

## Jeremy Griffith's speech at the WTM Website Launch

**Launch of the Foundation for Humanity's Adulthood's website—  
now known as the World Transformation Movement (WTM)—by  
one of the world's leading biologists, Professor Charles Birch, at  
the Australian Museum on 16 October 1998.**



Following WTM member John Biggs's speech, Jeremy Griffith\* introduced Professor Charles Birch. Jeremy is a biologist and author of the biological explanation of the human condition that the WTM supports. Jeremy introduced Professor Birch by explaining '*How holism relates to the human condition*'.

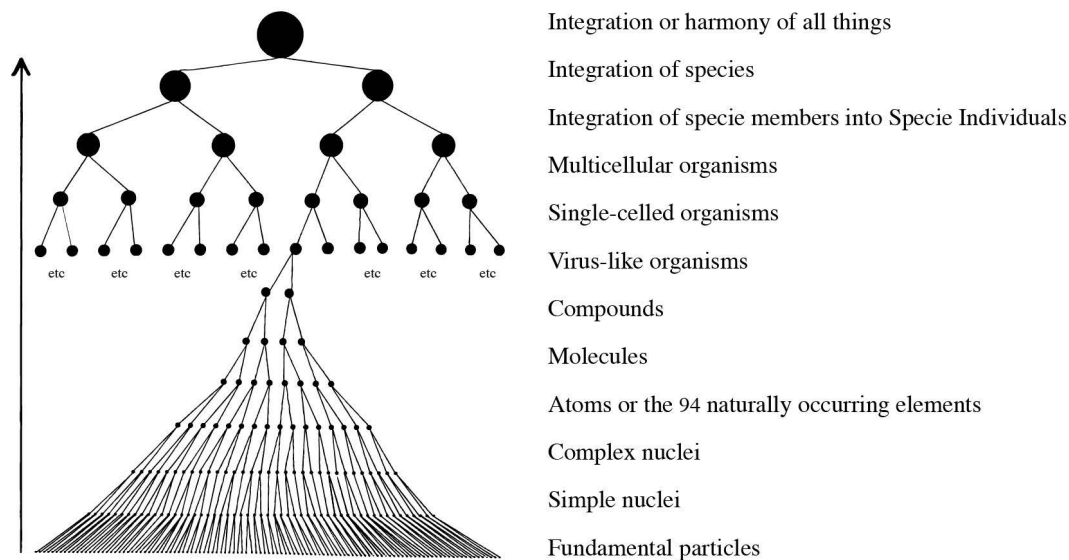
“ It is my very great privilege to welcome Professor Charles Birch. Charles was my biology professor at Sydney University.

I think we in Australia are incredibly fortunate to have such a man as Charles Birch living here. Tim Macartney-Snape and John Biggs [the previous speakers] referred to Charles's courage in daring to be holistic in his scientific approach.

In introducing Charles I thought I should explain the relationship between holism and the human condition, the human condition being the subject that the Foundation is concerned with addressing.

I'm holding up here an enlarged entry from the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* which says, '**holism: [is] the tendency in nature to form wholes that are more than the sum of their parts by**

**ordered grouping.** A lot of people think that holism refers to the interrelatedness of matter, but it is much more than that. At a deeper, more important level, holism refers to the integration of matter. The following is a diagram from Arthur Koestler's book *Janus: a summing up* which documents 'the tendency in nature to form wholes'.



Development of Order or Integration of Matter  
 A similar chart appears in Arthur Koestler's book *Janus: a summing up*, 1978.

This diagram shows that fundamental particles develop or come together or integrate to form simple nuclei, then these integrate to form complex nuclei, then these integrate to form atoms, then these integrate to form molecules, then these integrate to form compounds, then these integrate to form virus-like organisms, etc. It is a diagram of the integration of matter. This is what holism is referring to, the tendency of matter to form ever larger (in space) and more stable (in time) wholes.

The question is how does holism relate to the human condition?

Well, for a whole to form and stay together the parts of the whole must consider the welfare of the whole above their own welfare. If they don't the whole won't hold together. The parts have to subordinate their own welfare to the greater good of the whole. Simply stated, selfishness is divisive or *disintegrative* while selflessness is *integrative*.

So if you admit to holism you are actually admitting to there being this purpose or theme to life of the development of order of matter. The problem with this truth is that it confronts us humans with the huge question, which is 'well why aren't we integrative in our behaviour?' 'Why are we divisive (that is competitive, aggressive and selfish) when the ideals are to be integrative (that is cooperative, loving and selfless)?' Admitting to holism raises the issue of the human condition.

