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Thresholds in origin of life scenarios

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Summary

Thresholds are widespread in origin of life scenarios, from the emergence of chirality, to the appearance of vesicles, of autocatalysis, all the way up to Darwinian evolution. Here, we analyze the “error threshold” — which poses a condition for sustaining polymer replication — and generalize the threshold approach to other properties of prebiotic systems. Thresholds provide theoretical predictions, prescribe experimental tests and integrate interdisciplinary knowledge. The coupling between systems and their environment determines how thresholds can be crossed, leading to different categories of prebiotic transitions. Articulating multiple thresholds reveals evolutionary properties in prebiotic scenarios. Overall, thresholds indicate how to assess, revise and compare origin of life scenarios.

Keywords: thresholds, abiogenesis, origin of life, major transitions, prebiotic systems, evolution

Introduction

The transition from non-living to living matter is usually formulated in a historical manner, aiming to address the origin of life on Earth (Oparin, 1938; de Duve, 1991). However, the sparsity of historical evidence suggests that the “origin of life cannot be discovered; it has to be reinvented” (Eschenmoser and Loewenthal, 1991). This view, together with increasing experimental possibilities and the question of life on exoplanets (Rimmer *et al.*, 2018) broadens the field of investigation to synthetic systems with lifelike properties (Solé, 2016), such as metabolism, reproduction and evolution (Attwater and Holliger, 2014).

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Origin of life scenarios consist of successions of transitions. Major transitions have been outlined (Smith and Szathmary, 1995; Szathmary, 2015) but there are so far few empirical validations. Indeed, experiments may face huge parameter spaces and waiting times. Furthermore, studying transitions requires inputs from many disciplines, including chemistry, biochemistry, molecular biology, evolutionary biology, physics, astrophysics, geology, or geochemistry among others (Preiner *et al.*, 2019). Thus, it remains a challenge to decompose scenarios at a sufficiently fine-grained scale for experimental tests to be possible, while allowing articulation of elementary steps and overall plausibility estimates.

Here, we propose thresholds to be an operational notion that can be used to decompose origin of life scenarios, articulate theory and experiment, and assess scenario plausibility by coordinating interdisciplinary efforts. A threshold can be defined as a major qualitative change undergone by a physical-chemical system upon relatively minor changes in the values of systemic or environmental control parameters. One of the most studied thresholds is Eigen’s “error threshold” which constrains replication-based scenarios of early genetic polymers (Eigen, 1971; Kun *et al.*, 2015; Takeuchi, Hogeweg and Kaneko, 2017). A number of other prebiotic transitions invoke thresholds explicitly or implicitly: the appearance of homochirality (Hawbaker and Blackmond, 2019), replication (Kauffman, 1986; Szathmary, 2006), compartmentalization (Hargreaves, Mulvihill and Deamer, 1977), Darwinian evolution (Goldenfeld, Biancalani and Jafarpour, 2017).

Below, we first sample the diversity of thresholds found in origin of life research. Thresholds are encountered at different stages and levels of organization. In the second section, as a case study, we examine the original formulation of the “error threshold” for template-based replication, highlighting its interdisciplinary nature. In the third section, we analyze revisions to the error threshold that aim at establishing more precise or more plausible models. In the fourth section, we generalize the threshold approach to properties of prebiotic systems other than replication. Introducing a phase diagram representation allows us to categorize different types of threshold transitions as a function of the relationship between systems and their environment. In the fifth section, we investigate how to articulate multiple thresholds toward building complete scenarios. In turn, we determine qualitative relationships between transitions, such as entrenchment, contingency or transience. These relationships are typically used in evolutionary biology but are more generally applicable to prebiotic threshold transitions. Finally, we discuss how thresholds can be used to coordinate research efforts to study the origin of life.

1. The diversity of thresholds in origin of life

In this section, we illustrate the diversity of threshold-type transitions in origin of life research with a non-exhaustive list of examples taken from chemistry and thermodynamics all the way up to evolutionary and Darwinian dynamics.

