

# The Sacred Depths of Nature



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# Humans are symbolic and narrative beings



- We are unique in our use of symbolic language.
- Symbols point to underlying meanings, understandings.
- We organize and remember these understandings as language-based narratives.
- The logic of explanations, descriptions, and instructions all take narrative form.
- We also each construct a narrative self.

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- Spiritual responses to the mythos are elicited via art and ceremony administered by leaders.
- Moral/ethical edicts are built into the fabric of the mythos and elaborated by religious leaders.

Scientific inquiry has provisioned us with  
a mind-blowing new core narrative

History of Nature, Epic of Evolution, Epic of Creation,  
Universe Story, New Story

Everybody's Story

# Outline of Everybody's Story

## Evolution of the Observable Universe (13.8 billion years)

Singularity

Big Bang

Galaxies with stars

Nucleosynthesis in dying stars

Supernovas spread new kinds of atoms

## Evolution of Our Solar System (4.567 billion years)

Sun and planet Earth

## Evolution of Life on Earth (~ 3.7 billion years)

Origin of life on Earth

Biological evolution

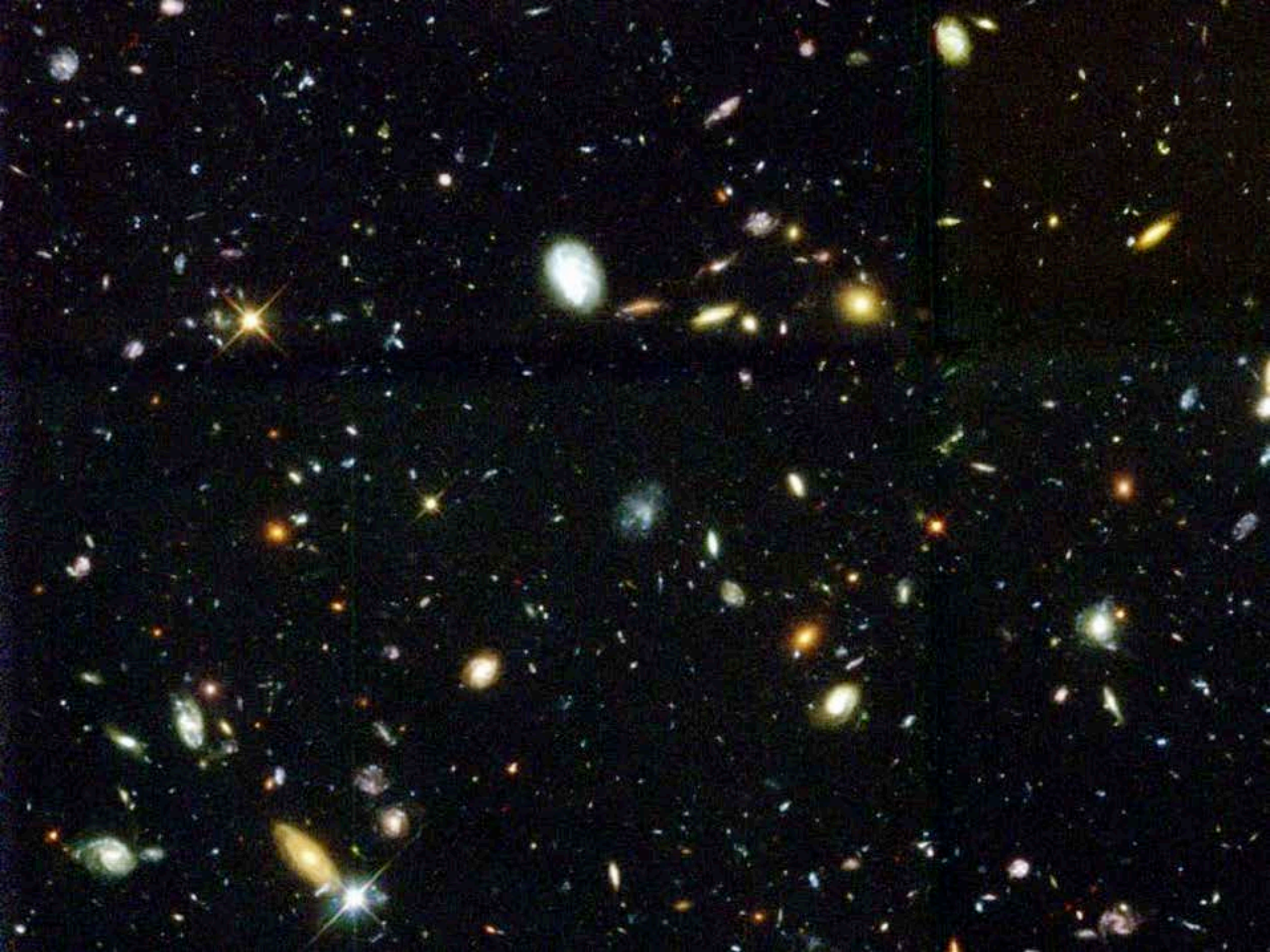
## Evolution of Minds (~ 550 million years)


Social minds (~ 300 million years)

Hominid minds (~ 6 million years)

Human minds (~ 160,000 years)

