

## Creating Life in a Test Tube?

What if a team of scientists were to announce in tomorrow's headlines that they had made "from scratch," from basic non-living chemicals, a living, reproducing organism?

I know (from asking this question at some meetings, and seeing the wary faces) that many Christians would be worried. One thing is certain, many humanists would not be able to contain their crowing. They would be claiming that this was the last nail in the coffin of belief in Creation. "Creator Not Needed to Make Life" would no doubt be a triumphant headline theme.

To show that this is not idle speculation, a short while ago a team announced that it was setting to work on just such a task. Now remember, nothing had been achieved. They just said, "We're going to start working on it."

Immediately, a gloating email message arrived at Creation Ministries International, saying, in effect, "You stupid Christians, you're going to see...as soon as this happens, the credibility of belief in Creation will be finished."

However, even if we assumed that the synthesis of life were to happen, would such responses be appropriate? Actually, it's not hard to show that they would not be even faintly logical or rational. In fact, if it were to happen, then in one sense, Christians should be getting excited, using it as evidence for Creation.

Why so? When considering how life began, there are really only two alternatives. Either life was created by an intelligent source or it made itself—i.e., evolved. That's really what "evolution" is all about—things making themselves, arising spontaneously from within nature—the material world—with no outside assistance.

So if someone were to claim that synthesizing life in a test tube wipes out the idea of Creation, they would in effect be saying, "*Synthesizing* life in a test tube proves that it *evolved*." Now substitute the italicized words in that phrase with others of identical meaning, and the absurdity of it becomes clear: "*Using intelligence to make* life in a test tube proves that it *made itself and did not arise through intelligence*."

A further analogy might be as follows: say someone, washed ashore on a remote island, sees a portable battery-operated television set. Never having seen a TV set before, they eventually happen to switch it on and watch it in amazement. Puzzling about how this device came to be, its discoverer decides to take it apart. Years are spent studying it and learning all about how it works.

Using thousands of hours of mind-power and effort, the person learns how to make an exact copy of each part, and how to put the parts together in exactly the same

way as the original. Finally, the moment has arrived—the switch is thrown. *Voilà*, it works.

Now if such an amazingly brilliant achievement had taken place, it would obviously be the height of foolishness for such a person to say, excitedly, "Wow, now I know for certain that the device I found made itself!"

I trust the analogy is clear. If (or perhaps when, provided God’s patience with rebellious humankind does not run out beforehand) humanity achieves the synthesis of a living organism, it will be much like the TV set on the island. The original design will, with a great deal of intelligent effort, have been copied.

The fact that, with all our knowledge of molecular biology, we are not even close to knowing everything about the complexities of even the simplest living organism shows just how much design-power and intelligence went into the creation of the first of its kind.

I believe that, in principle, people are capable of learning enough to be able to be hopeful of one day achieving such a thing for perhaps a bacterial cell. But far from undermining Genesis Creation, it merely reflects the image of God (Genesis 1:27) in humanity—creativity and intelligence, even if only a pale shadow of that of their Maker.

### Making a synthetic virus

The same team that announced they were going to start working on "synthetic life" announced in late 2003 that they had put together a functioning virus from "off-the-shelf" simple components.<sup>i</sup>

	Actual virus	Computer virus
Both are parasites to the host, which is:	A living cell	Your computer
Both consist mainly of relatively small segments of a code, which is:	DNA or RNA	A software 'string'
This code segment inserts itself into (or mimics) a pre-existing program, namely:	The host cell's DNA	Your computer's existing software.
This 'reprogramming' causes copies to be made of the parasitic code, utilizing:	The complex machinery of a living cell, involving software (information) and hardware (biological machinery).	The software and hardware of your computer (which might include your internet connection).

Of course, a virus is not really living. It has no machinery with which to sustain itself or reproduce itself. It is really nothing much more than a parasitic piece of DNA with the ability to hijack the machinery of a truly living cell to trick it into making copies of itself. This is more readily understood in an age when computer viruses are rampant, as the table shows.

### The Analogy

The synthetic virus which hit the news headlines was a replica of a known type called PhiX, which is harmless to humans. A similar thing has actually been done previously, imitating the polio virus.

In neither case was the synthetic virus truly made "from scratch." And despite the wording of the announcement, the building blocks they used were not exactly what you would find at your local corner store.

For instance, they did not synthesize DNA from raw ingredients. Instead, small chunks of already-existing DNA were used, which were then stitched together chemically so that the resulting larger molecule had the correct sequence. How did they know what the right sequence was? They knew (and copied) the sequence in the already existing PhiX virus. Nevertheless, it is a major step towards the possibility of one day making a living one-celled organism.

Life's long-chain molecules (like DNA) actually carry programmed information—a specific sequence of symbols (like alphabet letters). This information can be transmitted, as in reproduction, but it does not reside in the chemical properties of the matter that carries it, just as the message on this page is unrelated to the properties of ink and paper.

A scientist creating life would be imposing his intelligence onto matter to generate the information needed.

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