Periodically in the press articles appear discussing holistic science. This is one written in 1991 by Deidre Macken, titled *Science Friction* (see [www.wtmsources.com/152\\*](http://www.wtmsources.com/152*)). And it featured what it called 'science heretics'. Charles Birch was the main scientist mentioned. It talked about 'a monumental paradigm shift', and 'a scientific revolution' and it says that 'the universities aren't catering for this new development'. Most importantly it says, 'quite a number of biologists got upset about that [acknowledging holism] because they don't want to open the gates

**to teleology—the idea that there is goal-directed change is an anathema to biologists who believe change is random.'**

You see, if there is no purpose, if change is random, if there is no meaning and direction to life then we are not confronted with the issue of our divisive condition. Once you accept that there is purpose, namely to develop the order of matter—once you acknowledge holism—you are bringing humans into confrontation with the issue of why aren't they ideally behaved. You are raising the issue of the human condition.

So there is this debate raging around the issue of mechanism verses holism, but I suggest the real underlying issue is the issue of the human condition. People don't want to accept teleology, that there is goal-directed change, that there is some purpose to existence—namely, that in an open system such as Earth's, negative entropy causes matter to form ever larger and more stable wholes—because it implies we humans are supposed to be integrative when we are not. Until we humans can explain why we are not integrative the fundamental insecurity of the human condition carries on.

Our organisation is called the Foundation for Humanity's Adulthood because we are saying humanity as a whole is stranded in a state of adolescence, insecure about its condition, unable to explain why it's not integrative, why it doesn't comply with negative entropy. Why, if you like to use religious metaphysic, aren't we Godly? If God is the cooperative ideals then why aren't we ideal and cooperatively behaved?

We are a 'God fearing' species, we're afraid of this greater truth of integrative meaning because we can't explain why we don't comply with it. So this underlying riddle of life, this dilemma of the human condition, is underneath this debate which is going on between reductionism or mechanism and holism. Scientists, as it says in Macken's article, don't want to accept teleology, the view that there is a direction or purpose to life.

The point is there are these scientists in the world who are daring to be heretics and challenge the mechanistic view and prominent among them is our Australian scientist, Professor Charles Birch. His books titled *On Purpose, Regaining Compassion* and *Confronting the Future* dare to talk about purpose and about the neglected sensitive side of ourselves. There is this sensitive dimension to ourselves that's also involved—the issue of why aren't we cooperative also relates to the question of why aren't we sensitive, why have we lost this interrelated and interconnected aspect of life? Why can't we feel any more? Why evil? In religious terms what is the origin of sin?

So there is this deep question of the human condition that has troubled the mind of man, both believing and non-believing, since time immemorial—but in the past it has really been a futile exercise trying to grapple with this question. Until science had developed sufficient understanding of the details and mechanisms or workings of our world a clarification or explanation of why our divisive condition exists wasn't possible. Until science had done its job of finding understandings of the details and mechanisms of our world humans weren't in a position to liberate themselves from the condemnation associated with the issue of the human condition.

Faith has sustained us but science had to explain us. Religion for example teaches that 'God loves us' but ultimately we had to know why God does. We are a thinking machine, as John Biggs said earlier, so there is this horrific question that we have coped with by denying it. We have lived in denial or evasion of the underlying, all-important issue of the human condition.

I've drawn this cartoon to illustrate the situation.



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I've said that there is this great truth of integrative meaning that on the face of it condemns humans. I've drawn this as a fire that we can't go near because it's too hurtful, condemning. The more non-ideal our childhood has been through encounters with the horrors of life under the duress of the human condition, the less integrative we are and therefore the more the cooperative ideals are condemning. So there's this fire and all humans live, I suggest, at various distances camped out away from it according to how hurtful this truth of integrative meaning is to them.

In fact the Foundation's work talks a lot about resignation at the age of 14 or 15. Children when they are about 10 or 11 ask the real question, 'why are we going to a lavish party when there are people starving?' or 'how come there are pictures of dead people in the paper?' Why are humans the way they are, so insensitive and aggressive? Parents can't answer that question and can only mop their child's brow and say 'one day sweetheart you'll understand the world is more complicated than it appears' — which is no answer. So the child actually gives up thinking. At about 15 they discover the human condition within themselves, that ideality and reality are irreconcilable and deep depression sets in. So stressed are children by this confrontation with the human condition at this age that their immune system runs down and they typically get glandular fever. At that point they learn there is no choice but to give up thinking about this fundamental question. They realise they shouldn't go near the question again. It's very hard, the older you get, to go back and look at this question, to dig this forbidden turf up again. In fact once you reach a certain age you get to believe that this question doesn't even exist—you have been in such denial of it for so long—and yet it is the fundamental question that underpins all human life and behaviour.

