

Postscript

And the LORD God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever (Genesis 3, 22)

Will there be a future? This is another ancient and unanswered question. We believe that all preceding generations were confronted with it to an extent, and all cultures have likely wondered whether humanity could last much longer. For instance, in the early twentieth century, José Ortega y Gasset (1883–1955) wrote:

No one knows toward what center human things are going to gravitate in the near future, and hence the life of the world has become scandalously provisional [39].

Yet, humanity still thrives, and will likely continue to do so for while.

The previous generation witnessed the split of the nucleus of the atom. The sound produced by that fission killed thousands. For the first time in 4.280 billion years, a single living being was able to destroy the whole world. We take for granted that no rational being would dare to do it, but someone has already informed us that reason appeared relatively late over the course of human evolution, and it is just a thin layer over our beastly nature. Nevertheless, we are still here, wondering and wandering around. Only statistics can explain why the tragedy has not yet occurred: few individuals possess access to nuclear weapons.

Nowadays, as Chargaff said, we are meddling with another nucleus: the cell's. Once again, another nucleus has given us the power to eliminate all life on earth. Life is indeed very fragile. The difference, this time, is that the planet would remain intact. It would continue to orbit the sun for ages. No living beings at all. Only the lifeless minerals and the ashes of what used to be alive. No one to regret the past errors or to speculate about the future.

Atoms and cells are invisible to the naked eye. It is amazing that such minuscule entities hide within themselves such enormous destructive power. Yet this is an one-sided and unfair picture. We cannot forget to mention that nuclear energy delivers electric power to whole cities, and that, in the future, it may be the fuel that will

be used to take us to other planets. Analogously, Synthetic Biology may be applied to cure several human diseases, and, if employed in agriculture or animal breeding, may save mankind from starvation due to a food shortage caused by climate change. All of this means that both atom and cell nuclei may be adopted to benefit the biosphere as well. Who decides?

The only animal able to choose is the *Homo sapiens*. The Latin root of the word “sapiens” means *wise*.¹ Wisdom and Knowledge are very different things. While there is no doubt that our world is full of knowledge, the same cannot be said of wisdom. And it is *wisdom* that we desperately need more of. The last few centuries have shown that knowledge without wisdom produces a paradoxical effect: instead of expanding human horizons, it reduces them to a single question which was best expressed by Albert Camus (1913–1960) in the opening line of his book *The Myth of Sisyphus*:

There is only one really serious philosophical question, and that is suicide.

More *wisdom* than knowledge is necessary to refute the “Devil’s doctrine” mentioned by Chargaff. Our ancestors knew that some deeds cannot be undone, and unless we are absolutely sure what we are doing, we should not trifle with matters of life and death. Why are we lying to ourselves and ignoring this common sense advice? Chargaff was right about the author of the maxim “what can be done must be done,” for it certainly came surreptitiously from the *very center of Hell* where Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) put Lucifer.

We hold that this fragile thing called *life* lies between two *massive events*. The first was discovered by the Catholic priest Georges Lemaître (1894–1966), and it was the origin of our Universe. We do not know yet the nature of the second. It may be another tragic collision with a celestial body, or the “Big Freeze” that some physicists predict based on the latest cosmological evidence. But we can also force the ultimate extinction of life to come earlier either as a deafening *mushroom cloud* or as a silent *gene drive* that will sweep away all living organisms from the face of our planet. Nothing can be done to prevent the laws of Physics from following their natural course, but *homo Sapiens* can avoid the last two possibilities. On a geological time scale, our species is still in the early embryonic stage. It would be a pity to discover which cataclysm will put an end to all life, before realizing “what life is.”

Lord, forgive them, for they know what they do!
(Karl Kraus [59])

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¹Whoever chose the Latin word *sapiens* instead of *cogitans* was aware of the difference between them.

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Index

A

Adenine, 1, 2, 6–8, 16, 31, 33, 37
Agriculture, 72
Alan Mathison Turing, 30
Alighieri, Dante, 72
Alphabet, 1, 2, 6–7, 33, 50, 52
Animal breeding, 72
Applied mathematics, ix
Archaea, 36, 60–62, 65–67
Aristotle, x, 33
Artificial Intelligence (AI), 30
Assembly, 3, 9, 25, 34–36, 67
Autosomal, 26
Avery, O.T., 7

B

Bacteria, 3, 10, 11, 36, 60, 61, 63, 65–67
Bartók, 18
Base-pairing, 37
Bell number, 33, 38, 39
Big Freeze, 72
Bioinformatics, 11, 12, 14, 36, 72
Biological function, 2, 6, 13, 33, 64
Biological pathways, 2
Biologists, ix, 10, 55, 68, 69
Biology, 2, 11–14, 29, 33, 36, 38, 46, 55, 66,
69–70, 72
Biotechnological tool, 46
Box-and-whisker plot, 58, 59, 61, 62

