Biological Fallacy: Life = Organisms

By J. Stan Rowe

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Whatever that mysterious organizing principle called "life" may be, its immediate source is clearly the Ecosphere. Ecology demonstrates that organisms and their earthly matrices are symbiotic and inseparable, differentiated only by our cheating sense of sight. A creative animating process, life is an expression of the blue planet and its 4.6 billion years of evolution. The biological fallacy--equating organisms with life--is the result of a faulty inside-the-system view.

Consider the different experiences of seeing a system, a slice of plant tissue, from the outside and from the inside. Looking through a microscope, the student sees spaces bounded by walls and knows, from the instructor, that he or she is seeing unitary things called cells. Next, looking within, the student is mentally prepared to see parts: nuclei, plastids, mitochondria, starch grains, streaming cytoplasm, and particles dancing in Brownian movement. Note that the identification of parts is contingent on prior definition of the whole.

Suppose that instructor and student, before seeing cells from the outside, were reduced to microscopic size and placed within a cell. The teacher hands binoculars to the student and asks, "What do you see?" Sight from within particularizes; lacking the outside perspective that reveals the whole, the student will see the cell contents as separate and unconnected objects. He or she might then logically identify the dividing, reproducing organelles as alive and their cytoplasmic matrix, vacuoles, and plasma membrane as dead. The idea that the totality is alive, so obvious from the outside, is not apparent.

For thousands of years, humans have been viewers immersed in the Ecosphere, deep-air animals living at the phase boundaries where air and water meet land, mistakenly identifying all manner of things as organic and inorganic, biotic and abiotic, animate and inanimate, living and dead. Dictionaries full of nouns show the efficiency with which we have thought the world to pieces. Around our ignorant taxonomy we have constructed religions, philosophies, and sciences that fragment and departmentalize a global ecosystem whose aliveness is as much expressed in its improbable atmosphere, crustal rocks, seas, soils, and sediments as in organisms. When did life begin? When the Ecosphere itself was born, if not even earlier.

The idea that vitality characterizes the Ecosphere, rather than just its organic parts, illuminates many bright ideas that the lack of reasonable context has dulled--Gregory Bateson's universal pattern that connects all things, Rupert Sheldrake's morphogenetic fields that guide organic development--because the Ecosphere is an organizing entity. It is not a superorganism; it is supraorganic: a higher level of organization than plants and animals, including people. The lively Ecosphere gives the lie to those who see the world's reality as little more than a competitive arena, for without compliant

cooperation among its multitudinous parts the diversifying creativity of the planet could not have evolved nor could its overall homeostasis continue.

When life is conceived as a function of the Ecosphere and its sectoral ecosystems, the subject matter of biology is cast in a bright new light. Where should the preservation emphasis lie, on Earth spaces or on Earth species? Think of the implications of putting animation where it belongs and of denying that life equals organisms.

Other Ecocentric Texts