



Synthetic Life

Unintelligent design?

Is it possible to make life from scratch using just its raw materials? After all, living and non-living things are made from the same atoms and elements—they differ only in the quantities and arrangements of those atoms. A recent History Channel (THC) program called “How Life Began” leaves the impression that life “formed” relatively easily based on standard chemistry. If this is true, why not deliberately make a living cell in the laboratory using standard methods and readily available biological molecules? Take as many living cells as you want and break them apart into their component proteins, fats, nucleic acids, and inorganic salts. Then reassemble them into at least one living cell. Why not? Because it turns out that making synthetic life is not so easy after all. But if it was easy for random chance and basic chemistry to produce life originally, then why is it so hard for highly intelligent and experienced researchers to produce synthetic life on purpose?

To date, no one has succeeded in making synthetic life, but there are several research groups working toward this goal.¹ One group hopes to make a “minimal” living cell by starting with a “simple” bacterial cell and cutting down its 528 genes to the bare minimum for survival. Other groups are starting from scratch and hoping to assemble something that just meets the definition of life, which itself is controversial.² Along the way, they will certainly learn more about how cells work, while others hope to gain insight into what “primitive” cells may have been like.

What is the reasoning behind these efforts to create synthetic life? The premise is that if life can be constructed by just putting parts together in the correct way, then life is not really special. It is a lucky accident of chemistry, and there is no need to suggest that a Creator was behind life in the beginning. Using this reasoning, building a Ford Model T car using parts out

of modern Ford cars means Henry Ford never existed, and the original Model T just made itself out of random metal parts.³ If one day there appeared on your driveway a new Ford pickup truck, is the best explanation of how

it got there that it simply made itself? This is what Isaac Newton once told an atheist friend who wondered aloud who had made the exquisite model

of the solar system in Newton’s study. “No one made it” Newton said. “It made itself”. The absurdity of Newton’s point is clear. Someone had to have made the model solar system, the pickup truck, and, yes, life.

The History Channel program ends with the admission that it doesn’t really matter if we can’t figure out how to make life synthetically after years of dedicated, intelligent effort. Life may have formed spontaneously in space and been seeded on earth by meteors, or the “Earth” must have figured out how to make life on its own because, after all, we’re here aren’t we? 🌀

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1 P. Barry, “Life From Scratch,” *Science News Online*, vol. 173, no. 2 (week of Jan. 12, 2008), <http://www.sciencenews.org/>
2 M. Madiagan and J. Martinko, *Brock Biology of Microorganisms*, 11th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2005).
3 J.C. Lennox, *God’s Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* (Oxford, England: Lion, 2007).

Should scientists eventually succeed in creating “life” in a laboratory, what will they have proven? That life can be created by an intelligent being. Which is what Christians have maintained all along.