The prebiotic synthesis of the building blocks of life (i.e. amino acids, nucleic acids, sugars, fatty acids) requires reactants to reach sufficient concentrations for the reactions to take place, hence the existence of concentration thresholds. Concentration thresholds can be overcome by acting on physical-chemical conditions resulting from enclosure into vesicles (Luisi, Stano and de Souza, 2014), wet-dry cycles (Nelson *et al.*, 2001), freeze-thaw cycles (Monnard, Kanavarioti and Deamer, 2003; Trinks, Schröder and Biebricher, 2005), adsorption on mineral surfaces (Lambert, 2008) or

thermophoresis effects in hydrothermal vents (Baaske *et al.*, 2007). Eutectic ice and meteoritic impacts have been pointed out to overcome a concentration threshold of hydrogen cyanide for its polymerization into purines (Miyakawa, Cleaves and Miller, 2002; Parkos *et al.*, 2018) (figure 1.a). This pathway to purines includes yet another threshold which concerns free-energy barriers for the formation of intermediate compounds, which could be overcome through exposition to light (Boulanger *et al.*, 2013) (figure 1.b). Since the famous Miller’s experiment (Miller, 1953), lightning is often considered to overcome such energy thresholds as well. The subsequent polymerization of building blocks (e.g. nucleotides) must also overcome energy thresholds (Dickson, Burns and Richardson, 2000), through chemical activation (Wachowius and Holliger, 2019) or adsorption on mineral surfaces (Hazen and Sverjensky, 2010). More generally, when it comes to forming the chemical bonds of biomolecules, a kinetic barrier has been estimated to be around 100 kJ/mol at moderate temperature (Pascal, 2012). Another threshold transition in prebiotic chemistry concerns the emergence of homochirality among biomolecules, i.e. the fact that in extant life amino acids are left-handed and sugars right-handed (Hawbaker and Blackmond, 2019).

The emergence of prebiotic compartments can be studied as a phase transition in the thermodynamic sense. Several thresholds that separate phases of dissociated components from self-assembled structures have been identified. Self-assembly thresholds controlling compartments formation can be overcome by varying physical-chemical parameters such as pH, temperature, or molecular crowding. It has been studied for the formation of vesicles (Bachmann, Luigi and Lang, 1992), coacervates (Jiang *et al.*, 2015) or microdomains in liquid crystals (Todisco *et al.*, 2018) (figure 1.c). For finite-size structures, such as peptide nanospheres (Carny and Gazit, 2005), mathematical models have established a threshold separating the self-assembled state from a “yield catastrophe phase” where constituents nucleate without stabilizing to final structures, controlled by activation and dimerization rates (Gartner *et al.*, 2020).

Transitions toward self-organization in reaction networks require the spontaneous formation of autocatalytic networks (Kauffman, 1993) (figure 1.d). A first threshold concerns catalytic closure, initially formulated for a model of networks of ligation and fragmentation reactions between peptides (Kauffman, 1986). Catalytic closure implies the existence of a set of peptides such that the formation of any member of the set is catalyzed by another member of the set. In this model, the transition happens when $\frac{E}{N} > \frac{1}{2}$, with E being the number of catalyzed reactions and N the number of peptides (respectively edges and nodes of the network) (Cohen, 1988). Other models have simulated autocatalytic transitions in the context of template-based replication (Chen and Nowak, 2012; Mathis, Bhattacharya and Walker, 2017). Wu *et al.* for instance examined how variations in catalytic feedback efficiency and spontaneous polymerization rate could induce the crossing of a threshold delimiting a regime of slow spontaneous RNA synthesis from a regime of rapid autocatalytic RNA synthesis (figure 1.e). This transition is stochastic, meaning that the systems explore random chemical compositions in a fixed environment before undergoing the transition.

