

Is There a Right to Knowledge About Our Origins?

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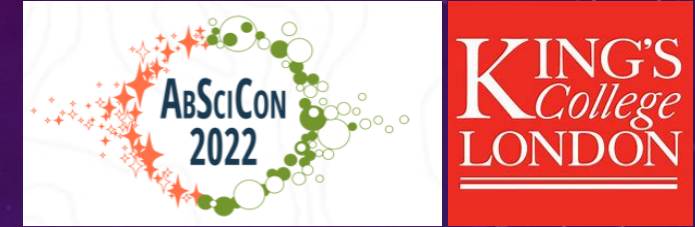
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Abstract

The core argument is that there may be a right to some of the knowledge that astrobiology can supply about the origins of life, and specifically about our human origins. Such a right might be appealed to in international agreements and declarations by bodies such as the UN.

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IS THERE A RIGHT TO KNOWLEDGE ABOUT OUR ORIGINS?

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THE KIND OF RIGHT IN QUESTION

‘A right to knowledge about our origins’

The kind of right that interests me is the kind that we might cite within international treaties or declarations about major and shared human entitlements.

PRELIMINARY COMMENTS ABOUT RIGHTS-1

- Rights talk is just an established way of *giving reasons for actions and responses*.
- Because talk about rights has this practical dimension, it is important not to 'overpopulate' the world with rights, to the point where an excess of claims becomes too demanding.

PRELIMINARY COMMENTS ABOUT RIGHTS-2

- Many of the rights that we enjoy have a history. It makes sense to talk about them from a particular point onwards, and not before.
- Rights associated with changes in science and technology are a good example.



RIGHTS WITH A HISTORY

Most or all of us have a right to access the internet. It is a pivotal arena of human interaction.

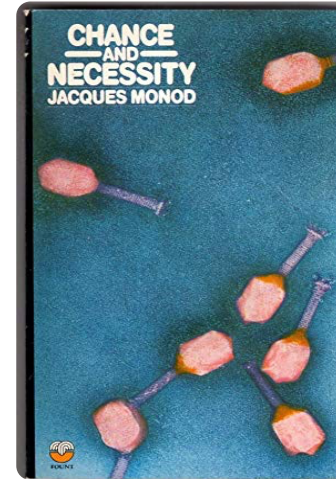
But nobody in the 1950s had such a right, nobody in the 19th century had such a right, and nobody who lived earlier had such a right.

SOCIETAL IMPORTANCE

- The emergence of the technology is not enough to underpin this kind of right.
- The technology also has to have a sufficiently broad societal importance.

WHAT SORT OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT ORIGINS?

- The kind of knowledge that astrobiology can supply.
- E.g. about whether or not our existence is contingent all the way down, a local accident, or whether the universe has life-favouring features.



GROUNDS FOR CLAIMING SUCH A RIGHT

- **A thought experiment:** We might delay but not withhold information about discovery if we had it ready to hand.
- **More philosophically engaged considerations:** the main lines of argument about rights do seem to offer some support.

DRAWING FROM PRAGMATIC ANIMAL RIGHTS THEORY

- Rights are often underpinned by appeal to our **autonomous rational agency**, or by appeal to some weakened version of the latter (e.g. sentience).
- But rights can also be underpinned by appeal to **strong interests** or **interests with a certain kind of depth**. This can yield a significantly more pragmatic approach.

INTEREST-BASING

- We have rights whenever our interests are strong enough to ground a duty on the part of others.
- But do we have a sufficiently strong interest in knowledge about our origins?

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE FOR A STRONG INTEREST

- When Darwin wrote the *Origin of Species*, he was breaking from a good many things, but also engaging in a practice that seems to be present across all cultures and goes all the way back in human history.
- Similarly, Oparin, Haldane, Miller and Urey were all doing something new but also something that goes deep in our human history.

A REINFORCING CONSIDERATION

Depth is not sheer fantasy: what goes deep is not just the telling of stories about our origins, but stories that contain a kind of knowledge, e.g.:

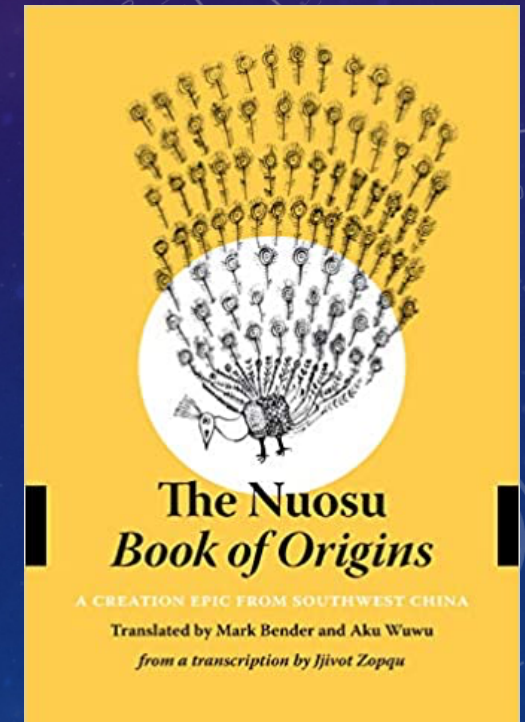
- **Amazonian origin stories** connect humans and other primates.
- **North American stories** of Skywoman's fall from the Pleiades suggests that both the role of water and origins with a larger than Earthly component.



A REINFORCING CONSIDERATION

Depth is not sheer fantasy: what goes deep is not just the telling of stories about our origins, but stories that contain a kind of knowledge, e.g.:

- **The Nuosu in SW China**, trace all life back to common origins in 12 tribes of snow. The tribes with blood (animals and us), the tribes without blood (plants). Again, with cosmological situating/movement from sky to ground.



AVOIDING TOO MANY RIGHTS

- It is not just about having the technology and ability to generate the knowledge in question.
- The idea of a right to knowledge about origins does appeal to *something of sufficiently broad societal importance* to at least consider inclusion in treaties and declarations.

ARE WE THERE YET?

- None of this matters if most of us would not be able to incorporate knowledge about origins into our lives.
- There have been times when would not have been able to.
- I want to suggest that we are at least closer to the point when humans in general might be able to use such knowledge to fill out a better picture of who we are, based upon a better understanding of where we have come from.
- We are already there, or will get there soon.