So humans, according to how secure they are, are afraid of living near the 'fire' and set up camp at a bearable distance from it. We are all variously evasive of the truth. Each distance out has its own lifestyle, its own way of coping, its own forms of evasion and self-distraction — ways of finding some relief through material and other forms of reinforcement. But I have drawn this brick fence here and it's a symbolic description of the border between mechanism and holism. Most of the world is evasive of holism, it is mechanistic or whole-view-evading in its approach and only detail-confronting. Mechanists have been searching for the details that would one day make clarification of the truth about our divisive condition possible, but they have been evading the integrative whole truth while searching for those details. We have been sort of marching towards the truth, towards the 'fire', while facing backwards, finding out without seeing the hurtful greater truth of integrative meaning.

So we have lived evasively, focused on the details, found and counted the frog's eggs, built up the information base that one day would make liberating clarification of our divisive condition possible. So we have lived by evasion. And that was a very necessary state. But there had to come a day when we turn around and confront the truth of integrative meaning—because you can't assemble the truth using evasive lies. Someone has to climb that brick wall and begin facing the truth—and that is what Charles Birch has done, climbed that wall.

Humanity has spent all this time, some 2 million years (the time humans have been conscious) accumulating knowledge, in the hope and faith that one day we would free ourselves from the horror of the dilemma of the human condition, finally explain why we are the way we are, divisively rather than cooperatively behaved, dignify ourselves, take ourselves beyond insecure adolescence.

So outside this brick wall is the evasive mechanistic world full of sustaining lies that have justified our condition while we were waiting for the real truth about our divisive condition to be found. There was social Darwinism (the need to compete for survival), then B.F. Skinner's operant conditioning theory (that man is a slave to reward and punishment), then Konrad Lorenz's theory, which excuses our divisive behaviour by saying it is stereotyped and the product of past experiences (i.e. it's instinctive), then Robert Ardrey's theory, which said our competitiveness was due to an imperative to defend our territory and then Edward Wilson's sociobiology theory, which argues that our selfishness is due to our need to perpetuate our genes.

The latest, very sophisticated refinement in evasion has recently emerged. It is the theory of 'evolutionary psychology'. A development of Edward Wilson's sociobiology, evolutionary psychology does at last concede that humans do have cooperative instincts; however, it dismisses the cooperativeness as being nothing more than a subtle form of selfishness.

The classic work in this new field is Robert Wright's book *The Moral Animal: Why we are the way we are*, subtitled *The New Science of Evolutionary Psychology*. You can tell from the titles, 'Evolutionary Psychology' and 'Why we are the way we are'—that the book is about explaining biologically our human psyche or 'soul', explaining the origins of our conscience's sense of morality and ethics. Edward Wilson's latest book *The Biological Basis of Morality* is also about evolutionary psychology and you can tell from his title that he is similarly claiming to be able to explain our human sense of morality.

The problem with the theory of evolutionary psychology is that it is an evasive 'answer' to the problem of the human condition. Evolutionary psychology maintains that our moral cooperative instincts are derived from reciprocity—situations where both parties cooperate for mutual benefit—which means that the cooperative traits are basically selfish and not selfless. Cooperating only when it benefits the individual allows only limited cooperation and thus integration. True or full cooperation and integration requires the ability to be unconditionally selfless—as I said earlier it requires the ability to consider the welfare of the larger whole above the welfare of self—and it is this true, unconditionally selfless cooperation that humans *were* instinctively orientated to. How unconditional cooperation developed in humans is explained in *Beyond The Human Condition* (which is on our website) in the chapter titled, 'How we Acquired Our Conscience\*'.

To quickly outline that explanation. We humans acquired an instinctive orientation to behaving unconditionally selflessly through nurturing. Maternalism is actually selfish behaviour—the mother is reproducing her offspring by fostering the offspring—but from the infant’s brain’s point of view, as an observer of its world, the mother’s behaviour *appears* to be selfless. The mother is giving the infant warmth, nourishment, protection, everything for apparently nothing in return. The brain of the infant is being trained or indoctrinated in selflessness during the nurturing infancy period.

