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Natural Genetic Engineering and Natural Genome Editing

Edited by

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Editor

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CONTENTS

Introduction: A Perspective on Natural Genetic Engineering and Natural Genome Editing. *By* Günther Witzany 1

Part I. Information Processing Replaces Mechanics

Revisiting the Central Dogma in the 21st Century. *By* James A. Shapiro 6

Deconstructing the Dogma: A New View of the Evolution and Genetic Programming of Complex Organisms. *By* John S. Mattick 29

On the Origin of Cells and Viruses: Primordial Virus World Scenario. *By* Eugene V. Koonin 47

The Great Billion-year War between Ribosome- and Capsid-encoding Organisms (Cells and Viruses) as the Major Source of Evolutionary Novelty. *By* Patrick Forterre and David Prangishvili 65

Learning from Bacteria about Natural Information Processing. *By* Eshel Ben-Jacob 78

Part II. Viral Infection-driven Eukaryotic Evolution

The Viral Eukaryogenesis Hypothesis: A Key Role for Viruses in the Emergence of Eukaryotes from a Prokaryotic World Environment. *By* Philip John Livingstone Bell 91

Cell-Cell Channels, Viruses, and Evolution: Via Infection, Parasitism, and Symbiosis toward Higher Levels of Biological Complexity. *By* František Baluška 106

Impact of RNA Virus Infection on Plant Cell Function and Evolution. *By* Annette Niehl and Manfred Heinlein 120

Hen or Egg? Some Thoughts on Tunneling Nanotubes. *By* Amin Rustom 129

Part III. Communal Evolution

Evolution of Genes and Organisms: The Tree/Web of Life in Light of Horizontal Gene Transfer. <i>By</i> Lorraine Olendzenski and J. Peter Gogarten	137
The Natural Genetic Engineering of Polydnaviruses. <i>By</i> Bruce Webb, Tonja Fisher, and Tyasning Nusawardani	146
Friendly Viruses: The Special Relationship between Endogenous Retroviruses and Their Host. <i>By</i> Mariana Varela, Thomas E. Spencer, Massimo Palmarini, and Frederick Arnaud	157
Natural Genetic Engineering of Hepatitis C Virus NS5A for Immune System Counterattack. <i>By</i> Mahmoud M. El Hefnawi, Wessam H. El Behaidy, Aliaa A. Youssif, Atek Z. Ghalwash, Lamyia A. El Housseiny, and Suher Zada	173

Part IV. Modular Interacting Agents

The Fragmented Gene. <i>By</i> Jürgen Brosius	186
The Source of Self: Genetic Parasites and the Origin of Adaptive Immunity. <i>By</i> Luis P. Villarreal	194
Cellular Genes Derived from Gypsy/Ty3 Retrotransposons in Mammalian Genomes. <i>By</i> Jean-Nicolas Volff	233
Noncoding RNAs: Persistent Viral Agents as Modular Tools for Cellular Needs. <i>By</i> Günther Witzany	244
APOBEC3 Proteins Inhibit LINE-1 Retrotransposition in the Absence of ORF1p Binding. <i>By</i> Nika Lovšin and B. Matija Peterlin	268

Part V. Epigenetic Control

Epigenetic Regulation of Mammalian Genomes by Transposable Elements. <i>By</i> Ahsan Huda and I. King Jordan	276
Are There Epigenetic Controls in <i>Trypanosoma cruzi</i> ? <i>By</i> Maria Carolina Elias and Marcella Faria	285
Conceptual and Methodological Biases in Network Models. <i>By</i> Ehud Lamm	291
No Genetics without Epigenetics? No Biology without Systems Biology?: On the Meaning of a Relational Viewpoint in a Complex Account of Living Systems. <i>By</i> Gertrudis Van de Vijver	305
Erratum for Ann. N. Y. Acad. Sci. 1171: 137–148	318
Erratum for Ann. N. Y. Acad. Sci. 1171: 570–575	319

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Introduction

A Perspective on Natural Genetic Engineering and Natural Genome Editing

In 1983, when I finished my studies of philosophies of language and science—in particular pragmatic action theory—I did not know the direction my research interests would take. In the ensuing four years, I studied a number of articles concerning different subjects in biology and was struck by the key vocabulary that was used for the description of the essential activities of cellular life, such as “genetic code,” “genetic information,” “cell–cell communication,” “nucleotide sequences,” “protein coding sequences,” “self/nonsel recognition”—all of which connote themes of communication and exchange of information, similar to the themes I had encountered in my studies of philosophy and action theory. Of particular influence on my thinking were the articles and books of Karl von Frisch, who received the Nobel Prize for his work on the language of bees; and a book by Manfred Eigen, in which he developed a profound argument for the idea that the genetic code functions not only as an analogue of natural human language but that both the evolution of life and the evolution of the mind crucially depend on the characteristic features of languages.

According to these and many other results of the discourse in the philosophy of science in the 20th century (especially between 1920 and 1980), it was clear that if the genetic code functions like a natural language then a variety of consequences follow because several preconditions must have been met. First, considering the genetic code as a natural language requires there to be a repertoire of signs (indices, icons, symbols)^a that can be combinatorially arranged according to syntactic rules, similar to words composed of the characters of the alphabet, to generate information. Without syntactic rules to determine correct sequence order, the combination of signs could not carry informational content, that is, meaning (similarly, if our natural language had no syntactic rules, meaning could not be ascribed to randomly generated collections of words). In other words, a coherent syntax excludes randomly derived mixtures of characters of an alphabet; and for humans, coherent syntax is generated by humans who are competent with the syntactic rules. This book, for example, could contain the same characters but in a random order; such a book would be meaningless. Without competent authors who combine the characters according to a set of coherent syntactic and semantic rules, meaning does not exist.

Signs cannot exist or function without sign-using agents, and agents generate signs to communicate. In communicative action, agents can both exchange messages about

^a According to the founder of semiotics, Charles Sanders Peirce, we are able to differentiate three different kinds of signs: indices, icons, and symbols. Indices are, in most cases, abiotic stimuli from the environment that are interpreted in the realm of memory; for example, a plant root identifies nutrients as being relevant, just as the plant shoot does with the angle of sunlight. Icons are biotic one-to-one signals (analogue) that need no further explanation, for example, plant cells identify auxin in a hormonal coordination process. There are also symbols, that is, signs or sequences of signs, like characters of an alphabet used to generate words, sentences, codes, which do not indicate by themselves what they mean (what their function could be) but are signs through natural or cultural conventions. Such sequences may also be sequences of behaviors, like the dance of the honey bees in colder hemispheres.