

# History and Philosophy of Biology



Robert Kretsinger

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# Contents

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <i>Acknowledgments</i>                            | v         |
| <b>Section A History and Philosophy: Overview</b> | <b>1</b>  |
| A1. Pre-Hellenic Science                          | 3         |
| A2. Hellenic Science                              | 9         |
| A3. China and Early Science                       | 15        |
| A4. Islamic Science                               | 20        |
| A5. Christianity and Science                      | 28        |
| A6. Inductive Logic, “Works,” and Francis Bacon   | 34        |
| A7. Deductive Logic, Maths, and René Descartes    | 39        |
| A8. The Scientific Revolution                     | 44        |
| A9. The Church and Science                        | 53        |
| A10. Falsifiability: Karl Popper                  | 60        |
| A11. Paradigm: Thomas Kuhn                        | 65        |
| A12. Two Cultures: C.P. Snow                      | 71        |
| A13. Emergence                                    | 75        |
| <b>Section B Physical Sciences: Overview</b>      | <b>81</b> |
| B1. Engineering                                   | 86        |
| B2. Mathematics                                   | 92        |



|                                    |                                    |            |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------|
| B3.                                | Astronomy                          | 100        |
| B4.                                | Mechanics                          | 109        |
| B5.                                | Alchemy                            | 115        |
| B6.                                | Phlogiston                         | 121        |
| B7.                                | Periodic Table                     | 126        |
| B8.                                | Electricity, Magnetism, and Optics | 133        |
| B9.                                | Thermodynamics                     | 141        |
| B10.                               | Geology                            | 148        |
| <b>Section C Biology: Overview</b> |                                    | <b>155</b> |
| C1.                                | Medicine                           | 157        |
| C2.                                | Anatomy                            | 162        |
| C3.                                | Physiology                         | 168        |
| C4.                                | Cell Biology                       | 180        |
| C5.                                | Embryology                         | 185        |
| C6.                                | Microbiology                       | 192        |
| C7.                                | Pharmacology                       | 202        |
| C8.                                | Biochemistry                       | 208        |
| C9.                                | Neurobiology                       | 213        |
| C10.                               | Botany                             | 219        |
| C11.                               | Genetics                           | 226        |
| C12.                               | Paleontology                       | 234        |
| C13.                               | Systematics                        | 242        |
| C14.                               | Evolution                          | 250        |
| C15.                               | Race                               | 258        |

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| C16. Information                               | 270        |
| C17. Origin of Life                            | 277        |
| <b>Section D Society and Science: Overview</b> | <b>285</b> |
| D1. Integrity                                  | 287        |
| D2. Consent                                    | 298        |
| D3. Faith, Intelligent Design                  | 310        |
| D4. Art  | 317        |
| D5. Global Warming                             | 325        |
| D6. Free Will                                  | 330        |
| <i>Author Index</i>                            | 339        |
| <i>Subject Index</i>                           | 347        |



# Section A

## History and Philosophy: Overview

How has one thought about science in times past and in various cultures? What are the more meaningful and rewarding ways to think about science today? Most definitions or characterizations of science fall into two categories:

The first says that science is the study of the natural world. If one includes applications of science, then immediately one is dealing with an un-natural world — one that reflects human activities, especially engineering and medicine. More difficult is the concept of the natural world. Surely investigating the blood circulation of a mouse is science, as is the study of its mating behavior. One then asks whether studying the circulatory system of a human is science. How about the study of his mating behavior? Of his art?

The second definition emphasizes procedure or technique. Does science involve the formulation of a theory and its subsequent testing? If so, how does one go about testing a theory in a historical science such as geology or biology? What distinguishes generalizations from hypotheses, from theories, from laws? Is there a scientific method(s); and if so, should it be applied to the study of human activities such as economics, governance, and art?

The following chapters address these questions: What is science? How have various cultures thought about science? What are contemporary perspectives on science and how have they evolved in recent centuries?

