“The New Trinity of the Triple Existence: How it’s possible to see our world as a conjunction of three different types of being”

A paper read by William McGaughey on July 15, 2016, at the third conference of the International Big History Association at the University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands

Close your eyes and imagine that you are in a Christian worship service. The congregation begins its recitation:

“We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth ...

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God ...

And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, who proceedeth from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and Son together is worshipped and glorified ...”

This statement expresses the Trinity, divine being in three parts.

Now open your eyes.  What do you see?  You see another kind of trinity which I call the Triple Existence. The Trinity of the Christian faith is a key to understanding God’s unseen being.  The Triple Existence is a way of perceiving the world that surrounds you in daily life. Unlike the other, this world is visible and physical.

I am talking first of the world of material existence - matter and the chemicals comprising it. The second type of being, a subset of the first, is life.  Living creatures are physical beings but of a certain kind. They have self-organizing bodies that develop  over a certain period of time. Then, there is a third type of being that I call “thought”.  This being emanates from the brain of a certain species of life, humanity, but it is also a dynamic force reshaping the earth.

History is a story of past human events.  Big history is the story of everything that has happened in the universe from the beginning of time to the present.  The challenge is to pack this experience in a single story that is coherent and meaningful.

The solution I have reached in my book, *History of the Triple Existence*, is to narrate universal history in terms of the emergence of three different types of being:  matter, life, and thought. Their combination constitutes a  triple existence.

Material existence has been here since the Big Bang. Life has evolved on earth during the past 3.5 billion years. Thought accompanies human culture. Information about the world and humanity’s past experience has been slowly accumulating in written records. Humanity’s collective thought has been changing the physical world.

Now is the time to put our knowledge of past events together in a creation story.  I think that the task is to primarily find the design of a story that explains how the world which we humans experience came to be.  There must be a unifying design in the story of the triple existence.

Big History should reflect the tripartite nature of this world.  It should tell how each type of being developed as the universe reached its present state. To a universe of matter alone, life was added; and then came thinking life, achieved in our own species, which also changed the world.

The earth, like the rest of the universe, is comprised of physical being embodied in chemical elements.  The atoms and molecules of physical existence remain unchanged unless disturbed by external influences or events.

Life, on the other hand, is comprised of chemical structures that develop over a period of time.  Living creatures are born, grow to maturity, reproduce, and decline and die according to a largely predetermined program. The genetic coding in each cell governs what happens to the organism at a given time in its life.

Thought is peculiar to cognitive processes occurring within the human brain.  We cannot see thought, only think it.  Even so, human thought has a way of being expressed to facilitate action. This is done primarily through language.  As a type of being, however, I am referring primarily to the product of thought.  It is what thought has created.

Within this framework, it’s possible to identify elements that represent one or the other type of being in a pure form.

Start with matter.  This is what the earth was made of before life appeared. Some of it is still visible.  We have, for instance, rock cliffs on the sides of mountains. There is water that has accumulated in lakes, streams, or in the ocean. The nitrogen and oxygen in the earth’s atmosphere also represent matter.  All that exists physically on earth consists of matter.

Life has a pervasive presence on earth. Except for the polar caps and the bleakest part of deserts, much of the earth’s surface has been transformed by living creatures. Vegetation in the form of trees, grasses, and shrubs covers vast territories. Coral reefs and limestone represent the physical residue of animals that once lived.  Petroleum deposits and coal remain from bodily structures that were alive hundreds of millions of years ago. We also, of course, have the present evidence of life in a variety of plant and animals species as well as microbes, viruses, and the like.

The last type of being, thought, is harder to identify.  Thought has a physical basis in neurological structures and processes existing within the human brain.  We experience this in being conscious. However, such being would not be considered to have an independent existence. Therefore, the focus of attention shifts from thought as a neurological process to the concrete product of thought, especially as exhibited in collective human activity.

As I sit in my study, much of what I can see around me represents thought incorporated in material structures.  I sit in a chair made of metal and plastic.  I stare at a computer screen that belongs to a machine for organizing and displaying information. I pick up a paper clip, a pen, or a piece of paper sitting on the desk in front of me.  The desk itself is artificial, as is the house that I am inhabiting.

From the standpoint of being, all three types have both a physical and a formal dimension pertaining to purpose or design. Scientists have worked out the atomic nature of physical substances.

Physical being is organized in discrete structures of atoms and molecules.  Life combines atoms of nitrogen, hydrogen, oxygen, carbon, phosphorus, sulfur, and other elements in DNA molecules. Those molecules become a blueprint for turning ingested chemicals into organic materials that support larger bodily structures. Thought, which initially consists of electrical impulses within the brain, advances to “being” when its mental processes initiate worldly activity.  Thought’s design becomes physical when human beings consciously act in the world.

So, how do we put this into a story?  Start with the fact that at one time matter did not exist.  It did not exist 15 billion years ago, before the Big Bang.  The story of material development starts with that event and continues with the expanding universe. Gravity produces concentrations of matter which, at a certain point, cause thermonuclear reactions.  Having undergone such processes, stars later exhaust their nuclear fuel, expand, and sometimes explode.  The universe becomes filled with the debris of atoms and molecules from previous explosions that may later recombine.

The solar system, the result of such a recombination, is unusual in that its existence did not stop with lifeless materials.  Somehow life got a start here. We do not know for sure how, after a billion or so years of lifeless existence, organic atoms and molecules appeared on earth.  But this happened. First single-celled prokaryotes appeared and then eukaryotic cells which contained a smaller cell within the cell where the DNA was stored.  From here, life proliferated into a variety of species living in water or on dry land and sometimes flying through the air.  Evolution drove the proliferation of species.

Human beings are a type of animal.  It took life 3.5 billion years to evolve from single-celled microbes and bacteria to multi-celled organisms such as corals, shellfish, insects, amphibians, reptiles, trees, birds,flowering plants, and mammals. Living creatures developed a capacity to extract energy and nutrients from materials in their environment. The human species evolved from certain species of mammals within the ape family.  Homo sapiens itself originated in southern Africa between 100,000 and 200,000 years ago.

That process would have been unusual even if its development had stopped here.  But man had a special capacity for thinking that allowed a third type of being to emerge. I refer here to thought or, more precisely, to the collective product of human thinking.

Look around you and see many kinds of artificial objects that human thought has created. In all parts of the earth, the landscape has been transformed through agriculture, mining, transportation, and urbanization, which are conscious activities intended to serve the human species in certain ways.  They have all left their product on earth.

The point is that the three-part development of being on earth can be described in a collection of stories and, ultimately, in a single story told in separate chapters.  That is what I have done in my book, *History of the Triple Existence*.  The first two chapters pertain to the creation and development of the inanimate universe including the solar system.  The next two chapters, three and four, describe the appearance of life on earth, the evolution of living species, and humanity’s own arrival.  Then come six chapters that describe the development of human society, both prehistoric and in historical times.  The final chapter, number eleven, contemplates humanity’s future.

There is a miraculous quality to the story of Big History that tells how something came from nothing.  Matter came from the void that once filled the universe.  Seemingly without cause or direction, life sprang from inanimate materials. Thought differentiated itself from electro-chemical processes within the human brain to produce visible objects.

So why study Big History?  It’s a story that encompasses all other stories. It’s a fascinating adventure that has not yet come to an end.  I hear echoes of the father, son, and holy ghost in humanity’s latest attempt to grasp the nature of its reality.

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