Once formed, autocatalytic networks need to be sustained. For this, catalysts within autocatalytic networks should exhibit high enough specificity towards the reactions of the network to overcome degradation and losses due to side reactions. Given an autocatalytic set of p reactions, each catalyzed with a specificity s_i (where $i = 0, \dots, p$), disappearance can be avoided provided $\prod_{i=1 \dots p} s_i > \frac{1}{2}$, thereupon revealing a “decay threshold” (Szathmáry, 2006; Vasas *et al.*, 2012; Blokhuis, Lacoste and Nghe, 2020). Furthermore, for survival to be possible, the concentration of feedstock compounds must stay above a specific value most of the time. For a single autocatalytic reaction, this condition is

fulfilled if $R > \frac{a}{k}$, with R being the concentration of reactants, a the degradation kinetic coefficient of the autocatalyst and k the kinetic rate of autocatalyst production (King, 1977).

Later stages in origin of life concern the emergence of template-based replication of genetic polymers, which is discussed in detail in the next section, and the emergence of protocells. Early compartments and genetic polymers may not have been strictly associated in lineages. Indeed, compartments provide a way for multilevel selection (Poole, 2009) even when genes are submitted to pooling and mixing (Matsumura *et al.*, 2016). The “progenote stage” has been described as a stage where genes heavily exchange between dividing protocells via horizontal gene transfer (HGT) (Woese and Fox, 1977). The transition from dominant HGT to lineages where genetic polymers and compartments are strongly correlated has been coined the “Darwinian threshold” (Woese, 2002) (figure 1.f). Mathematical models (Arnoldt, Strogatz and Timme, 2015; Goldenfeld, Biancalani and Jafarpour, 2017) show that such a threshold can be crossed when the progenotes HGT rate decreases below a specific value. This decrease might result from mutations and environmental changes such as protocell density, alkaline shifts, or nutrient limitation (Claverys, Prudhomme and Martin, 2006; Kovács *et al.*, 2009). In contrast, other authors posit the advent of Darwinian evolution before the appearance of protocells. This is the case of Eigen’s theory of template-based replication of genetic polymers (Eigen, 1971; Eigen and Schuster, 1977; Eigen, McCaskill and Schuster, 1988), which we detail in the coming section.

2. The error threshold and the replicase

The error-threshold, introduced by Eigen (1971), has certainly been the most studied threshold in origin of life theories. We draw here on the main findings to make a case study and highlight the usefulness of studying thresholds, the replicase scenario being reviewed elsewhere (Kun *et al.*, 2015; Takeuchi, Hogeweg and Kaneko, 2017). In the RNA world hypothesis, an RNA capable of catalyzing the polymerization of its own sequence as well as others (Cheng and Unrau, 2010), a generalist *self-replicase*, is regarded as a primordial replicator capable of Darwinian evolution. The appearance and maintenance of such a replicase regime—a process that we will refer to as the “replicase scenario”—is constrained by the error threshold which imposes upper bounds on the length of the copied reference sequences given an error-rate during replication. More specifically, to avoid the disappearance of the sequence to be copied across rounds of replication, called the “error catastrophe”, the following condition must be fulfilled:

$$l \leq \frac{\ln(s)}{e} \tag{1}$$

where e is the replicase copying error rate and s the selective advantage, defined as the ratio of the replication rate of the reference sequence to that of the erroneous sequences. Note that formula (1) was initially derived by Eigen *et al.* assuming that a polymerase is present and non-limiting or that replication is non-enzymatic (see next section for more precise models). Formula (1) is valid for $s > 1$, otherwise this model forbids any reference sequence, including the replicase, to be sustainable. From (1), we deduce a function $e_{max} = \frac{\ln(s)}{l}$ (red curve on figure 2.a). Due to the minimum structure complexity required for replicase activity, replicases of a given length l cannot reach perfect fidelity and their error rate must be above a certain value $e_{min}(l)$ (blue curve on figure 2.a). Bounds e_{min}

and e_{max} delineate a domain in the space parametrized by (l, e) so that above e_{min} there exist replicases, and under e_{max} , replicase copying can be sustained through faithful replication. If these domains overlap, i.e. if there exists an l such that $e_{max}(l) \geq e_{min}(l)$, then the replicase regime is possible in the intersection domain (green zone in figures 2.a and 2.b; note that the sheer possibility of the replicase regime does not imply its plausibility). Otherwise, $e_{max}(l) < e_{min}(l)$ for all l , and the replicase regime has no existence domain (figure 2.c). The latter case corresponds to the so-called ‘‘Eigen’s paradox’’: no long replicases without replication fidelity, but no fidelity without long replicases.

