

## THE INSIDE OF THE UNIVERSE AND INDESTRUCTIBLE RIGHTNESS

### *The New Cosmic Story: Inside Our Awakening Universe*

By John F. Haught (Yale University Press, 2017)

Reviewed by Herman Greene

The “Book of the Year”? “Yes” [wrote a reviewer](#) of John Haught’s book, *The New Cosmic Story: Inside our Awakening Universe*. “Yes,” says this reviewer, “It’s the book of the year for me.” I highly recommend it for your reading. Now let me describe the book and why it has had an impact on my work and the work of the Center for Ecozoic Studies.

As is often the case, when you come across something profound, you say to yourself, “I knew that, I just didn’t quite have the words to describe it.” There’s another name for this and that is “self-evidence.” Contrary to what we often imagine philosophy to be about, Alfred North Whitehead wrote that self-evidence is the primary test for good philosophy. Self-evidence means that you really find something to be true in your own experience and it helps you to organize your understanding of the world. This is what *The New Cosmic Story* did for me.

In the book, Haught writes about the rise of subjectivity in the universe. There is an outside story of the universe (its physical dimensions) and an inside story where the universe is developing subjectivity and narrative meaning, and seeking fulfillment in what is unfinished. This inner dimension expanded greatly with the birth of the human, and within the human journey it expanded greatly again when the spiritual foundations of humanity arose during what Karl Jaspers called the “Axial Age” of 800-300 BCE. Haught calls what occurred in the axial period an “awakening to a sense of rightness.” This sense of rightness came to be understood as transcendent, indestructible, fulfilling, and liberating. This rightness was idealized in some traditions as a unifying principle (or process) called God, and all-that-was came to be understood as a meaningful *uni*-verse. Read religiously, what the universe was/is about was/is awakening to the dawning of rightness. This awakening did not and does not deny the long shadows in the cosmic journey, rather it gave and gives a sense that the universe is still emerging and that the human journey is not over.

As I read this book I discovered things I knew and were important to me, but that I had neglected in my work. These things have to do with subjectivity, the universe being unfinished and in a state of becoming, and the universe being lured forward by an incorruptible, indestructible rightness. Put another way, CES has neglected telling the story of the promise that is present in the growth of subjectivity and sense of rightness in the universe, and the importance of faith. Faith is the belief beyond all appearances that the universe is not finished and is moving towards greater justice, beauty, truth, and goodness.

Things can be important to you, but they may lie beneath awareness until someone calls them to your attention. Faith has been important to me and I have been sustained by an awareness of the promise of the growth of subjectivity, truth, beauty, and goodness. Yet in speaking to others and even in my self-talk I have emphasized effort against all odds in an uncertain universe . . . this is something of a hangover from my years as a student in the 1960s where I

took in the message of existentialism: we live in an absurd world and we must create our own meaning. Life doesn't have a goal other than what we decide today. I haven't lived in existential despair and I have modified the message of existentialism as it applies to me, nonetheless there it lay in my being. From this place, the Great Work was our responsibility, even my (overwhelming) responsibility and the success of the Great work rested just on our decisions and my decision. While I have always been religious, somehow my religious understanding shifted as I read Haught's words about the persistent working in an unfinished universe of an incorruptible, indestructible rightness.

Haught wrote, "Running silently through the heart of matter, a series of events that would flower into 'subjectivity' has been a part of the universe from the start (p. 15)." He said attempting to understand the universe by its physical laws is like trying to understand literature by the rules of grammar. These rules of grammar make possible meaningful writing and reading, but do not in themselves provide for either. Likewise the materiality and physical laws of the universe make possible its inner journey, but are not the inner journey itself. The inner journey of the universe is one of meaning, beauty, purpose, goodness, and anticipation. It is as much a part of the universe story as the laws of physics. I know this is true because this is my experience. I am the subject (one of many) that the universe labored for billions of years to bring into being.

What human would not say that the growth of meaning, beauty, purpose, goodness, and anticipation are part of the universe? Only high abstraction of thought would deny this because it is evident in our own experience, and thus demands inclusion, even if an immediate perfection or immediate realization is not possible. Life is a journey, the universe is a journey . . . a long (and longing) journey, a difficult one only to be redeemed by beauty.