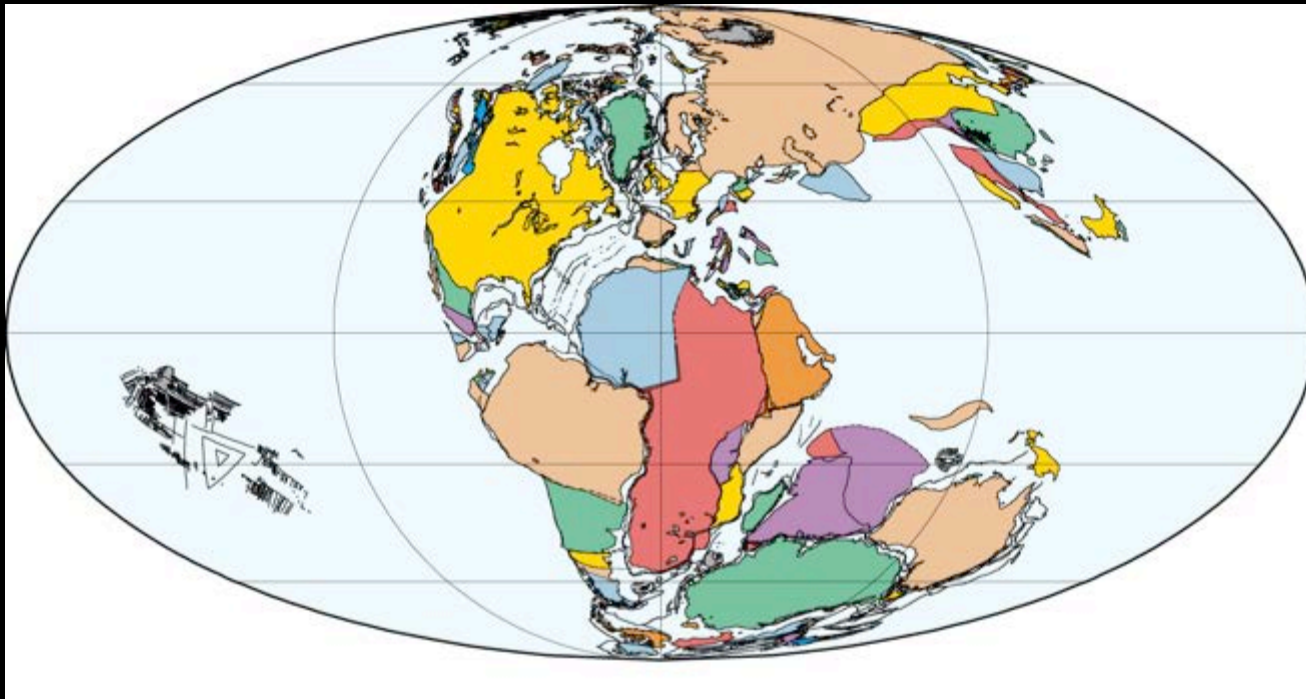




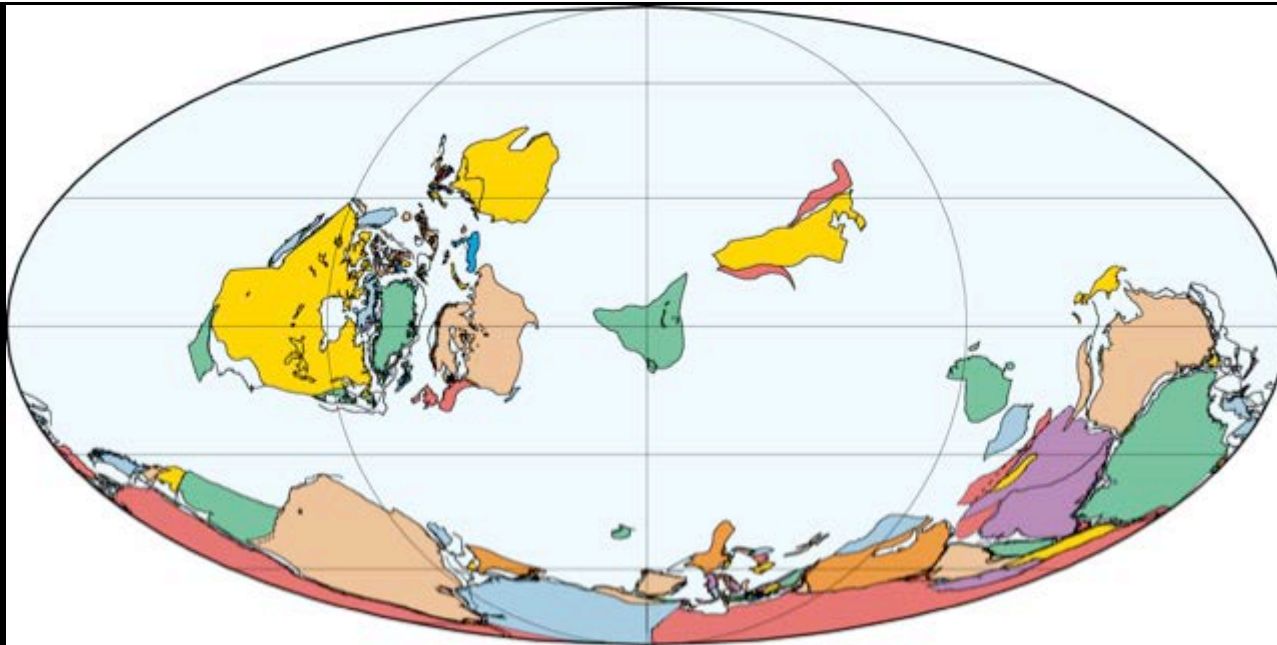
A dark, almost black, sky with a silhouette of a mountain range at the bottom. In the upper right quadrant, there is a small white dot with a white arrow pointing towards it from the right. The word "Earth" is written in white text to the right of the arrow.