If the replicase regime is possible, the next step is to study the plausibility of emergence of a sustainable replicase. First needed is the number N_l of sequences of length l that have a replicase activity with an error rate e . The higher this number, the greater the chances of reaching at least one such replicase by a pre-existing generative process. The distribution $f(e, l)$ of these sequences is depicted in figure 2.d for a given length l . Second, the pre-existing generative process also determines the plausibility of the transition. A typical model for this regime is random polymerization, where every sequence is generated with equal probability for a given length. There, the fraction of generated polymers of a certain length $g(l)$ in the polymer population decreases rapidly with l . From the distributions $f(e, l)$ and $g(l)$, we estimate the probability for a sustainable replicase to appear to be:

$$P_r = \sum_l g(l) \int_{e_{min}(l)}^{e_{max}(l)} f(e, l) de \quad (2)$$

This probability can be used in the context of an environmental scenario supplying estimates of the total number N of random oligomers present at any moment, their global renewal rate ρ resulting from sequence generation and destruction dynamics. The typical time t required for one replicase to appear then obeys:

$$\rho t N P_r \sim 1 \quad (3)$$

The parameters found in (2) and (3) highlight the highly interdisciplinary nature of the question: the threshold e_{max} is determined by replication dynamics studied in theoretical biology; the distribution f and threshold e_{min} arise from genotype-to-function relationships obtained from biochemical considerations; g depends on the chemistry of spontaneous polymerization; ρ and N depend on geochemical processes, and t should be compared with estimates from geology and planetary system stability analysis.

The analysis leading to (3) is only part of the answer for the replicase scenario: for the replication dynamics to actually start, a replicase needs to encounter either a copy of its own sequence or a complementary sequence. This should probably take place in a compartmentalized setting, where only replicase sequences are present, since otherwise the copying of other sequences would immediately take over the population. Furthermore, the analysis presented so far may be questioned, given that formula (1-3) rely on a number of strong assumptions. We examine some of these considerations in the coming section.

3. Refining and revising the replicase scenario

The error threshold of equation (1) relies on a number of simplifying assumptions that have been refined in subsequent models presented here. Such models may lead to lower e_{max} , thus reducing the size of the green zone in figure 3, which goes to the detriment of the replicase scenario. For instance, Eigen’s original model ignores the effects of changes in replicase concentration, whereas the latter is impacted by replication. Including this aspect greatly lowers e_{max} (Obermayer and Frey, 2009). Experimental data about RNA replication highlight another required model revision, because replication errors typically lead to shorter sequences rather than to point mutations (Ichihashi and Yomo, 2016). As a result, mutants tend to replicate faster than the original sequence, which means $s < 1$ by definition of the selective advantage, so that replicase regimes cannot be sustained (see Section 2). Note however that it is still unclear whether results obtained with protein replicases used in these experiments extrapolate to hypothetical RNA replicases. In contrast, other model refinements tend to increase e_{max} , thus broadening the range of viable replicases. This is the case when considering the abundance of neutral mutations in the neighborhood of the replicase sequence, leading to a “relaxed” error threshold which is significantly lower than Eigen’s (Kun, Santos and Szathmary, 2005; Takeuchi, Poorthuis and Hogeweg, 2005).

