

“The rest is mere jelly”

Wetwares: Experiments in post-vital living
Theory out of bounds, volume 24.

By Richard Doyle

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Review by Gavin Miller

The typographic style of Richard Doyle's *Wetwares: Experiments in post-vital living* hints strongly at the aspirations of the series *Theory out of bounds*. Conventions and assumptions about how a page should look are challenged and overturned: block quotes burst enthusiastically out of the margins (pursued by the enormous paragraph indents), the title of the series slides word by word down the gutter of facing pages, and the page numbers appear in pairs in the header of each recto. The message is clear: you are going to be disconcerted by what lies within.

And perhaps you will be, for the ambitions of this book are bold. It aims to explore the new meaning of “life,” now that the cutting edge in biology, computing, and philosophy seems to have stripped “life” of “vitalism.” If there is no mysterious vital fluid “inside” an organism—no ghost in the machine—then the extension of the term “life” expands dizzingly, for “life” seems no more than the copying, storage, and transmission of patterns which replicate themselves in various material substrata. Take computer viruses, says the author, “the creation of organisms iterable enough to move from computer to computer, capable of being copied across networks, undoes the monopoly of carbon on living systems and extends the franchise of vitality”; the phenomenon of computer life “deterritorializes life itself, as life becomes an explicit virtuality, placeless and yet distributed, ubiquitous” (p. 9).

As the foregoing quotations reveal to the *cognoscenti*, there are three strands of ideas in Doyle's exposition. The first of these is from computing science. Doyle acknowledges inspiration from sources such as Hans Moravec's *Mind Children* (1987). Moravec sees life not as matter of bodily identity, but in the identity of patterns, which may be copied, transmitted, and stored—essentially as computer programs and data. Moravec speculates that one might upload a personality from its organic computer to a new electronic version, or prepare back-up copies which could be used in the event

of death. As Moravec puts it, “if the process is preserved, I am preserved. The rest is mere jelly” (Moravec, 1988: p. 117). For Moravec, this position is “postbiological”; to Doyle, it is “postvital.”

The plausibility of the Artificial Life or “alife” model is complemented by modern genetics, where, as Doyle puts it, from “the perspective of many contemporary biologists, life is just an interesting configuration of *information*” (p. 21). When considered as information, “life is no longer confined to the operation of DNA but is instead linked to the informatic events associated with nucleic acids: operations of coding, replication, and mutation” (p. 19).

The third intellectual organism in this symbiotic association is the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, which furnishes concepts to explicate this informatic model. “Deterritorialisation,” for example, is one of Doyle’s key terms: “to ‘deterritorialize’ something . . . is to connect an entity to elsewhere. A hand deterritorializes a tree branch when it becomes a tool for digging” (p. 182). When life is conceived as the effect of events of coding, copying, and environmentally constrained variation, then individual organisms have life not by virtue of themselves, but by virtue of the whole process of which they are a part. The “life” of an individual person or creature is a kind of fiction; it is merely a stage in an ongoing replicating process. In this way life is “deterritorialised” as we undergo “a shift from an understanding of organisms as *localized agents* to an articulation of living systems as *distributed events*” (p. 19). From the informatic perspective, “I” am alive only in a secondary sense; “life” is properly predicated only of a whole living process—the (natural or artificial) species, perhaps, or even an ecosystem.

From this basis, Doyle launches a variety of fascinating cultural readings. Aliens, for example, are an index of our contemporary postvitalism. Reports of aliens and alien abduction proliferate like informational patterns, “replicat[ing] in exuberance, nomadically distributing themselves across diverse and even divergent ecologies” (p. 198). As well as being a model for cultural dissemination, postvital life is also directly addressed in films and texts. Stephen King’s novel (and David Cronenberg’s later film) *The Dead Zone* allows Doyle to explore the blurred boundaries “between life and death or flesh and machines” (p. 154). The hero, John Smith, kept alive during a coma by machines, is then reborn from this postvital gestation, disturbing—as Doyle perceptively notes—the monopoly on reproduction traditionally held by heterosexual motherhood (a monopoly also subverted by the practice of cryonics, another of the fields which Doyle examines).

Indeed, the great strength of *Wetwares* is its enormous range: as well as aliens, comas, and cryonics, Doyle addresses organ transplantation, the Sokal hoax, “uploading” the self, sampling, economics, as well the many philosophical intersections which he perceives. There is plenty here to enjoy and ponder over.

The greatest weakness in *Wetwares* is that it does little to persuade sceptics. Doyle rarely plays devil’s advocate to the theses in the book. But some disarming of counter-arguments is essential in a field which has led to some extremely speculative claims. Frank Tipler, for example, in *The Physics of Immortality* combines the informatic model of life with modern physics, and claims to offer “a testable physical theory for an omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent God who will one day in the far future resurrect every single one of us to live forever” (Tipler, 1996: p. 1). Tipler also enthusiastically points out that—according to the informatic model of coding, copying, and variation—automobiles are alive. This, to many readers, would probably count as a *reductio ad absurdum* of postvitalism. Doyle does little to allay the suspicion that postvitalism is science become scientism become religion: that all this talk of uploads and copying and cryonics is as futile as mummification. Granted, *if* life is “informatic”, then dizzying conclusions follow. But the conclusions only follow if the hypothesis is established. The weakness in *Wetwares* is that enormous quantities of information regarding postvitalism may be copied into the reader’s brain, but without it commanding any belief.

References

- Moravec, H. (1988). *Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence*. Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press.
- Tipler, F. J. (1996). *The Physics of Immortality: Modern Cosmology, God and the Resurrection of the Dead*. London: MacMillan.