Earth



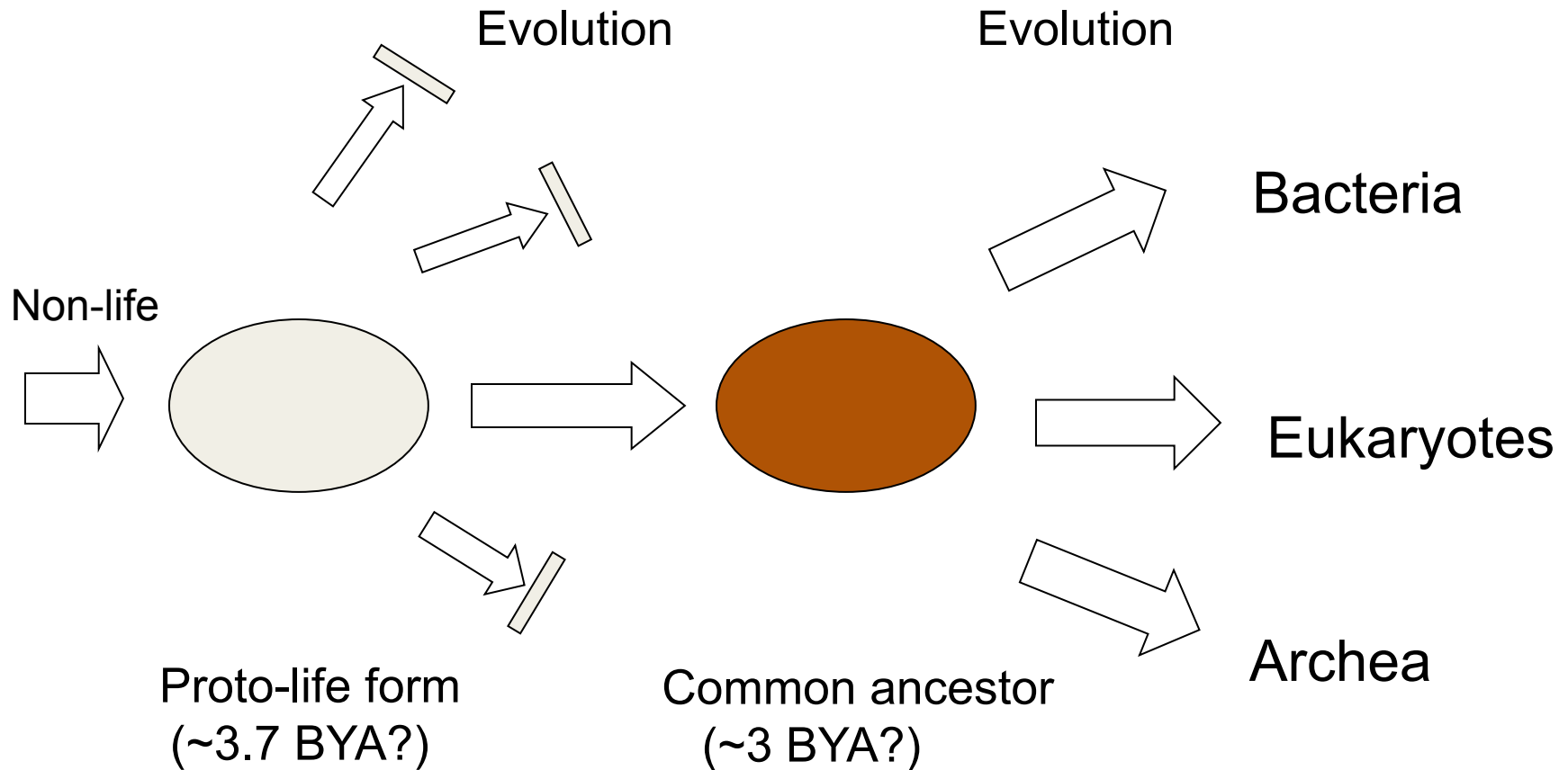


150 MYA

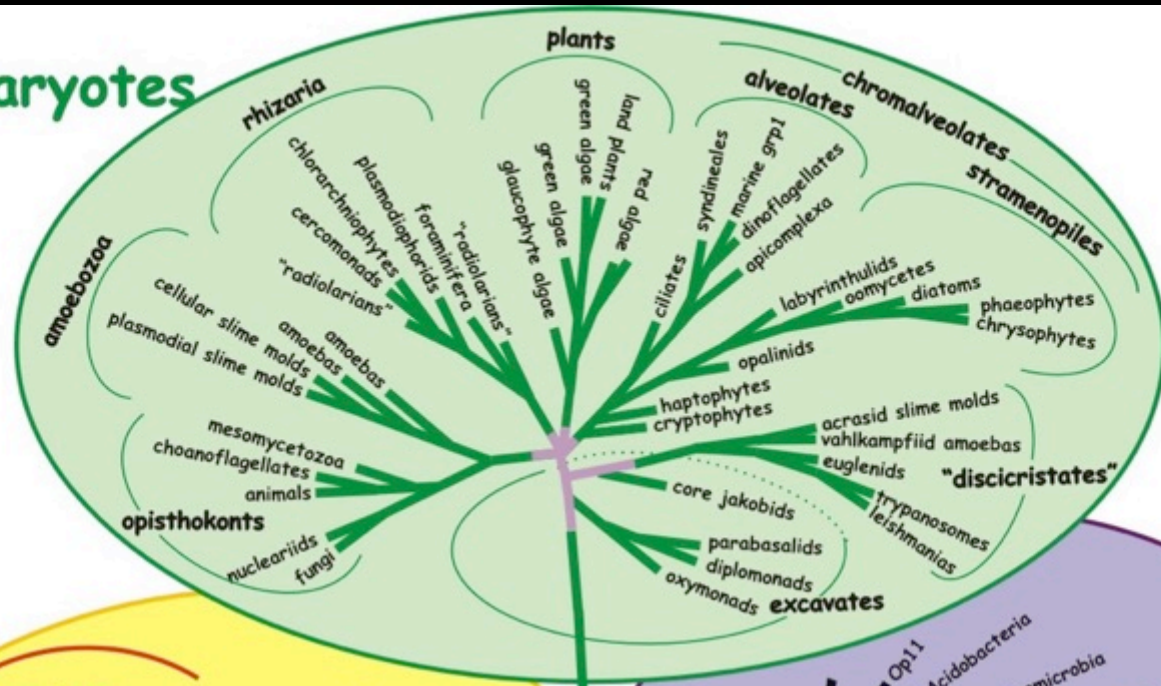


450 MYA

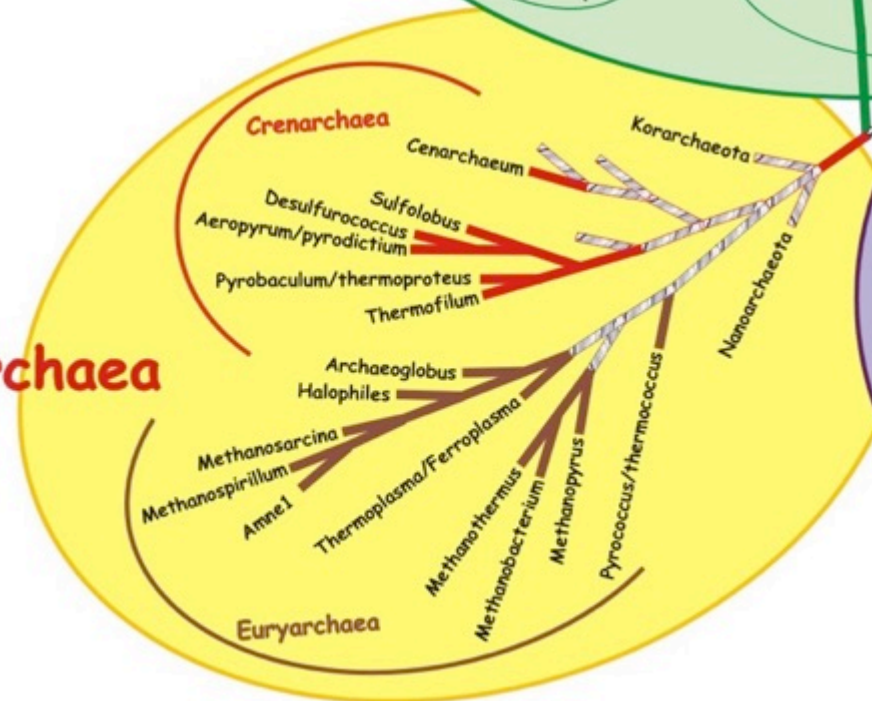
# Original life --> modern life via evolution