Other modifications are revisions of the scenario. So-called “hypercycles” were first proposed as a way to increase the robustness of the system to replication errors (Eigen and Schuster, 1977). This model is based on a network with multiple molecular species, each species being replicated in a template-based manner while helping the replication of other members of the network. The resulting cooperative dynamics can raise the error threshold, thereby increasing the replicase regime zone (Takeuchi, Hogeweg and Kaneko, 2017). Other scenarios introduce compartments and more generally spatial structure. The Stochastic Corrector Model (SCM) considers lineages of compartments which grow, are selected, and divide (Szathmary and Demeter, 1987; Grey, Hutson and Szathmary, 1995). Transient Compartmentalization (TC) assumes simpler cycles consisting of compartmentalization, selection, and pooling (Matsumura *et al.*, 2016; Blokhuis *et al.*, 2020). Unlike the original model and its equation (1), SCM and TC authorize the presence of parasite sequences that replicate faster than the reference sequence. This was experimentally demonstrated for TC with replicated RNA (Matsumura *et al.*, 2016). Indeed, in both cases, erroneous copies only locally invade compartments and are removed from the population by compartment-level selection. Surface clusters are an even less constrained setting that allows the maintenance of replication, although less efficiently than non-permeable compartments (Szabo *et al.*, 2002; Shah *et al.*, 2019). These mechanisms increase e_{max} , thus also increase the plausibility of the replicase scenario. However, this comes at the cost of assuming the existence of spatial structures and introducing additional parameters (number of molecules per compartment, compartment lifetime, selection process, etc.).

Once the error threshold is determined, the next question is to estimate the fraction of viable replicases in the sequence space. This corresponds to determining the distribution f in equation (2), which depends on the relationship between sequence and catalytic function, including the minimum possible error rate e_{min} given a certain replicase length. This problem cannot be solved computationally yet, and heavily relies on experimental data. Experiments on synthetic replicases show that processivity — the ability to copy long templates — is a limiting factor even before considering fidelity. Processivity is notably hampered when copying folded RNAs, which is the case for replicase templates. Consistently, replicases synthesized in the laboratory can copy other RNAs as long as themselves but cannot copy themselves (Horning and Joyce, 2016; Attwater *et al.*, 2018).

Another issue is that the sequence space cannot be covered experimentally due to its astronomical size ($\sim 10^{14}$ for a typical 190 nucleotides long replicase (Johnston *et al.*, 2001)). Consequently, experimental data need to be combined with theory and computation in order to estimate f . For instance, the diversity of RNA secondary structures is predicted to increase as $1.4848 \times n^{-\frac{3}{2}}(1.8488)^n$ where n is the sequence length (Schuster *et al.*, 1994). This is consistently smaller than the 4^n possible sequences. Taking structure similarity as a proxy for function indicates an average redundancy in sequences with similar catalytic properties, potentially reducing the size of the space to characterize. A complementary approach is to estimate the tail of distribution f between e_{min} and e_{max} (figure 2.d) using laws of extreme statistics (Gumbel, 1958). Indeed, replicases are rare sequences for which statistics are expected to follow extreme value theory. The latter restricts distributions of rare properties to functional forms (among the Weibull, Gumbel and Fréchet laws) with few parameters. Such approach has been tested experimentally for proteins (Boyer *et al.*, 2016) and ribozymes (Pressman *et al.*, 2017). Despite the complexity of the genotype-to-phenotype relationship, the limited number of parameters involved in these laws may allow estimates of f from a restricted sample of replicases.

Finally, the transition scenario toward existence of a sustainable replicase may be revised by considering different polymer generation processes anterior to the replicase regime. Polymer generation could have been enhanced by catalysis of polymerization (Hazen and Sverjensky, 2010), ligation (Mutschler *et al.*, 2018), or recombination (Blokhuys and Lacoste, 2017), as well as by size selection (Mizuuchi *et al.*, 2019). An alternative is that autocatalytic sets could have preceded template-based replication and biased polymer populations toward longer and more functional sequences (Vasas *et al.*, 2012). All these processes can add weight to the distribution g in equation (2) in the length categories corresponding to replicases and contribute to the plausibility of their emergence.

