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BOOK REVIEW

The Origin of Everything, via Universal Selection, or the Preservation of Favored Systems in Contention for Existence by D. B. Kelley. Newbury, Ohio: Woodhollow Press, 2013. 339 pp. $32.95 (paperback). ISBN 978-0985462505.

The great problem in writing a theory of everything is that it may turn out to be a theory of nothing. Here is how it works. If you develop a theory that explains only some small, simple Thing, then the theory is very strong. It is precise, understandable, and it always works. As you expand the theory to encompass another Thing, it becomes weaker. It may still be precise and understandable, but it is now more complicated, and because it involves two things rather than one, it starts to become conditional. This means that in order for it to work with regard to the second Thing, we may have to take into account something about the first Thing. And so it goes. As the theory covers more and more Things, it becomes less precise, less understandable, and parts need to be added on in order cover multiple contingencies.

People who go down this path inevitably come to a critical point, at which their theory has become so precisely complicated that it can barely be understood, and gargantuan efforts become necessary to make it work at all. To resolve this impasse, they have a terminological epiphany. They suddenly find a language (that is, an arcane vocabulary) which confers the appearance of simplicity to the morass they have created. Precision is replaced by undefined terms and relationships, described in forceful but impenetrable prose. Argumentation becomes not an activity of rational thought, but a magical experience in which a swirling array of undefined concepts assembles itself in just the right way to come to whatever conclusion is desired. In the mouth of its inventor the theory does indeed explain everything, but in the ears of the audience it explains nothing.

I do not know if this process was the origin of *The Origin of Everything*, but there are some telltale signs. Kelley regards that everything from atoms to the universe itself comprises "systems." There is a chapter titled Defining Systems, which talks about systems without ever defining them. Evidently "system" is another word for "thing." Kelley's systems have behaviors (which he calls "behavioralisms") that are in some way motivated by intents. Thus they choose to cooperate with each other, or to compete with each other, or else they come to some conciliatory compromise between

these extremes. There is, in fact, a rather large literature on the concept of "system" and descriptions of the behavior of natural systems, virtually none of which is used or referenced here.

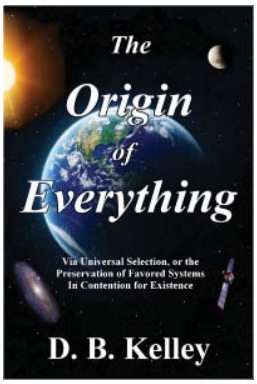
Systems that exist do so because they are "stable" (another undefined term). If they are not stable, they are "weak." They are encouraged to become stable by a universal process of Behavioral Selection, another chapter title in which the topic under discussion is neither defined nor explained. Here is a sample:

> [selection] presents itself as one of the most fundamental laws in all of Nature, not only because it's ultimately responsible for stability and change, but because it achieves them by forever encouraging behavior that is both efficient and productive. It does so by favoring behavior that is good relative to the assemblages at hand. It thereby instills conduct that is respective not only to the phenomenon, but to those systems both superior and subordinate to its own. It will thus be clear that it forces all ensembles into maximum equilibrium, as it is often the path of least resistance for everything and everyone involved that leads to the greatest measure of relative good.

If this passage speaks to you, and you think it provides a definition or some kind of insight, then you are among the audience for this book. If, on the other hand, you find that it is dominated by bald assertion and looping repetition (in addition to poor writing), then you are not. I did not select this passage because it is unusual; in fact, it is a very good representation of both the thinking and style of the entire book.

Kelley does not shrink from making immodest comparisons between his work and that of Charles Darwin, in which Darwin is clearly the lesser intellect. Not only the title but also the foundation of Kelley's thesis are grounded in Darwin; indeed, he refers to his ideas as "universal Darwinism." Darwin is taken to task, however, for failing to appreciate that his ideas were not limited to the world of biology, which he carefully and systematically investigated for some thirty years before publishing, but are in fact ubiquitous truths, finally revealed by Kelley. The reader may well wonder, if Darwin failed where Kelley has succeeded, why Kelley's book is not filled with the careful working out of the consequences of a persistent program of intelligent and directed observation of the natural world. Why does Kelley think that vague and disconnected references to concepts in physics, joined with homey and familiar analogies from daily life, represent an advance over the methodological clarity and modesty of Darwin? Dare we think that *The Origin of Everything* is a sign of how far the practice of science has fallen in the 150 years since *On the Origin of Species*?

It seems to me possible that Kelley's whole selection idea is related to a common misinterpretation of Darwin. The phrase at issue is "survival of



the fittest," which can probably be parsed as "those individuals that survive are the ones that have the greatest capacity to survive." Stated this way, the principle is as true as it is barren. Saying that systems are selected (somehow) because they are "stable" might be insightful if we had a definition of "stable," but without such a definition the assertion might be parsed as "systems are selected because they are favored for selection." In fact, Darwin had perfectly good models for selection, involving predator–prey relationships, and competition for scarce resources, such as food. The only inescapably logical part of his reasoning was that an animal had to survive to a certain age in order to reproduce. By the mechanism of inheritance, reproduction implemented the last step of the selection process. For Kelley, systems reproduce themselves through an expression of their endlessly cyclical existence. Even more mysteriously, we read that

> Although selection thus appears as one of the most influential principles in Nature, however ironic, it involves a process that in some regards does not exist. . . . Seemingly contradictory to everything that we have learned thus far, sometimes neither Nature nor any other system makes any discriminatory selection at all.

I found the book to be increasingly difficult to read, as it wandered among a variety of topics, mentioning important works by famous authors, evidently hoping that propinquity alone would associate these great ideas with universal Darwinism. The insistent, unsupported repetition of the book's essential themes gives one the same sense as reading Voltaire's *Candide*, in which Dr. Pangloss insists on finding that we live in the best of all possible worlds despite the mounting contradictory evidence. Or perhaps Rudyard Kipling's *Just-So Stories*, in which increasingly confabulated explanations are found for every observable fact.

This book was published by Woodhollow Press in Ohio (Kelly evidently lives in Cleveland). I could not find a webpage for this press, and none of the book databases (including Amazon) listed any publications. In fact, the only web presence of Woodhollow I could locate was (multiple cites of) a laudatory press release about Kelley's book. In the modern era of publishing it is probably worthwhile to spend some effort on ascertaining the reputation and record of the publisher as part of the decision to acquire a book.

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