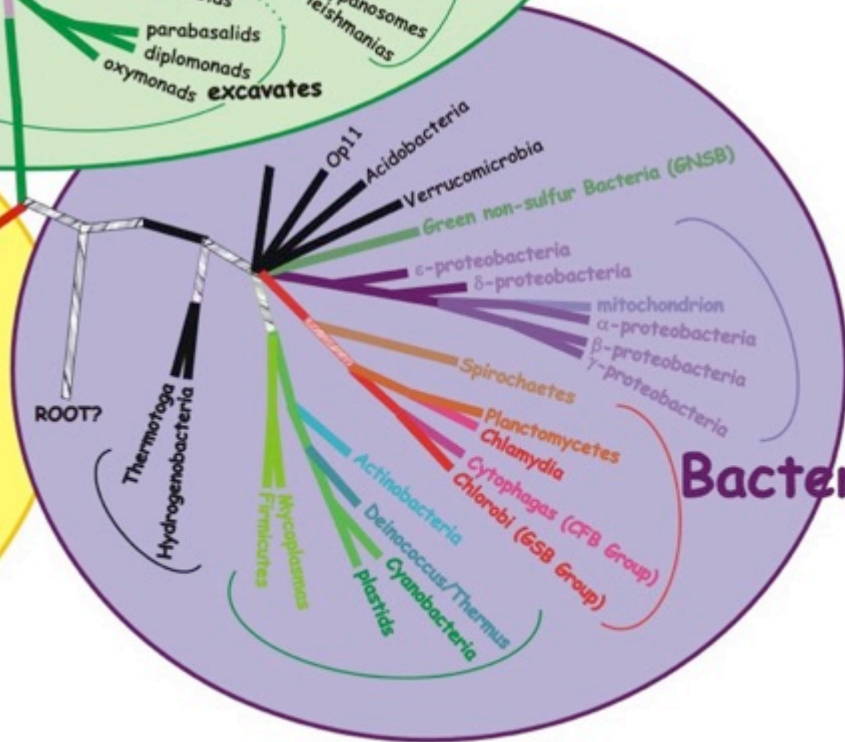
# Eukaryotes



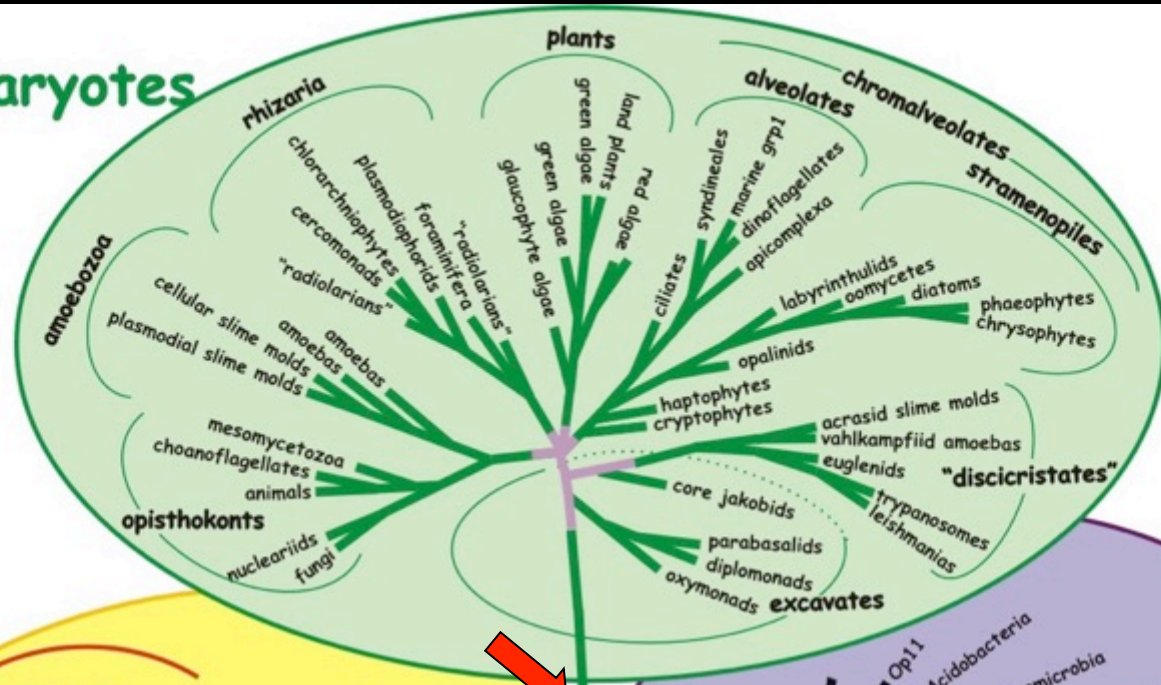
# Archaea



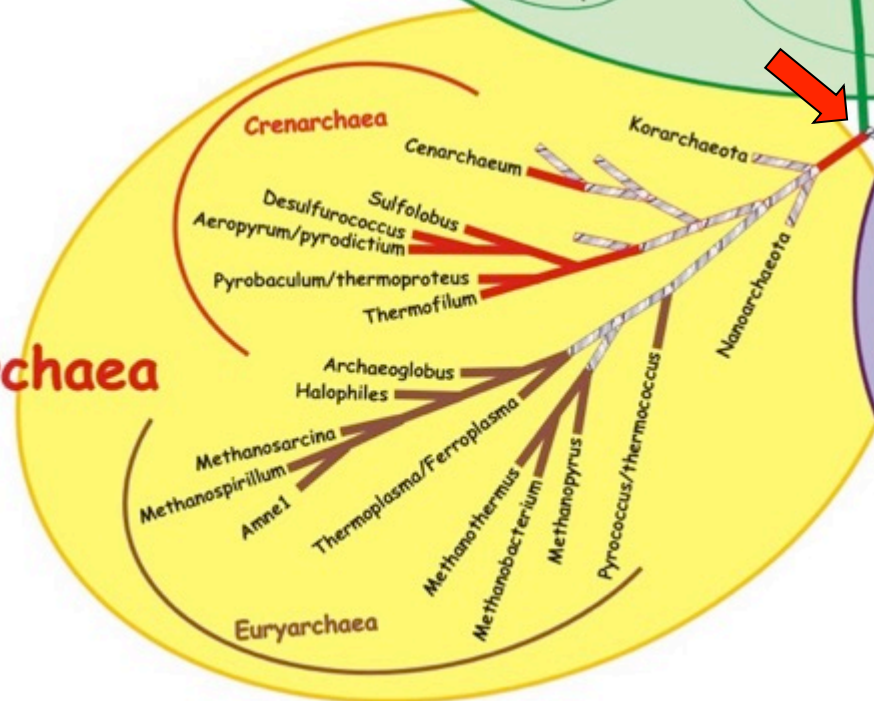
# Bacteria



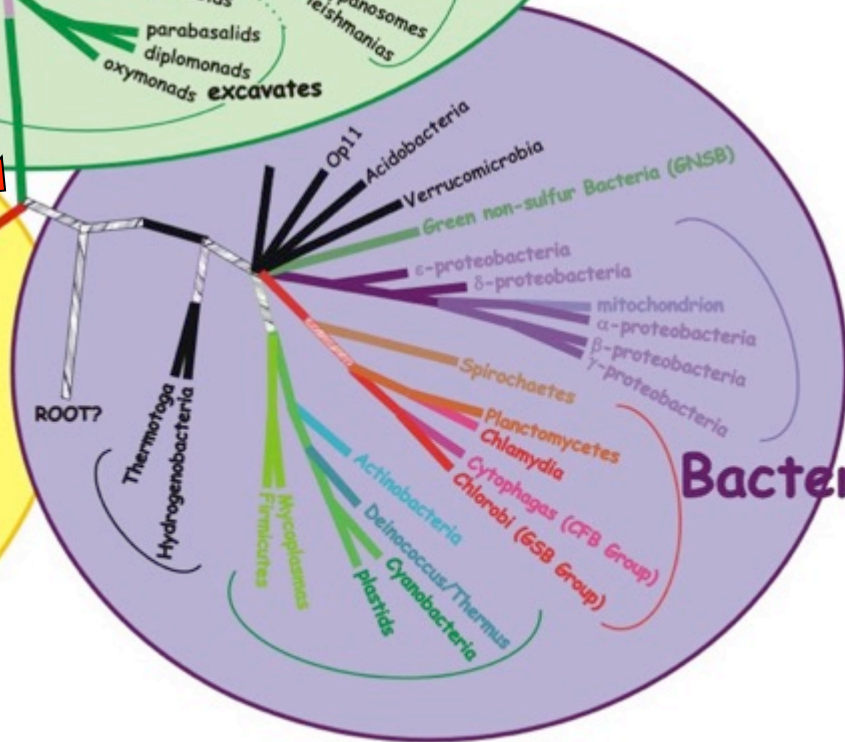
