Introducing “Classics in Biological Theory”

Stuart A. Newman¹

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This issue introduces a new feature in the journal, “Classics in Biological Theory.” This initiative is the conception of Richard Gawne, formerly a fellow of the Konrad Lorenz Institute, *Biological Theory*’s sponsor, and currently a post-doctoral fellow in the Center for Regenerative and Developmental Biology at Tufts University. Richard was motivated by a frustrating symmetry between the experience of contemporary biologists being continually hit by a tsunami of “big data” (the surfeit of DNA and RNA sequence data, for example) while the ground of knowledge provided by earlier generations of scholars sinks beneath their feet. The latter is contained in thousands of papers that are rarely read or discussed, with most being lost to history entirely.

Even in today’s digital age, when scientific papers of all eras are more widely accessible than ever, earlier framings are rarely considered and cited, and the intellectual efforts of biologists and natural philosophers of the past are rapidly fading away. The risk is not only the need to metaphorically reinvent the wheel, but to literally reinvent such concepts as phenotypic plasticity, as readers of the inaugural entry in the Classics series, Clarence King’s 1877 “Catastrophism and Evolution,” in the current issue (King 1877), will note.

In an effort to address this problem, we plan to regularly provide in *Biological Theory* a new platform for making available papers that are decades, or perhaps even a century or more old. Articles will be selected by Richard Gawne (who will serve as the editor of this special section) in coordination with experts in the relevant fields, who will write introductory essays highlighting the continued relevance of the work to the theory and philosophy of present-day biology. In each case, a link will be provided to a PDF version of the original article. We are privileged to have the King paper in this issue introduced by the renowned evolutionary

biologist Niles Eldredge of the American Museum of Natural History (Eldredge 2019).

In many instances, the papers we reprint will be in the public domain, but either not in digital form or at obscure sites. In other cases, they will still be under copyright. We will favor items that are not generally known, or if so, only by tenuous reputation, the Cheshire Cats (Carroll 1866) and Héctor Riveras (Unkrich et al. 2017) of scholarly literature. In all cases, *Biological Theory* and its publisher Springer Nature will obtain the rights to offer the paper along with its introduction via open access to the community.

Reading the works of previous generations of scholars can provide unique perspectives on modern-day issues that we might otherwise overlook. Our objective in making these works available in the Classics series, therefore, is not history for the sake of history, but rather the recognition that looking backward can sometimes help us determine how to move forward.

References

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✉ Stuart A. Newman
newman@nymc.edu

¹ New York Medical College, Valhalla, NY, USA