4. Generalizing the threshold approach

We have seen that the error threshold sets a number of requirements on polymerases for them to sustain replication. We now generalize the threshold approach to other properties of prebiotic systems. In figure 3, the axes correspond to relevant parameters of the system and its environment, and regions α and β respectively correspond to systems without and with a property of interest (regions separated by a threshold line). We call this representation a phase diagram, by analogy with equilibrium thermodynamics, extending its use to non-equilibrium regimes as well. In the replicase scenario, region α corresponds to a regime of randomly produced RNAs and region β to sustainable template-based RNA replication, the boundary between the two being the error threshold. In contrast with figure 2 where the axes stand for system parameters only, the x-axis in figure 3 captures system parameters (e.g. replicase error rate) and the y-axis environment variables (e.g. temperature). Note that it is not always obvious to distinguish prebiotic systems from their environment, and choosing a variable as being either part of the system or of the environment may be a matter of choice. Note also that the x-axis represents chosen control parameters of the system; other parameters of the system may lie in other dimensions, in particular as encoded by the green shading of β in figure 3, which indicates the presence of a specific property of the system. A point in the diagram then represents a system with certain fixed properties in a given environment. Such phase diagrams allow us to classify modes by which a system overcomes a threshold and acquires a novel property, i.e. moves from region α to region β . We classify transitions into four modes:

1. *Extrinsic transition*: the acquisition of a new property is here solely driven by the environment. In figure 3a, the system is initially located at point A in region α and environment E_1 ; a change from E_1 to E_2 brings the system to B in region β . Since this transition is not caused by any change in the system control parameters, there is no variation along the x-axis. Transitions in prebiotic chemistry are typically framed in the context of extrinsic transitions (Kawamura and Maurel, 2017; Kitadai and Maruyama, 2018; Benner *et al.*, 2019), where concentration thresholds are overcome during wet-dry cycles in ponds (Campbell *et al.*, 2019), where steps of nucleobase synthesis occur at the junction of interconnecting streams (Patel *et al.*, 2015), or where hydrogen cyanide is synthesized upon meteorite impacts (Parkos *et al.*, 2018). This mode can also be applied to the appearance of vesicles triggered by CO_2 (Bachmann, Luigi and Lang, 1992).

2. *Intrinsic transition*: the novel property here results from changes in parameters of the system while the environment remains unchanged. In figure 3.b, the system is initially located at point A in α with environment E_1 , and moves to B in β without any environmental change, simply moving along the x-axis. This is the case when a replicase appears from random polymerization as described in section 3 (Mathis, Bhattacharya and Walker, 2017). Another example is the appearance of autocatalytic sets as modelled by Jain and Krishna (1998). This model assumes that catalytic species only are limiting and follow a dynamic where the least fit species tend to disappear and be randomly replaced by novel catalytic species. Under these assumptions, an autocatalytic set inevitably emerges and fixes. Note that in the examples cited above, extrinsic transitions are deterministic while intrinsic transitions are stochastic, but this need not always be the case. For a discussion on contingency versus determinism in the origin of life see Luisi (2003).

3. *Scaffolding transition*: the environment changes only transiently, and fixing a novel property requires to combine the environmental change with a system-driven change. Here, the environment plays the role of a scaffold in the sense that it transiently supports the emergence of a property which is then internalized, i.e. becomes an intrinsic property of the system (Caporael, Griesemer and Wimsatt, 2014). In figure 3c, the system starts at point A in region α in environment E_1 , then moves to point B in region β via an extrinsic transition triggered by an environmental change to E_2 . At this stage, returning to E_1 would bring the system back into α . However, if the property acquired in β allows exploration of neighboring areas along the x-axis, the system may reach B' in β while in environment E_2 . Then, an environmental change from E_2 back to E_1 would bring the system from B' to B'', yet still within β . Such scaffolding transition could be observed when a dilute solution of polymers in a pond (system in A) is submitted to partial evaporation (from E_1 to E_2), thereby reaching a concentration threshold above which autocatalysis becomes possible (system in B), leading it to accumulate enough catalysts (from B to B') so that once back to wet conditions, autocatalysis is maintained (from B' to B'').

4. *Symbiotic transition*: two distinct systems aggregate into a new system thereby acquiring a novel property. In figure 3.d, systems A and B both in α merge into a new system C located in β in a constant environment. Such transition is hypothesized when compartments meet autocatalytic chemistries (Hordijk *et al.*, 2018; Joyce and Szostak, 2018). Both may pre-exist separately, but evolution by natural selection requires autocatalytic chemistries to be compartmentalized in order to provide a collective level of selection (Vasas *et al.*, 2012).