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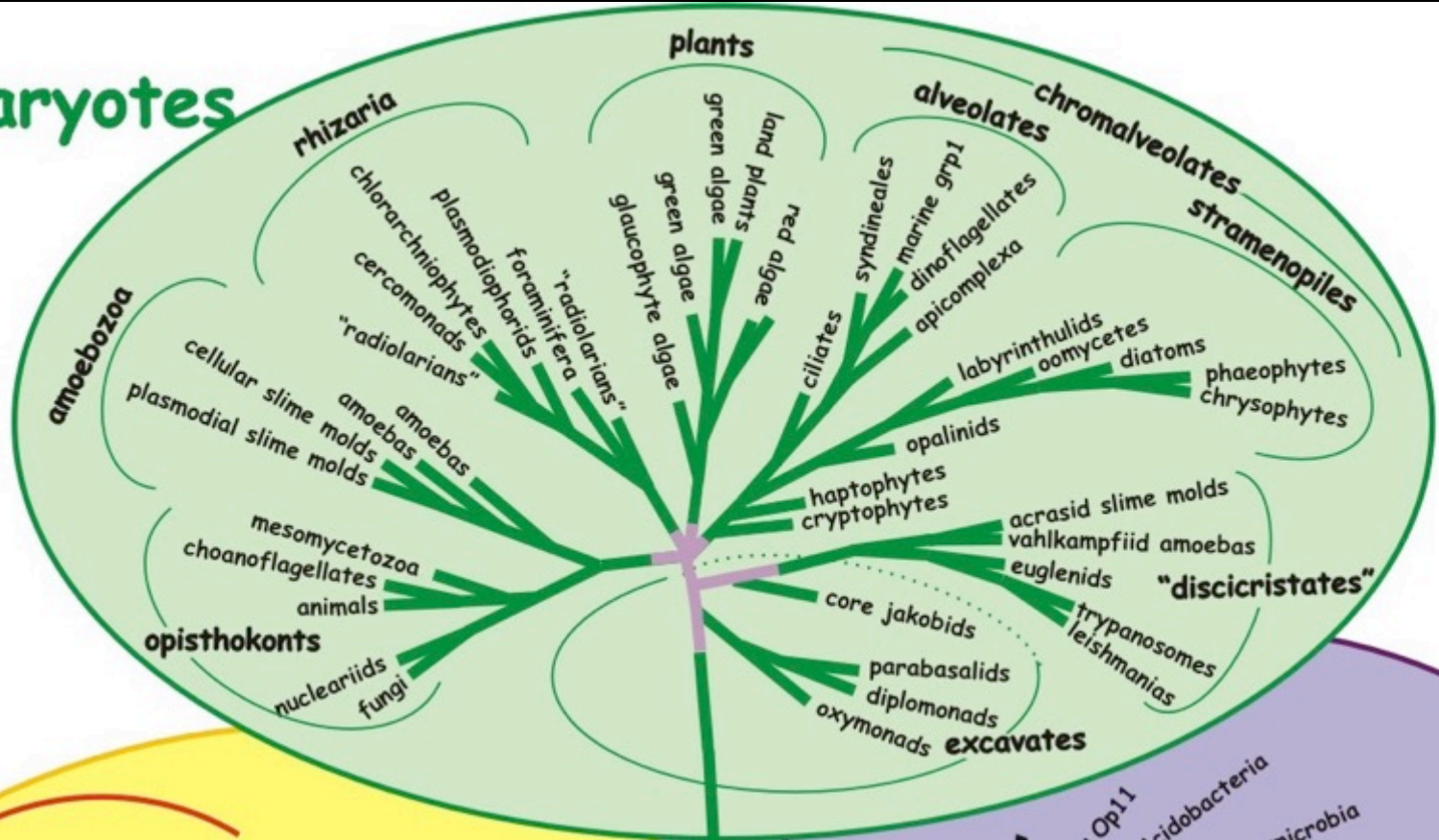
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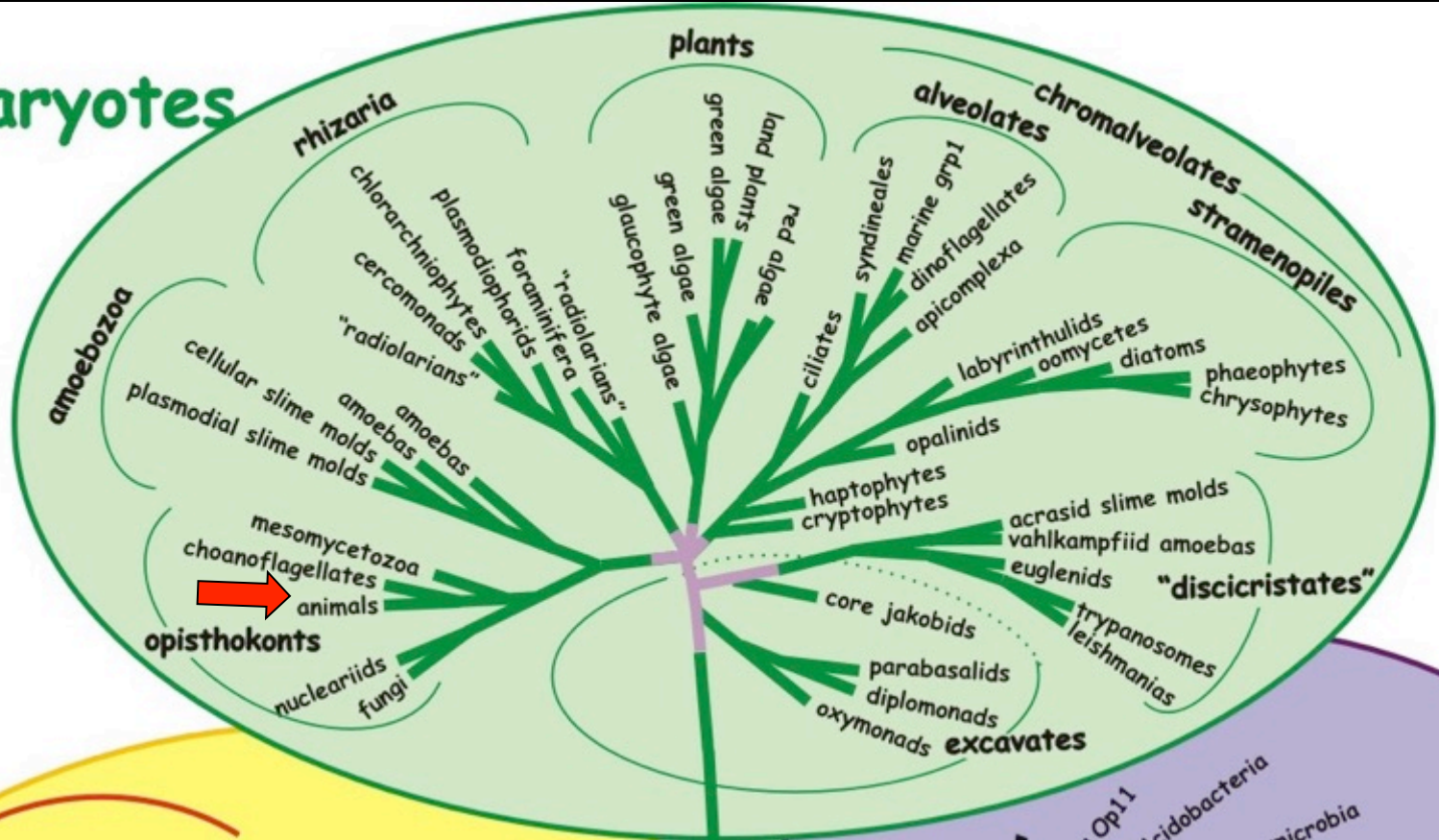