- A1. Pre-Hellenic Science
- A2. Hellenic Science
- A3. Chinese Science
- A4. Islamic Science
- A5. Early Christianity
- A6. Inductive Logic, “Works,” and Francis Bacon
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- A13. Emergence

# A1

## Pre-Hellenic Science



As will be discussed in the next chapter, most historians, especially those in the West, appropriately turn to Greece to understand the origins of science, as well as many other intellectual endeavors. However, there are strong arguments for including engineering, informatics, medicine, and agriculture in the definition of science. If so, we should consider our first tools, garments, dwellings, and herbal remedies.

It requires reasonable talent to flake a stone and attach it to a handle to make an axe. It is hardly trivial to cure a hide and sew pieces together to make a cape or shoes or to bind branches and leaves to make a sturdy shelter. Chimpanzees use digging sticks to access termite nests. Other mammals and birds use tools and make complex nests and burrows. Macaws intuitively ingest clay, apparently to absorb toxins in some seeds that they eat. These skills are to some extent transmitted by imitation, but most are inherent. It seems reasonable to infer that some ability to do simple science is innate in our own species, as well as in others. There is overwhelming evidence that other complex behaviors are genetically encoded — so much for *tabula rasa*.

One can only speculate about the development of human language and the urges to do art and to do science. These intellectual abilities are probably inter-related. In any case, several fundamental achievements occurred independently several times in human evolution. These include the concepts of counting and adding, identification of stellar constellations, codification of medical practices, as well as the naming and grouping plants and animals. The assignment of names, stories, and powers to these constellations, animals, and practices reflects abstract thinking. These basic achievements of applied science occurred independently in Egypt, India, Mesopotamia, China, and Meso-America.

The earliest astronomer for whom we have records is Thales of Miletus (~600 B.C.). We are left to marvel as to why the Greeks extended these speculations and analyses to new levels of sophistication and abstraction. Did their achievements reflect unique environmental circumstances or the convergence of yet to be identified historical currents? Or were the circumstances that led to the appreciation of questioning purely stochastic? This is hardly a popular interpretation. However, the antecedents, if any, of Greek philosophy have yet to be established.

This chapter summarizes some of the early achievements of the Egyptians, Indians, Assyrians, and Babylonians — peoples of the Bronze Age in the Middle East. Subsequent chapters survey Chinese and Islamic science.



One refers to Egypt, after the unification of the upper and lower kingdoms about 3000 B.C., without exploring the subtleties of different dynasties. Lunar and solar calendars were merged; their calendar consisted of 12 months each of 30 days plus five special days committed to religious holidays. Sundials gave a precise definition of the solstices.

Much of their knowledge of anatomy came from mummifiers, who inserted a long hook through a nostril, broke the thin ethmoid and removed the brain. They removed viscera through an incision in the left groin. These procedures seemed not to have laid the foundation for further exploration of anatomy. Why were they not more curious?

The Ebers Papyrus (~1550 B.C.) listed some 877 “prescriptions” and noted a “... tumor against the god Xenus ... do nothing there against.” Homer (~700 B.C.) in the *Odyssey* noted that “... the Egyptians were skilled in medicine more than any other art.” Herodotus (484–425) visited Egypt ~440 B.C. and wrote of their advanced medical practices. Pliny the Elder (23–79) praised their medicine. However, they failed to distinguish arteries from veins or nerves from tendons. The heart was assigned spirit and thought. Hippocrates, Herophilos, Erasistratus, and Galen studied at the temple to Amenhotep III across the Nile from Luxor. Peseshet (~2400 B.C.), mother of Akhethotep, was the first female doctor on record.

The Egyptians made potions or amulets with animal or plant parts that resembled afflicted regions — “*simila similibus*” (similar with similar), a concept not unknown to modern homeopathy. They distinguished phylactic, protection against demons, from theophoric procedures that invoked the help of a deity.

Herodotus in his *Histories* noted that circumcision was the norm and that the Egyptian military brought back uncircumcised phalli of Libyans as souvenirs. How might one evaluate the effectiveness,