

This was my "2 sides of 1 sheet" first time version 😊

The Meaning of the Gaia Theory

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2024 Connie writes:
Michael audited Lynn Margolis
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essay length
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5 mins
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term.

In order to understand the meaning of anything, one must see the bigger picture. For example, a tragic event in life becomes meaningful only when it is seen as fitting into a larger interpretive framework. Ultimately, the largest context of meaning no matter what the issue is a people's cosmology, their story of how things came to be, how they came to be as they are, and where and how the human fits into the scheme of things. This is what helps them make sense of the mystery of life and death, and it provides the psychic energy for them to deal effectively with both individual and social crises. On every continent, a people's creation story is *the* foundation for science, religion, ethics, law, economics, politics, education, medicine...everything. It is the basic set of unquestioned assumptions upon which all else is built. Cosmology is the cornerstone of all meaning.

The Gaia theory comes out of the Western scientific tradition, which itself comes out of a biblical cosmology. Indeed, the reason that science developed as it did in the West was because it had a cosmology which allowed it to do so. The Genesis creation myth said that we humans were placed on a fixed, ready-made Earth which we were to be stewards of. It told us that we were spiritual in nature and that we were called into a relationship, a covenant, with the divine. However, since the locus or the meeting place for this relationship was in the transcendent realm, this physical world was simply a temporary background or transient stage. Thus, because the world was material, not spirit, and because we understood ourselves as having been divinely mandated to have dominion over the rest of nature, our cosmology gave us the freedom to explore the natural world and figure things out, as well as to develop various technologies.

If we take a look at Native American cosmology, as a comparison, we can see how it would have been impossible for the scientific tradition to develop in a tribal context. Their beliefs would never have allowed it. Because in virtually all the creation myths of the native peoples of this continent the Great Spirit was not transcendent but lived *in* the natural world, lived *in* the Earth. And since the Earth was experienced as Mother, and all matter was spiritual as well as physical, they simply did not have the freedom to get in there and start figuring out how things worked. There was not the sense of detachment that would have made scientific exploration or technological development possible.

Now, interestingly, thanks to our western, biblical cosmology, we have made *enormous* progress in figuring things out over the last couple of centuries; so much so, that, with discoveries in biology, geology, chemistry, physics, and astronomy, we have come to see that the very cosmology which brought us to where we are is no longer adequate, that it needs to be revised because it no longer fits with what we have empirically discovered. For example, we have come to see that we were *not* placed on a fixed, ready-made Earth, but that we are the latest evolutionary development of an unbroken process which began some fifteen billion years ago in a great explosion of light and energy. Creation is still happening. And with the splitting of the atom we have come to see that *all* matter has an inner, numinous, non-material dimension.

Thus, our science, which itself emerged out of a biblical cosmology, is now giving birth to a *new* creation story, a *new* cosmology. Presently, however, most scientists (and most people in general) are still operating out of assumptions of the old story, and have not yet grasped the meaning and transforming significance of the new story. As Thomas Berry, one of the foremost thinkers of our age, says at the beginning of his recent book on the new cosmology, The Dream of the Earth, (Sierra Club Books, 1988), "One of the more remarkable achievements of the twentieth century is our ability to tell the story of the universe from empirical observation and with amazing insight into the sequence of transformations that has brought into being the earth, the living world, and the human community. There seems, however, to be little realization of just what this story means in terms of the larger interpretation of the human venture." So if the *meaning* of the Gaia theory is inextricably linked with a modern *cosmology*, then the importance of Thomas Berry's work for Gaian students and scientists can hardly be overstated.

Taking the new cosmology as our fundamental context for understanding Gaia, we see that the universe is not some object with life *in* it, rather, it is *the* subject which is alive. And the human is that being in whom the universe, after some 15 billion years, and Gaia, after nearly 5 billion years, begins to consciously reflect on itself, its meaning, who it is, where it came from, and what it is made of. As Teilhard de Chardin noted well over a half century ago, "the human person is the sum total of fifteen billion years of unbroken evolution now thinking about itself." We are not separate beings *on* the Earth, we are a mode of being *of* the Earth. How you and I think is how Gaia thinks.

Surprisingly, this awareness has thus far been absent from most of the literature on Gaia and is seldom realized in Gaian discussions. For example, those who would say that Gaia will survive just fine no matter what humans do to her are unknowingly operating out of the old cosmology. That kind of a statement fails to recognize the fact that humanity is not separate from Gaia but is Gaia's latest evolutionary development: self-awareness. If someone were to take an icepick and scramble the frontal lobe of a child who had just recently begun to differentiate itself from the world, well, sure, the child may live, but at what kind of a diminished existence. Likewise, the debate as to whether or not the biota regulates the environment becomes ludicrous when it is remembered that the human is a totally integral part of the biosphere. Of course the living Earth regulates its own environment! Who developed heating systems, air conditioning, chain saws, dams, bulldozers, power plants, and cloud seeding if it wasn't the living Earth

I will suggest that a large number of the criticisms of the Gaia theory will evaporate like an early morning mist in the light of the dawning new cosmology. Naturally, it will take time to develop the regular habit of viewing the world this way because it is a shift in our most basic identity, our deepest and largest sense of Self. But if Gaia is to avoid suicide or serious self-impairment, if the evolution of the universe in this solar system is to continue with self-conscious awareness, then we must know and live with the realization that we *are* the Earth, and that Gaia's story is our common sacred story. Ultimately, we are called to consciously participate in the further evolution of the universe through love. The *meaning* of the Gaia theory lies through that door. Thomas Berry, I believe, holds the key.