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REVIEW OF 1950 CROSSROADS OF AMERICAN RELIGIOUS LIFE

- The modern study of life begins with a somewhat surprising figure, Erwin Schrödinger. He was born in 1887, and educated in Vienna. He is best known for his development of his wave equation, which has become the foundation of quantum mechanics, and for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1933. His importance to biologists and

for the definition of life comes from his book *What is Life?*, which is based on a series of lectures given open to the general public in Dublin. His book was enormously influential in convincing physicists such as Max Delbrück that biology offered questions that physicists could find interesting. In it he tried to answer three main questions: 1. How can organisms maintain their organization in the face of a continuous production of entropy as a consequence of the second law of thermodynamics? 2. What is the nature of the hereditary material? 3. Can biology be fully understood (even in principle) in terms of the known laws of physics? He answered the thermodynamic question with the statement that "what an organism feeds on is negative entropy". This may seem

an unnecessarily poetic way of expressing an idea that is well understood by scientists today: that the inevitable production of entropy by an organism is compensated for by the ingestion of low-entropy food and excretion of higher-entropy waste. However, this was not well understood at all at the time he was writing, and his statement undoubtedly cleared away some confusion. It is worth noting that Schrödinger's point is not well understood, even today, by adherents of creationism, who often claim that the second law of thermodynamics makes evolution impossible, because (according to them) increasing the information content of a system is impossible. The point, however, is that a continuous production of entropy is characteristic of

a closed system, but the earth is an open system, because it continuously receives radiation from the sun, and organisms are also open systems, for the reasons explained by Schrödinger. In any case, if the creationist argument had any merit it would apply as much to life as to evolution, but we know that life is possible. Schrödinger suggested that the hereditary material must be a sort of "aperiodic crystal", that is to say a substance that had a high degree of cyclic regularity, as in a crystal, coupled with non-repetitive elements whose structures did not interfere with the general regularity, but whose irregularity allowed them to ask as what he called a "codescript". After the tremendous increase in knowledge of molecular genetics that has occurred in the half-

century that followed his lectures we can recognize this as a description of DNA, which has a structure that appears completely regular when viewed from a distance, but completely irregular when viewed with enough resolution for the individual bases to be identified. As for the third question, modern biologists are not much interested in life or its definition, but if pressed most would probably consider that these first two of Schrödinger's three points cover the whole story. Thermodynamic analysis of organisms as open systems explains their energy management and information storage in DNA explains heredity, and that is all there is to it. However, neither of these explains how organisms maintain their organization, virtually indefinitely, without external

help, in the face of frequent and sometimes large changes in their environments. This idea was the least well understood when Schrödinger was writing, and remains the least well understood (and the most controversial) today. Later critics, such as Linus Pauling and Max Perutz, who considered that Schrödinger had contributed nothing of value to the understanding of life, appear to have missed this point, treating matters that were obvious to them as obvious to Schrödinger's audience in Dublin and to the readers of his book. Provided one remembers the target audience for the book -- not distinguished scientists like Delbrück, Pauling or Perutz, but intelligent and educated non-scientists -- it remains well worth reading today. It is not an easy

read, but it is not impossibly difficult either. It is a very short book, of less than 100 pages, and is reprinted in this edition with *Mind and Matter* and with *Autobiographical Sketches*. This last is interesting, but very "sanitized", making very little reference to his wife and none at all to the many other women who played major roles in his life. To learn about Schrödinger's remarkable personal life you need to turn to Walter Moore's masterly biography (*A Life of Erwin Schrödinger* (Canto original series)).

- *What is Life?* is an absolute classic. Schrodinger felt that life must be explainable by physics and chemistry, yet seemed to violate the normal behavior of entropy-- and he understood further that this was a remarkable wedge point to explore. He figured out

the explanation: life is the result of evolution of genetic information, which selects for complex processes that by ordinary considerations would be very unlikely. He predicted that there must be a molecule capable of carrying the genetic information (incorrectly thinking it would be a protein.) His beautifully-written book was influential and timely. Within 4 years, Von Neumann elucidated the mechanisms involved in self-reproducing automata (illustrating his abstract discussion with a picture looking remarkably like DNA to the eyes of readers today); and within a decade, Watson and Crick grasped the structure of DNA. You should not read Schrodinger's book today as one of your first sources to understand life-- there has been remarkable progress in the 50

years since Watson and Crick-- but you should read it to gain appreciation for how science can be advanced when the time is ready and a wedge point, an apparent conflict between fundamental ideas, is analyzed. The volume also includes another lecture by Schrodinger, Mind and Matter, which is historically interesting in another way. In Schrodinger's day, the state of understanding had not advanced to the point where it was possible to make as useful conjectures about the structure of mind as of life, and he accordingly felt "[mind] may well be beyond human understanding." Readers interested in Schrodinger's book will also enjoy What is Thought?, published 2004. What is Thought? argues that mind must be explainable by computer science, that

the fundamental issues are computational, and that there is again a wedge point: the question of how the workings of a computer, which are always purely syntactical, can correspond to meaning and understanding. The situation is parallel to the one that faced Schrodinger with respect to life in two respects: first, mind is the outcome of evolution, which has built thought processes that seem inconsistent with our standard science, and second, scientific research has advanced to the point where, if we focus on the wedge point, significant

understanding is obtainable. What is Thought? brings to bear on the problem of mind core ideas from computational learning theory, complexity theory, and evolutionary computing, as well as molecular and evolutionary biology, cognitive science, and other areas. The result is a principled and concrete explanation, consistent with the vast array of available data, of how meaning, understanding, language, consciousness, and all the various aspects of mind arise from execution of an evolved computer program.