C

Camus, Albert, 72
Cell, 2, 3, 6, 69, 71, 72

Chargaff, E., vii, viii, ix, x, 2–5, 7–9, 15, 17,
19–21, 29–31, 37, 55, 71, 72
Chargaff's first parity rule (CFPR), 7, 8
Chargaff's grammar of Biology, 5
Chargaff's second parity rule (CSPR), 4, 8, 9,
15, 17, 19–21, 23, 30–32, 43–45, 50,
51, 56
Chesterton, G. K., ix
Chromosomes, 10, 15, 16, 26, 27, 29
Closed set, 40
Codons, 47
Cohen, J.E., 69
Collins, F.S., 12
Complementarity, 37
Complement operator, 31, 36
Complement-reverse operator, 36–38
Completeness, 35, 36, 67
Computer science, 11, 12, 14
Conscious, viii, ix
Courant, R., 5, 36
Crick, F.H.C., 8
CRISPR, 46
Culture, x, 71
Cytosine, 1, 2, 6–8, 16, 31, 33, 37

D

Data, 12, 13, 24, 26, 30, 37, 48, 55–70
da Vinci, Leonardo, 18
Death, ix, x, 2, 72
Debussy, 18
Demonstrative reasoning, 9, 29, 55
Devil's doctrine, 3, 72
Devlin, K., 5, 9
Diseases, 2, 72