The reason that primates were the ones that were able to develop nurturing to the point where the training in selflessness became instinctive (and, incidentally, in the process liberated consciousness) is because they were semi-upright from having lived in trees. It was this upright, arms-free posture that enabled them to hold a helpless infant and thus leave the infant in infancy for a protracted period of time.

Our soul is not a subtle form of selfishness.

The theory of evolutionary psychology is actually a way of evading the possibility that humans have unconditionally selfless, fully integrative instincts. The fact that there exists within us unconditionally selfless, fully cooperative, altruistic instincts is another of the dangerous partial truths that we humans have sensibly had to evade—because such a truth brought into focus the, until now, insoluble condemning and thus depressing issue of the human condition, the issue of ‘why aren’t we selfless now?’

Evolutionary psychology admits that we do have cooperative instincts but says they are still selfish instincts. It is a theory that emphasises selfishness. Like the other contrived excuses before it, evolutionary psychology justifies our divisive, upset condition by maintaining that existence is selfish and divisive when the truth is that existence, including genetics, is concerned with developing order; it is about developing the integration of matter.

What is so outrageous about evolutionary psychology is that it is a blatant attempt to discredit our altruistically orientated instinctive self or soul as nothing more than a subtle form of selfishness in our makeup. I agree with this quote by Randolph Nesse, mentioned in Matt Ridley’s 1996 book, *The Origins of Virtue*: **‘The discovery that tendencies to altruism are shaped by benefits to genes is one of the most disturbing in the history of science. When I first grasped it, I slept badly for many nights, trying to find some alternative that did not so roughly challenge my sense of good and evil. Understanding this discovery can undermine commitment to morality—it seems silly to restrain oneself if moral behavior is just another strategy for advancing the interests of one’s genes.’**

The point I want to make here tonight is that science has arrived at the doorstep of the issue of the human condition—even though the issue is being treated evasively. The human journey is starting to converge on this great issue of the human condition.

Religion is also brought into it because faith has sustained us while we were waiting to be able to explain ourselves. However, the day we try to explain ourselves faith can feel threatened—but the whole point of the human journey, as has been explained, is to one day explain ourselves—and by doing so make it possible to safely confront the truth of cooperative ideality.

So while most biologists are still being evasive there are some who are daring to *not be* evasive and acknowledge holism—for example to write books with titles such

as *On Purpose*—to suggest that there is such a thing as purpose. The vitalist/holism versus mechanism/reductionism debate has been going on for a long time and taken different forms, but it's coming to a head. John Biggs quoted Charles Birch earlier from a 27/2/98 article in *The Sydney Morning Herald* titled *God* by Deborah Smith saying, 'this meeting of science and religion is yet no bigger than a cloud on the horizon'. Coming is this giant storm. Look through all the mythology of history, religions, whatever, you'll hear it described as a storm, because that's confrontation day, exposure day, shake-down day, self-confrontation day, judgement day no less when we can confront the truth about ourselves, when all our evasions that we have employed—life on the evasive, mechanistic side of that brick wall, is suddenly exposed. But, as I said, it's going to be a state of compassionate understanding, *not* a state of condemnation when we can finally explain ourselves.

So there is this wall, this mechanistic wall that has protected us from exposure to this previously unfrontable issue of the human condition. Some day we had to arrive at that wall and then someone had to climb over it. You will see in my cartoon that I drew a person standing on the fire side of this wall. These are the few scientists, such as Charles Birch, who have dared to acknowledge integrative meaning or holism. They are showing the way. To my way of thinking they are very great heroes. Without their words, their leadership I wouldn't have dared to keep thinking in this more holistic vein that our work in the FHA deals with. So the reason I wanted this lovely, big bowl of flowers beside the podium is because I wanted to make some statement about what it means to me having Charles Birch here tonight. I wanted to put some flowers there in recognition of what he has meant to me in terms of his courage. I don't know how much you know about Charles but to me he's defied and overcome a lot, he's quietly persevered, and he's been an incredible inspiration to me.

It means a great deal to me for Charles to come along tonight and help us in this world that is so afraid of the work the Foundation does of confronting the human condition, and talk about holism as he understands it. Professor Birch thank you very, very much for coming tonight. ”

Published by WTM Publishing and Communications Pty Ltd (ACN 103 136 778)  
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