

THE POSSIBILITY OF THE ARTIFICIAL CREATION OF LIFE

HAROLD ARMSTRONG

Department of Physics

Queen's University, Kingston, Canada

There has been talk lately about the "artificial creation of life" in the laboratory. Christians have often been concerned about these matters; may I suggest some thoughts which might be helpful?

The proposal is that a living being (let us say that, for it is a being, a something, a substance in Aristotle's sense, of which we are talking, not the attribute "life"; just as a carpenter could build a white house, but not "whiteness".), might be produced in the laboratory, in some way other than from a previously existing living being.

First of all: if this were done, it would not make God any the less, any more than my reproducing a line of Hamlet would decrease Shakespeare's genius. Or consider it another way: suppose (as could have happened, although it did not) that when our Lord fed the multitudes, bread had never before been made and so was seen for the first time, but that subsequently men had learned the art of baking. Would that have made the miracle any the less? Obviously not!

Secondly: until two hundred or so years ago, men believed that living beings, certain worms and insects, for instance, were produced without the intervention of living beings, by what was called "spontaneous generation." And this belief made no trouble for their Christianity; Sir Thomas Brown, for instance, a devout man certainly, believed in spontaneous generation, and mentioned it in passing in his "Religio Medici". The suggested "creation of life" would, in fact, be just spontaneous generation under special conditions. And if this notion did not bother our forefathers, why should it bother us?

In the third place: can we be sure that living beings have never been created artificially before? We are told in Exodus 8, 7 that the magicians of Egypt produced frogs. And, Revelation 13, 15 might mean that something like that will happen again.

Incidentally, the fact that the magicians succeeded in their attempts — up to a point — does not, of

course, show that God had lost control. He was longsuffering, then as always, (2 St. Peter, 3, 9), but, when He judged that things had gone far enough, that was the end. The magicians, even with Satan's help, were not able to do any more. (Exodus 8, 18). It is true that the extent of Satan's help should not be underestimated; he who was likely present when the sons of God shouted for joy at the Creation (Job 38, 7) would be in a good position to know something about how life was created. But for all that, just as in Egypt, his power was puny in comparison with God's power working through Moses, even so it is and shall be. So if, in the future, we should see something presented as "creation of life artificially" we could expect to see it go just as far as God in His longsuffering is willing to allow — thus far and no further.

Finally: even though the artificial production of a living being (should it come about) need be no threat to our faith, yet the attempt to do such a thing may be something in which no Christian (or Jew, or, for that matter Moslem) should be engaged. The building of the tower of Babel, so far as we know, threatened no one's faith, but for all that it was presumption. Incidentally, if it be said that the magicians of Egypt had help from dark powers, can we be sure (I say this in all seriousness) that the same might not be true of similar attempts today? The devil can think of many ways of working with man to man's harm, nor is he limited to appearing complete with horns and tail and stirring the cauldron with his pitchfork.

Finally: if we look around, we will likely find that some of those who are most interested in "creating life" are some of those shouting loudest that we must do something about the "population explosion." Is it not strange that men should with one breath cry that we have too much "life", and with the next urge that we strive mightily to make more?