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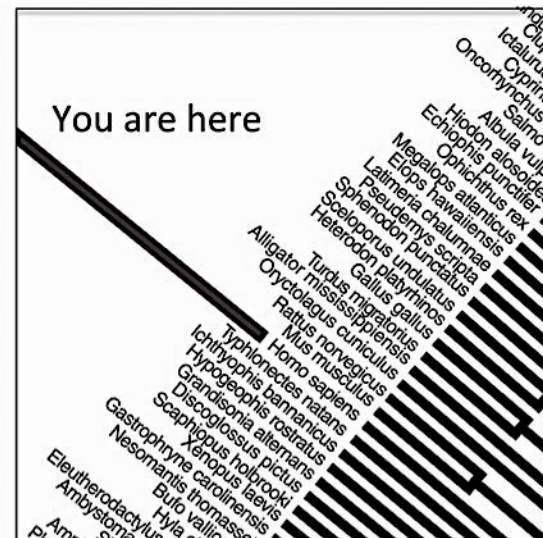
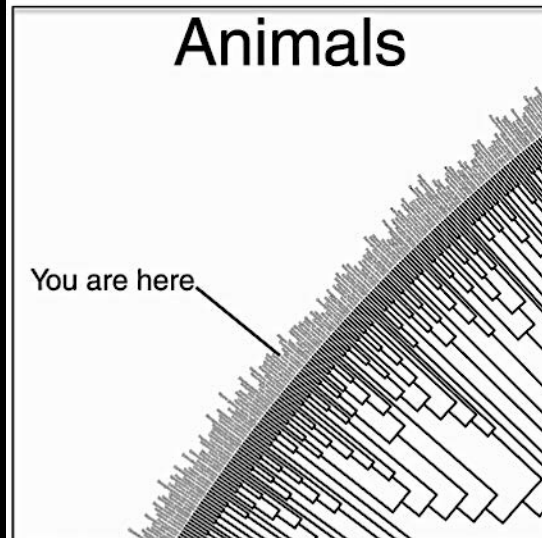
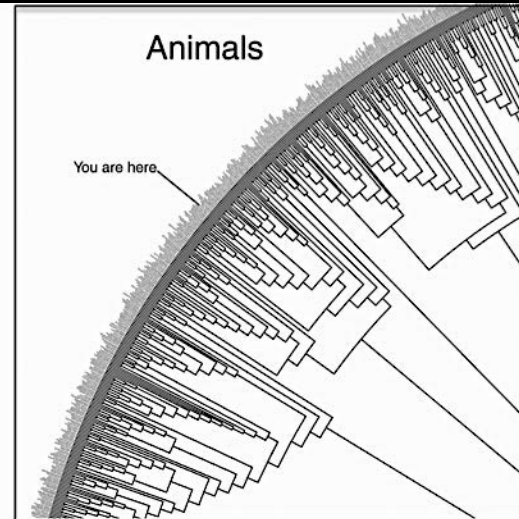
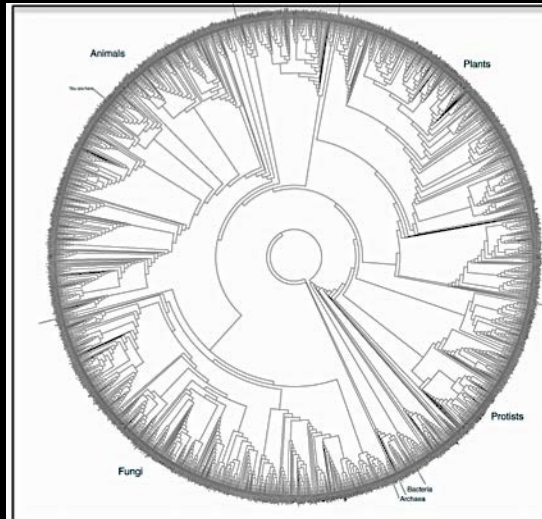
# Eukaryotes