DNA, 1–14, 17, 29–31, 33, 37, 38, 43–46, 52, 56, 57, 64, 70

DNA methylation, 64

DNA's first principles, 4

Dobzhansky, T., 1, 2

Double-helix structure, 8

E

Einstein, Albert, 1, 65

Embrapa, 61, 72

ENCODE, 10, 12, 13

Equivalence class (EC), 40–42, 45, 47, 57

Euclid, 18

Eugene Goostman, 30

Eukaryota, 36, 60–63, 65–67

Eukaryote, 13, 67

Evolution, 2, 5, 71

Evolutionary forces, 30

Extinction, 2, 72

F

Fibonacci, 17–21, 29

Fixed-word, 37, 41, 45–48, 50, 62, 65

Forsdyke, D.R., 30, 31

Fractal, 51, 52

Framework, 5, 29, 32, 69

Franklin, Rosalind, 8

Freak Biology, 66

Full rank, 24

G

Gamow, G., 55

Gardner, M., 1

Gasset, J.O., 71

Generating Set (GS), 42–43, 47, 48, 50, 51, 57, 58, 64

Genes, 6, 10–13, 46, 65

Genetic code, 1, 65

Genetic engineering, 3

Genome, 2, 3, 6, 9–13, 15, 24–27, 34–36, 57, 61, 65, 67, 69

Genome editing, 3, 46

God, 2, 10, 55–71

Gödel, ix

Golden ratio, 17–19

Grammar, 2, 4, 7

Grammar of Biology, 5, 7–8, 29–53

Grammatical rules, 4

Greek, 10

Guanine, 1, 2, 6–8, 31, 33, 37

H

Hadamard, Jacques, viii–ix

Hardware, 2

Hardy, G. H., viii, ix, 5

Heraï, R.H., x

High performance computing (HPC), 61

Hilbert, ix, 46

Hilbert, D., ix, 46

Histogram, 35, 57–59, 65, 66

History, vii, 3, 10

Homo sapiens, 61, 72

Human genome, 3, 9, 11–13, 24–27, 34–36, 57, 67

Human genome project (HGP), 10–13, 25

Human nucleotide frequencies, 9–27, 29

Human understanding, viii, 40

I

Inequalities, 63

Insight, viii, 14, 40–42, 47–52, 66

Interdisciplinary, ix, 12

Intuition, viii, ix

Invariant property, 52

Inverse, 38

Involutions, 38

J

Jacobian, 24

“Junk” DNA, 13

K

k2-effect, 62–69

Kingdoms of life, 35, 59–69

Kline, M., 10, 29

Knowledge, vii, 2–4, 6, 8, 9, 20, 66, 72

Krauss, K., x

k-word dictionary, 33

k-words, 34, 35, 38, 39, 42, 43, 47, 67

L

Laboratório Multiusuário de Bioinformática da Embrapa, 61

Lamaître, Georges, 72

Lamarck, 2

Language, 2, 4, 5, 7, 14

Language of DNA, 2, 4, 14

Leonardo of Pisa, 18

Liber Abaci, 18

Life, 1–4, 6, 9, 13, 71, 72

Limit, 2, 12, 17, 18, 21, 22

Line, 5, 13, 15, 16, 18, 69, 72

Living being, 2, 3, 5, 69, 71

Loneragan, B.J.F., 40

Luck (L), 9, 30

M

Man, vii, x, 1, 2, 55, 71

Mathematical model(ing), 10, 14–27, 29, 33, 55

Mathematics, viii, ix, 5, 9, 11, 12, 14, 18, 29, 32, 33, 38, 40, 46, 55, 69–70

Math Table (MT), 47–49, 56, 58, 61

Matrix, 47

Matthew, P., 1, 5

Michelangelo, 15

Miescher, F., 6, 7

Minimization, 24

Molecular Biology, 36, 38, 46

Mononucleotide, 6, 29–31, 43, 44

mRNA, 4

Mutagenic chain reaction (MCR), 2

N

National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI), 16, 24, 60

National Human Genome Research Institute (NHGRI), 12

National Institute of Health (NIH), 11

Nature, vii, 1, 3–6, 10, 14, 18, 29–31, 37, 42, 48, 55, 64, 71, 72

NCBI. *See* National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI)

Newman, Cardinal, 7

Newton, I., 14, 29

NHGRI. *See* National Human Genome Research Institute (NHGRI)

NIH. *See* National Institute of Health (NIH)

Nobel, 11, 65

Nocedal, J., 14, 15

Non-compliant genome assemblies, 67

Number, 4–6, 11, 13, 14, 17, 20, 21, 31–36, 38, 39, 42, 47, 51, 52, 61, 65

O

Objective function, 14, 24

Oligonucleotides, 3, 32, 38, 50, 51

Optimization problem, 14, 15, 23–25, 27

Optimizing, 14

Organism, 2, 4–6, 10, 13, 36, 46, 57, 59–61, 67, 69, 72

P

Palimpsest, 6, 52

Palindromes, 46

Palindromic sequences, 45–46

Parity, 8, 30, 31, 46–53, 55

Partition, 32, 33, 38–42, 57

Patterns, 2, 5–6, 9, 56, 69

Perez, J.-C., 20

Phenomenon, 9, 10, 62, 63, 66

Philosophical question, viii, 72

Philosophy, vii, viii, 69

Photoelectric effect, 66

Phylogenetic tree, 61

Plato, x

Plausible reasoning, 9

Poincaré, Henri, viii

Pólya, G., 9, 29, 55, 59

Prabhu, V.V., 4, 31, 43

Protocols, 4

Pythagoreans, 33

R

Ramanujan, ix

Random DNA sequence, 30, 43, 44

Rational, viii, ix, 10, 19, 71

Reason, vii–x, 4, 14, 17, 18, 46, 53, 64, 69, 71

Repeats, 13, 46, 60

Repetitive sequence, 13, 34

Reverse operator, 36

RNA, 1, 2, 7, 12

RNA-world, 13

Rules, 3–6, 8, 10, 29, 30, 52, 65, 67, 69, 70

S

Sanger, F., 10, 11

Sanger method, 10, 11

SBMAC SpringerBriefs, ix

Science, vii, 1–3, 5–7, 9, 10, 14, 19, 29, 33, 69

Scientific discovery, viii

Scientist, vii, ix, x, 3, 4, 9, 12, 14

Set partition, 33, 38–42, 57

Shimabukuro, A.I., x

Sir Adrian Peter Bird, 63

Sisyphus, 72

Socrates, x

Software, 2

Species, 1, 2, 25, 35, 36, 60, 65, 72

Staden, R., 11

Stark, R., 10

Stove, D.C., vii

Suicide, 72

Symmetry principle (SP), 4, 31, 32, 43–47, 49, 52, 56
Synthesized genome, 3
Synthetic Biology, 3–5, 46, 72
Szybalski, 4, 69

T

Table, 39, 55
Tetranucleotide hypothesis, 7, 8
Theorem, 44, 45, 47, 50
Theoretical model, 17
Theory, 7, 32, 66, 68
Thymine, 1, 2, 6–8, 31, 33, 37
Transcription, 4, 69
Transposons, 13
Truth, vii, viii, 30, 46
Turing test, 30

U

Umberto Eco, 15
Universe, viii, 1, 6, 9, 10, 39, 72
Uracil (U), 1, 2

V

Venter, J.C., 3, 6, 11
Vogel, F., 11, 12

W

Waterman, M.S., 13
Watson, J.D., 8
Wisdom, 72
World, vii, 1, 5, 6, 9, 10, 13, 29, 71, 72
Wright, S.J., 14, 15