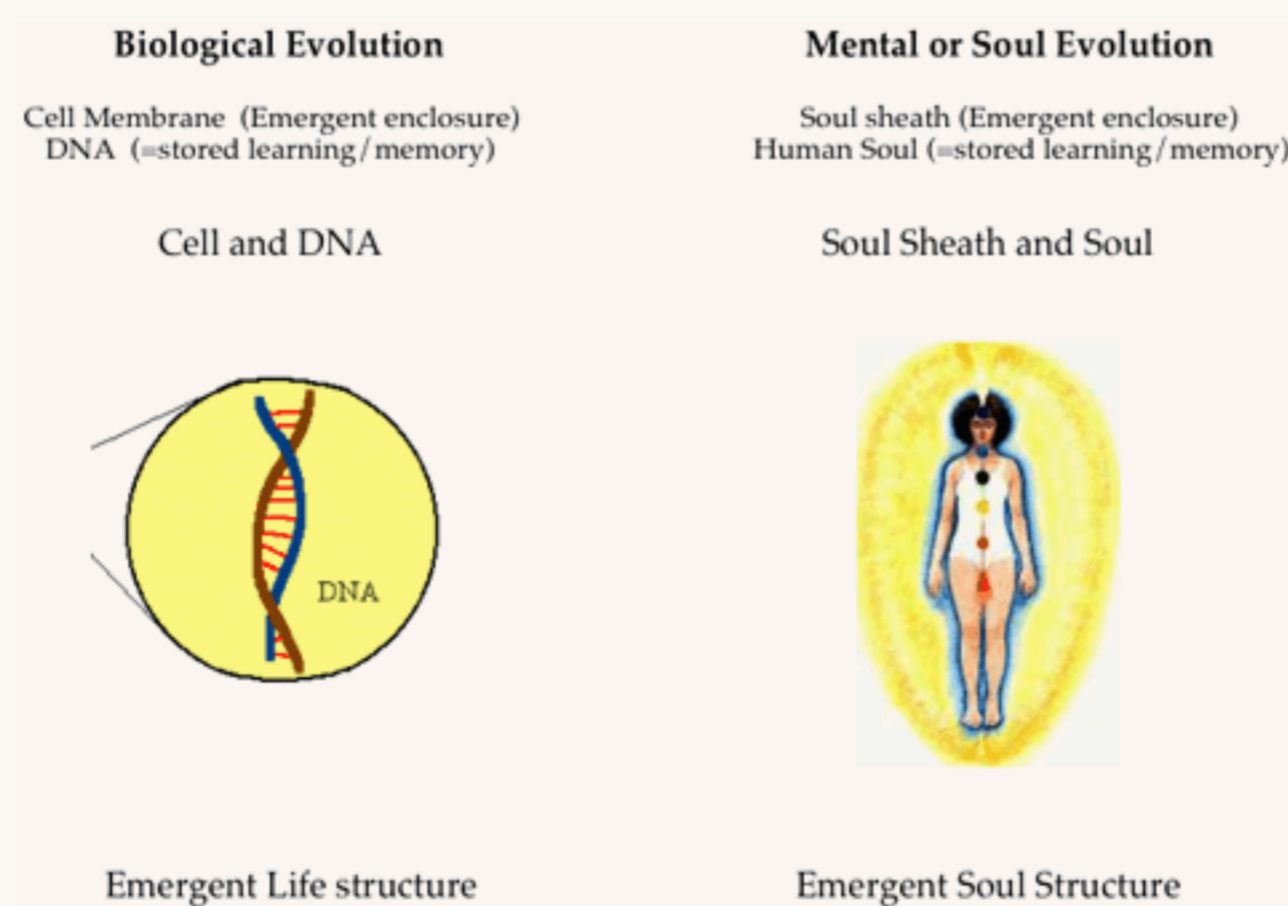
Murphy has speculated that the universe's broad intention is to bring forth through mammalian, human, and super-human evolution a richer and more intricately embodied experience of Spirit Itself. The great potential in the universe for the experience of many subtle riches of perceptual, emotional, and spiritual life is slowly being realized in the course of evolution. In this manner, Spirit "discovers" through the evolution of living embodied structures (that is, the evolution of the attributes Murphy has categorized) that it can experience Itself in ever-greater richness, ever-greater subtlety, and ever-greater enhancement of ecstatic embrace.

At this point, Emily Kelly mentioned Frederic Myers's view of evolution. He regarded it as one continuous process of revelation (self-revealing) in which more and more of the world all around us (which has been here all along) comes into view. In Kantian terms, the universe's evolution reveals more and more of the noumenal realm, the thing-in-itself, which we are already immersed in but only dimly aware of. Transformative practices are the contemporary means by which humans can continue the evolutionary journey—by developing, attuning, and increasingly refining our sense faculties and spiritual capacities for a richer experience of what is already here.

With these broad ideas in mind, Poletti suggested that his theory about reincarnation fits well with the same larger intent of the universe that Murphy has spotted: to bring forth ever-more complex gross forms that can embody more of the depth, richness, sophistication, and subtlety of Spirit. How the universe accomplishes this mighty task is through the continuous re-entry of embodied structures that carry previous memory and learning. This can occur in diverse evolutionary structures—whether they be cells, leaves, animals, or human souls with human karmic memories. Poletti suggested the same fundamental process may underlie the whole drama of evolution and emergence. Poletti concluded by showing a chart displaying his basic idea to the group.

How Evolution May Bring Forth Life and Mind in the Universe

Novel Emergent Structures that are Unique to Life and Mind Respectively



Both the cell with its DNA and the soul sheath (or kosha) with its human soul-memory are re-entered into the larger system of life and mind respectively. The continuous re-entry of all information into these larger systems is at its root a simple process that may be responsible for driving the rise of biological and then later mental complexity. The same pattern of closure and re-entry works at two different levels in the universe. Same general principle, different levels of application.

In the realm of mammalian evolution, certain attributes (or capacities) seek out greater and richer expression through the evolution of species. To date, the embodied form of Homo sapiens has enabled, or brought forth, the greatest potential for the expression and experience of the richness and subtlety of the Universe (or Spirit). There is no reason to think this process stops with the current human form. Evolution is likely to continue emerging ever-more complex embodied structures with which the Universe can know and experience the spiritual heights and depths of Itself.

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