# Choanoflagellates

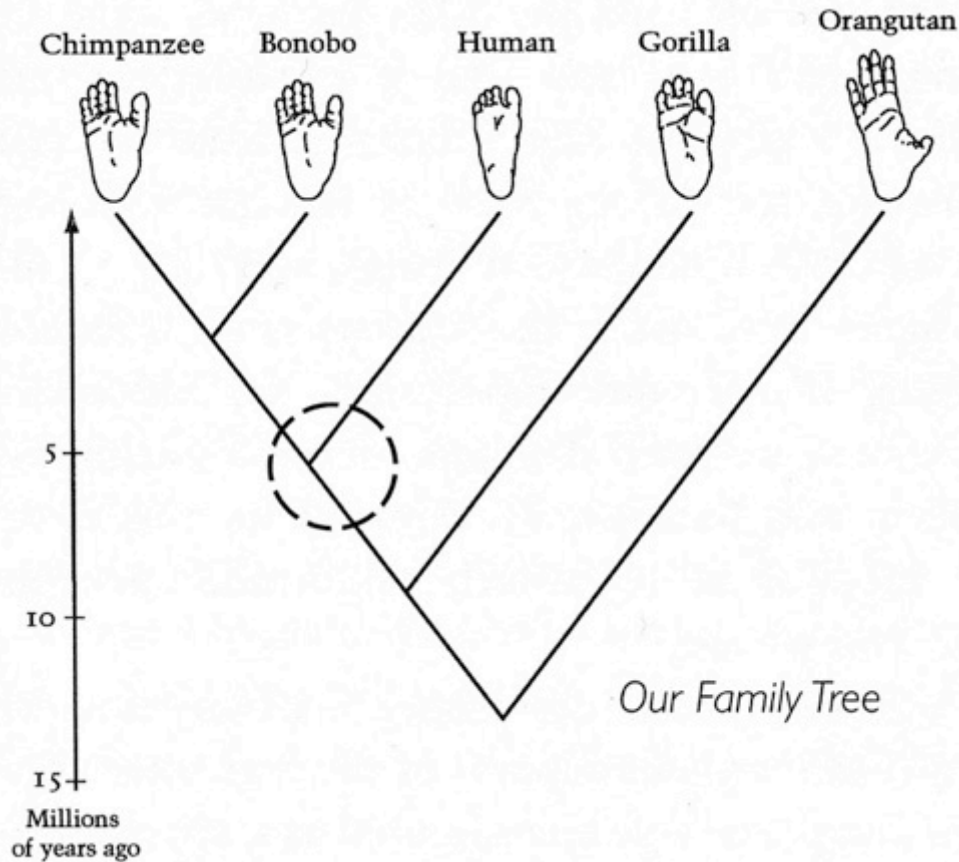


# Key feature of Everybody's Story: All beings share common ancestry, are interrelated



“Biologically we are just another ape; mentally we are a whole new phylum of organism”

-- Terry Deacon



Human uniqueness:

Symbolic language

Narrative self

Language-based cultures

# Outline of Everybody's Story

Curriculum offerings

## Story of the Observable Universe (13.8 billion years)

Singularity

Big Bang

Galaxies with stars

Nucleosynthesis in dying stars

Supernovas spread new kinds of atoms

Physics

Mathematics

## Story of Our Solar System (4.567 billion years)

Sun and planet Earth

Earth evolution

Chemistry

Geology

## Story of Life on Earth (~3.7 billion years)

Origin of life on Earth

Evolution of life: awareness, interdependence

Biology

Ecology

## Evolution of Animal Minds (~550 million years)

Social minds (~300 million years)

Hominid minds (~6 million years)

Human minds (~160,000 years)

Psychology

Sociology

Humanities

# Humanities

- Art, music, human history, philosophy, religions
- Created and transmitted via language-based human cultures that are part of Nature.

A naturalist takes the Everybody's Story seriously  
-- takes nature seriously --  
and adopts the story as a core narrative

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and adopts the story as a core narrative

A religious naturalist also explores its  
religious potential



## Reprise: Three key axes of religious exploration

- Interpretations of the story
- Spiritual responses to the story
- Moral/ethical orientations gleaned from the story

None of these is front-loaded into Everybody's Story.

Therefore, all are open to exploration.

## The interpretive



The **interpretive** axis entails asking the Big Questions along philosophical/existential axes.

How does Everybody's Story inform my experience of being a Self? What does it tell me about free will? Death? Love? The search for The Meaning of Life? Why there is anything at all rather than nothing?

## The spiritual



The **spiritual** axis entails exploring inward religious responses to Everybody's Story, including awe and wonder, gratitude, assent, commitment, humility, reverence, joy, and the astonishment of being alive at all.