5. Articulating series of thresholds

In previous sections, we analyzed single threshold transitions. However, origin of life scenarios combine multiple transitions (Szathmáry, 2015; Solé, 2016). There are to date only a few attempts to assemble complete detailed scenarios (Martin *et al.*, 2003; Damer and Deamer, 2020). Research efforts have focused on combining transitions for specific stages, such as the synthesis of building blocks (Patel *et al.*, 2015; Kitadai and Maruyama, 2018; Becker *et al.*, 2019), the emergence of functional RNAs from random ones (Briones, Stich and Manrubia, 2009; Higgs and Lehman, 2015) or the emergence of evolution from catalytic micelles (Lancet, Zidovetzki and Markovitch, 2018), to cite a few. Below, we apply the phase diagram representation to multiple thresholds. This analysis reveals different types of articulations between threshold transitions: *accumulation*, *entrenchment*, *contingency*, *transience*, *facilitation*. These concepts are borrowed from evolutionary biology but are used here to analyze systems that do not necessarily evolve in a Darwinian manner. We indeed consider these concepts to be generally applicable to successions of threshold transitions, heritable transitions through Darwinian evolution only being a particular case.

We first consider the crossing of two successive thresholds. In figures 4.a-c, the green and blue regions β and γ indicate systems which possess properties p_β and p_γ , respectively; in region α , the system does not possess any of them. Here, the x- and y-axes depict relevant variables that can be environmental, systemic or both. For *accumulation* of properties p_β and p_γ to be possible, regions β and γ must intersect. Figures 4a-c depict systems that start from region α , then cross the threshold leading to β , followed by a second threshold-crossing to region γ . A notion stronger than accumulation is *entrenchment*, where any property p_γ posterior to p_β requires it and fixes it irreversibly. This is illustrated in figure 4a, where region γ is entirely included in region β . For example, p_β could stand for the existence of catalytic RNAs and p_γ of autocatalytic RNAs. Another threshold articulation is when β and γ intersect without inclusion. Such a situation is characterized by *contingency* in the sense that p_γ may exist independently of p_β (and vice-versa) so that any of the two properties may appear first (figure 4.b, from points A to B or points A to b). This would be the case with the appearance of RNAs (p_γ) together with other genetic polymers (p_β) (Cleaves *et al.*, 2019). Alternative polymers further illustrate *transience*, where a property is acquired, and then lost (figure 4.b, any path from point A to point D). For instance, TNA may have appeared, coexisted with RNA, then disappeared (Yu, Zhang and Chaput, 2012). Finally, a threshold transition can make a subsequent transition more plausible when acquiring p_β lowers the threshold to acquire p_γ (figure 4.c); this is referred to as *facilitation*. For example, compartmentalization (p_β) lowers the error threshold that delineates sustainable replication (p_γ) (Matsumura *et al.*, 2016).

We now consider the articulation between more than two thresholds as depicted in figure 4.d as a Venn diagram, where thresholds delineate regions corresponding to different properties. For example, a chemical system may start in region α where it has the ability to synthesize random RNAs. By reaching β , it gains the ability to synthesize random peptides as well. Next, reaching γ allows autocatalysis among sets of peptides. Furthermore, in these examples, the system is allowed to *accumulate* the properties that define α , β and γ because they all intersect. An example of *entrenchment* here is RNA oligomer synthesis (α) that is a necessary condition for the existence of autocatalysis in RNA sets (δ is fully included in α). *Transience* happens if the system loses its ability to synthesize random RNAs (α) but acquires protein RNA-replicases (ϕ), as it allows replication of long RNAs from single nucleotides.

The notion of *entrenchment* can be further refined. As we have seen, it occurs when a system cannot get rid of a feature because too many features have evolved on that basis. As a result, the entrenched feature can narrow down the access to other properties as well as open other possibilities. The former is known as “contingent irreversibility” (Smith and Szathmary, 1995) and the latter as “generative entrenchment” (Schank and Wimsatt, 1986) or “enabling constraint” (Kauffman, 2014). In figure 4.d, reaching region δ allows transition to region ϵ but not ϕ . The advent of homochirality illustrates these notions. Indeed, a racemic mixture of oligonucleotides (region β in figure 4.d) could break its symmetry because of a triggered small enantiomeric excess amplified by an autocatalytic reaction leading either to L-ribose RNA only (region γ) either to D-ribose RNA only (region δ) (Hawbaker and Blackmond, 2019). Entrenchment would follow with peptide synthesis: L-ribose RNA systems could imply D-amino acids peptides only (region ϕ) whereas D-ribose RNA systems could imply L-amino acids peptides only (region ϵ) (Illangasekare *et al.*, 2010).

