

# Life and Death in the Universe

By Edwin D. Reilly, Jr.

“... the pressure of human millions who have discovered what concentrated efforts and thoughts can do. As megatons of water shape organisms on the ocean floor. As tides polish stones. As winds hollow cliffs. The beautiful supermachinery opening a new life for innumerable mankind. Would you deny them the right to exist? Would you ask them to labor and go hungry while you yourself enjoyed old-fashioned Values? You—you yourself are a child of this mass and a brother to all the rest. Or else an ingrate, dilettante, idiot. There, Herzog, thought Herzog, since you ask for an instance, is the way it runs.”

*Herzog*, Saul Bellow, 1964

On a plane to Cleveland a dozen days ago, my eyes fell upon the opening quote from Saul Bellow, part of the prologue to Ian McEwan’s wonderful new novel “Saturday.” The very next day, I found that Bellow had just died at age 89. His death came halfway through the period of mixed mourning of the death and celebration of the life of Pope John Paul II at age 84.

“...millions have discovered what concentrated efforts and thoughts can do,” muses Herzog, in contrast to Stalin’s derisive “How many divisions does the Pope have?” Without a single one, this Pope brought down President Reagan’s “Evil Empire.” May the next Pope be from Africa, whose people must not be allowed to die from hunger, or AIDS, or at the hands of one another.

McEwan’s new novel is called “Saturday” because in it he relates everything that happens to his protagonist, neurosurgeon Henry Perowne, in the stream-of-consciousness that constitutes a single day of his life. At work, he must be dispassionate in order to operate successfully. Weekends, he is free to ponder the mysteries of the universe. Looking out a window and seeing two women crossing the town square in early morning, he speculates that they may be nurses coming off the night shift: “In the lifeless cold, they pass through the night, hot little biological engines with bipedal skills suited to any terrain, endowed with innumerable branching networks sunk deep in a knob of bone casing, buried fibres, warm filaments with their invisible glow of consciousness—these engines devise their own tracks.”

I take it that McEwan, through Perowne, believes in both consciousness and free will, as I do. But how much consciousness appertains to a person in a “permanent vegetative state,” a phrase now burned into our memories during the pandemic anguish over Terri Schiavo? One may just as well ask, “When, precisely, do we die?” The medical community seems to have decided that death is equivalent to the onset of irreversible loss of consciousness as indicated by lack of brain wave activity.

We lose full consciousness when we sleep, but our dreams and our subsequent awakening prove that we have not died. When persons in deep coma exhibit the slightest trace of consciousness, heroic measures are often used to keep them “alive.” But when the brain stops waving, “we” may be dead no matter how well our heart or other body parts continue to function. Michael Schiavo, Terri’s husband, apparently believes that she died years ago. Her parents, Bob and Mary Schindler, wonderful people by all accounts, firmly believe that she died only when her heart stopped beating, and that she was starved to death. But what would Terri have wanted?

The Florida courts concluded that beyond reasonable doubt, Terri had expressed the wish not to be kept alive artificially if she ever became as incapacitated as Karen Ann Quinlan, who

died in 1985 when Terri was 21. The most effective witness to that claim was not that of Michael Schiavo, but rather his sister-in-law, and, more compelling, Terri's best friend.

The morning of the day we left, I attended a meeting of the Schenectady County Health Care Issues Committee. The only agenda item was a legal and medical review of the Schiavo case and what we might do locally in the aftermath. For decades, Dr. Arnold Ritterband, the Committee's chairman, has been a fountain of ideas for improving the health of county residents and the driving force for implementing his proposals.

Arnie asked for a show of hands as to how many of the 20 or so attendees had a living will or health proxy statement, and 85% did—precisely the reverse of the 15% of the general public who do. But, he said, these documents may prove useless if left in a lawyer's drawer or even squirreled away at home where no one can find them or, perhaps, even know that they exist. Better, he proposed, that they be placed in a secure database, not on the very public Internet, but rather on a medical "intranet," one that could be accessed in an emergency by EMTs, ER personnel, and ICU doctors.

Why all this fuss about the length and quality of the lives of McEwan's "hot little biological engines?" A writer whose work I otherwise admire, the late Stephen J. Gould, believed that the universe has no meaning, didn't know we were coming, doesn't care that we're here, and will not miss us when we're gone. I cannot abide such pessimism.

As (good) luck would have it, a couple with a small child was in front of us on both legs of our trip to Cleveland. On the way home, nine-month-old Ella kept playing peek-a-boo with me around the edge of her mother's seat. A future President, I'm sure. On the way west, a handsome three-month-old boy was held up over the seat to face me. His young grandmother, beaming from the seat opposite, said that he was her first grandchild and that because his name was Glenn Scott Armstrong, great things were in store for him.

Glenn looked me in the eye warily, wondering, perhaps, who this stranger might be and why he was making such a funny face. Then he gave me the widest smile that his chubby little cheeks could accommodate. That's meaning enough for me.

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