## The moral

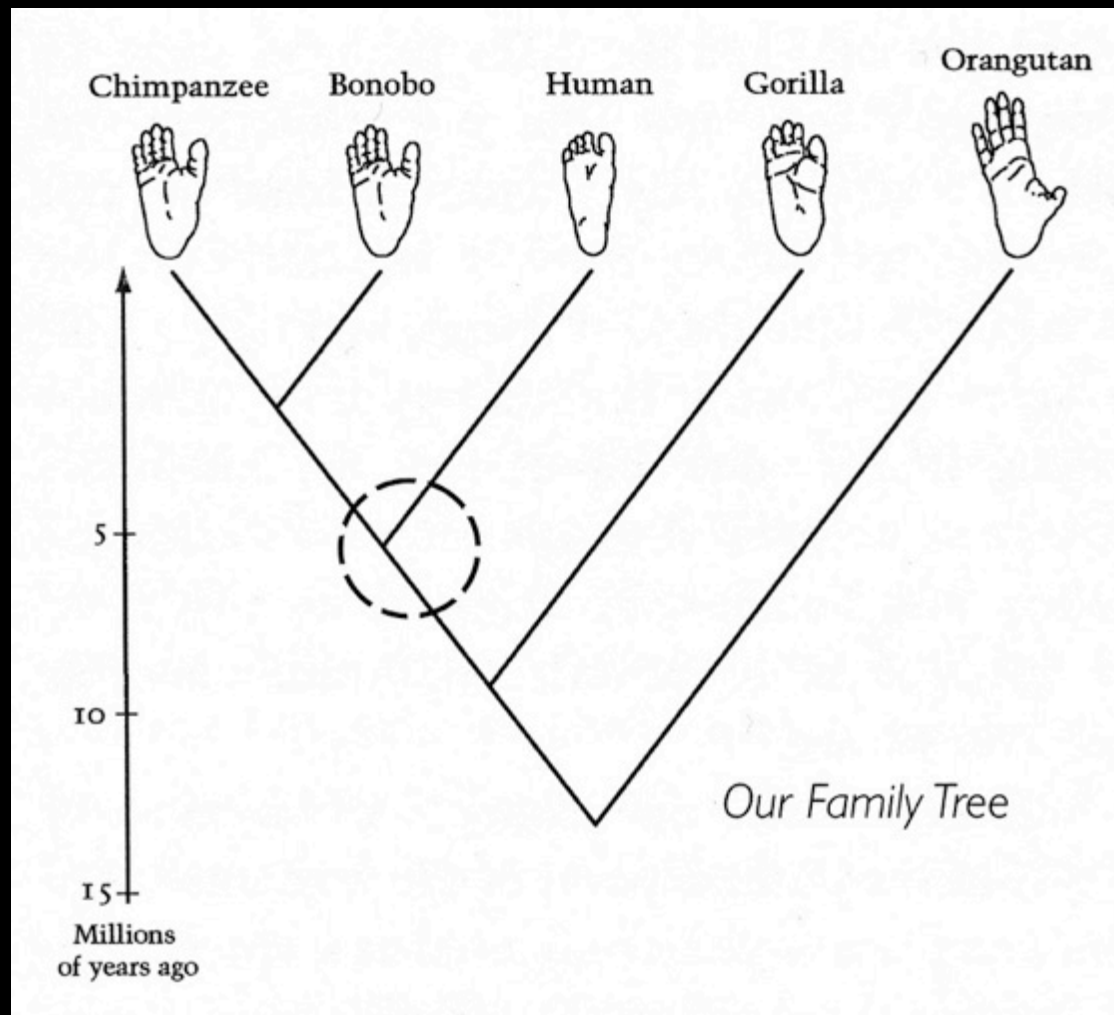
Where do human moral understandings come from?

Theist: God by whatever name

Philosopher: Human reason

Religious naturalist: It is natural for humans to be pro-social.

# “The antiquity of our moral sense” (Franz de Waal”



## Hierarchy and reciprocity



# Maternal nurture



## Group nurture





# Friendship



# Empathy



## The antiquity of our moral sense



## Humans experience primate moral sentiments symbolically

Our ape sensibilities have not been left in the evolutionary dustbin.

Nor are they experienced as apes experience them.

They are experienced as human minds experience things:  
Symbolically, and in narrative form.

# Ecomorality

Seeking right relations between the earth and its creatures, based on our interrelatedness, interdependence, and responsibilities.

## Ecomorality entails:

- An intimate knowledge of the history and the workings of the natural world.
- An understanding that humans and their cultures are a part of the natural world.
- Accepting, and then rejoicing in, one's critterhood, one's connectedness with all other beings and all those beings who "died for us".

## Ecomorality:

Interrelatedness, interdependence, responsibility



A naturalist takes nature seriously



A naturalist takes nature seriously

A religious naturalist takes Nature seriously

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A religious naturalist takes Nature seriously

A religious naturalist also takes Nature to heart

## Taking something to heart

If I were to say that I have taken the Koran to heart, you might infer that the teachings of the Koran now shape how I think, feel and act. I now take Allah's will as my own, and I have a newly clarified sense of who I am, where I came from, and where I am going. Taking the Koran to heart alters the fabric of my self-understanding, it shifts my teleological center of gravity, and I operate differently in my efforts to live in harmony with that reality.

-- Loyal Rue

Taking Nature to heart means that your  
heart can be broken

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Taking something to heart means experiencing moral outrage when that which is revered is desecrated.

And then acting on that outrage.

## Religious naturalism without God language (1)

We find our sources of meaning within the natural world, where humans are understood to be emergent from and hence a part of nature.

Our religious quest is informed and guided by

- the deepening and evolving understandings fostered by scientific inquiry
- the mindful understandings inherent in our human traditions, including art, literature, philosophy, and the religions of the world.

## Religious naturalism without God language (2)

The natural world and its emergent manifestations in human creativity and community are the focus of our immersion, wonder, and reverence, and our common naturalistic orientation generates our shared sense of place, gratitude, and joy.

## Religious naturalism without God language (3)

We acknowledge as well a shared set of values and concerns pertaining to peace, justice, dignity, responsible freedom, the richness of ethnic, cultural, and ecological diversity, and planetary sustainability.

We are committed to furthering the realization of these values and are convinced that the naturalistic perspective has much to offer in this process.

## Religious naturalism with God Language



The Rev. Philip Hefner, Lutheran Theological Seminary, Chicago

## Religious naturalism with God Language (1)

I believe that Evolution is the way God has created the world — God has woven the creation on the web of emergence, adaptation and natural selection.

We are very far from understanding the significance of this aspect of God's creation and also far from integrating this truth into our systems of belief.

## Religious naturalism with God Language (2)

Some think that attention to the sciences is to be feared, that it reduces religion and faith to molecules, genes, and neurons.

On the contrary, it throws light on how God has created our world, and what the actual purpose of faith and religion might be in the divine purview. Scientific perspectives can free faith, morality, and spirituality to be richer, more constructive, and, from a believer's perspective, more faithful. We have much more to fear if we ignore or reject them.

## Religious naturalism with God Language (3)

All religions face the challenge and the excitement of engaging new ideas of nature and allowing their worldviews to be changed and enriched by this engagement.

In this sense all of us, regardless of our starting-points, are called to take nature into our religious frameworks. We are all called upon to be "religious naturalists."



## Religious naturalism with God Language (4)

Any viewpoint that does not attempt to take the measure of nature as we presently know it is in danger of becoming debilitating rather than enriching in all 3 of the religious spheres: the interpretive, the spiritual, and the moral.

For those of us who begin with God, the challenge is to recognize that our scientific understandings are revelation—revelation of what God has done, what God is doing now, and what God intends.

## Summary

A religious naturalist is anchored in and dwells within her understandings of the natural world. He finds religious orientation within that meta-narrative and develops mindful religious responses to it -- interpretive, spiritual, and moral.

Importantly, these responses often deeply overlap those espoused by existing traditions. The adoption of a meta-narrative does not necessarily alter the human impulse toward common spiritual and moral sensibilities; rather, it influences how we get there.



You do not have to be good.  
You do not have to walk on your knees  
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.  
You only have to let the soft animal of your body  
love what it loves.  
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.  
Meanwhile the world goes on.  
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain  
are moving across the landscapes,  
over the prairies and the deep trees,  
the mountains and the rivers.  
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,  
are heading home again.  
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
the world offers itself to your imagination,  
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting--  
over and over announcing your place  
in the family of things.

Mary Oliver, *Wild Geese*