Haught gives three ways of relating to this inner dimension of the journey of the universe. In scientific materialism, it is simply denied. The universe is composed of inert matter in motion moved strangely, on the one hand, only by antecedent deterministic causes that go back to its beginning, and, on the other hand, by accident or chance, such as in random mutation of genes or the accident of why we have this universe. The deepest reality of the universe is the particles and forces identified in physics. In scientific materialism our human senses of freedom and purpose are illusory. The universe is meaningless though we may find (an illusory sense of) meaning in our own lives. This understanding is baffling to our own experience: what we consider to be our humanity cannot be accounted for in it. Yet it is the philosophical ground of modern secular thought and the institutions it has given rise to including, without limitation, our academies of learning.

The second approach, which Haught calls "analogical," has been and is dominant in the classical religious traditions and in the humanistic teachings and cultural manifestations of those religions (as well as in contemporary spiritualities that claim to be spiritual but not religious). The analogical recognizes meaning and goodness, but places them outside the physical universe. There is an eternal realm of perfection we come into contact with and to which we belong, but it is not in the physical world. In some traditions, the soul which communicates with

this realm is a stranger to the human body that houses the soul. In the analogical understanding, the plan of the universe was established in the beginning. We look backward to a primordial goodness and forward to an other-worldly, already divinely realized goodness to come. Our earthly life is a school for souls, the universe is a backdrop for the drama of human redemption. The physical universe dwells in the presence of eternity and analogy's practice calls for presence to the unchanging ideal of eternity (the eternal present). Things that change do not participate in the divine.

Haught acknowledges the significance of the analogical for the inner life and that its language and practice has enduring importance now and in the future. It recognizes the transcendent and the inner life and calls people to a higher plane of being and action. His criticism is that it has not appropriated what science has disclosed about the universe—the universe is still coming into being, it is unfinished and develops narrative meaning over long stretches of time. As Haught puts it, analogy ignores “the unfinished cosmic story and the painful uncertainty of its still-coming-to-birth (p. 198).” In so doing it fails to offer humans the deepest awareness, sensitivity, and spiritual journey. Further when analogical religion sacralizes a rigid ideal it may give rise to dogmatism, exclusivism, and unbending moral codes.

The third approach, which Haught advocates, he calls “anticipation.” In this approach the beginning of the universe was just that, the beginning. It was the beginning of a cosmic journey in which the divine and the subjects of the universe have been and are engaged in realizing greater truth, beauty, and goodness. The cosmic journey is the locus of the divine. The divine raises up new possibilities in the ever-changing journey and acts as a lure for creative participation in the future. The experience of the divine is not so much with being, as becoming. This is experienced with varying levels of intensity as ecstatic awareness of possibility. There is appreciation for the journey that has occurred already and for what is occurring at this moment, but in this approach, we, trusting in an indestructible goodness, live in excited anticipation of what is yet to be and give of ourselves to creative participation in its realization. We believe the feeling of meaning and purpose that we have is grounded in, and is a part of, the journey of a meaningful, purposeful universe. We and the divine live in an unfinished universe. The past is prelude for greater glory. “Ecological responsibility, therefore, has to do not only with past cosmic achievements and terrestrial ecosystems, but also with preparation for the augmentation of life and the emergence of more-being in the liberating expansiveness of what is yet to be (p. 141).”

As I wrote earlier, reading Haught's book brought me to awareness of some of my own shortcomings. In speaking about global warming and ecological degradation, I have tended to focus on the outer (physical) journey of the universe and our response to it. Even though I have consistently held up Thomas Berry's statement that “the universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects,” as being Berry's most important statement, I have often failed to bring the inner dimension of the story of the universe into the picture. Likewise I have often failed to bring into the picture this dawning of a sense of rightness and that the universe is guided by a transcendent, indestructible rightness. Part of the power of Martin Luther King, Jr., was that he brought subjectivity and indestructible goodness into his work as, for example,

when he said, "The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice." He spoke of anticipation when he declared, "I have been to the mountain top, I have seen the promised land."

I can only end this review by again highly recommending this book. I hope you get as much out of it as I have.