Finally, we relate the diagram representations to the concept of *lifeness* (also referred as *aliveness* or *life index*) proposed by several authors (Bruylants, Bartik and Reisse, 2010; Sutherland, 2017; Malaterre and Chartier, 2019). Lifeness stands for a scale where so-called “infrabiological systems” (Szathmary, 2005) are positioned between a non-living state and a living state. It remains unclear which quantities or measures best account for lifeness. For instance, Bedau (2012) proposes a discrete scale from 0 to 9 depending on the number of interactions between three subsystems: container, metabolism and program, while Malaterre and Chartier (2019) propose a multidimensional gradual scale that integrates system and environment-related functions. In any case, projecting the paths of figure 4d on any such measure would make threshold transitions appear as jumps, the directionality of paths towards a living state corresponding to increasing lifeness (figure 4.e). In this view, we propose that lifeness corresponds, at first order, to the number of thresholds crossed relative to the total number of thresholds in a given scenario. This suggests a way toward formalizing the notion of chemical evolution: early prebiotic systems may not yet evolve in a canonically Darwinian manner, but in the sense of acquiring and sustaining qualitatively novel properties by crossing thresholds, thereby increasing their lifeness before getting a chance to increasing their fitness.

6. Discussion

Thresholds define conditions of existence for particular states along the path from inanimate matter to life. Although not all prebiotic transitions are threshold transitions, thresholds pose well-defined problems that can structure interdisciplinary efforts to understand the origin of life (Fig. 5). Thresholds may initially be deduced from apparent paradoxes, so-called “catch-22” or “chicken-and-egg” situations stated as: “without X, no Y, and without Y, no X” (Benner, 2018). For instance, from a bird’s-eye view of life, metabolism, genetics and compartments appear so intertwined that there is no obvious scenario for their gradual emergence. As we have seen, thresholds are also detected when taking a closer look at molecular processes, such as template-based replication, or from computer simulations and experiments. Their signatures are discontinuities, hysteresis and waiting time distributions, as observed with first order phase transitions in physics.

Quantitatively characterizing a threshold requires back-and-forth adjustments between theory and experiment. Interestingly, thresholds pose conditions of existence of a given state without referring to an anterior nor a posterior state. Thus, their study is independent of a particular transition or scenario

in the first place. The starting point is typically a simplified model establishing relationships between parameters. Such a “toy-model” has been highly productive in the case of the error threshold, notably pointing to the disciplinary diversity of its parameters. From this point, thorough theoretical investigations of the parameter space and regimes help elaborating hypotheses testable with synthetic experiments in chemistry, systems chemistry, physical-chemistry, soft matter physics, etc. (Solé, 2016; Preiner *et al.*, 2019). In turn, models may be refined until convergence. A possible outcome is that the proposed regime is impossible due to multiple incompatible thresholds, resulting in a true paradox and the revision of the scenario with alternative regimes. Otherwise, the regime is possible and then comes the question of its plausibility.

To assess plausibility, transition from an anterior state must be accounted for (Orgel, 2008; Schwartz, 2013). Theory, possibly again with back-and-forth adjustment with experiments, estimates the probability of crossing the threshold given the anterior state and environmental conditions as determined by geology, geochemistry, or planetary dynamics (Stüeken *et al.*, 2013; Sasselov, Grotzinger and Sutherland, 2020). Comparing the crossing probability from different anterior states and environments selects between transitions (e.g. random polymerization or autocatalytic sets before to template-based replication). The plausibility of scenarios finally results from the probability of successions of such transitions. If this total probability is deemed too low, alternative scenarios may lead to consider novel thresholds (e.g. error thresholds with compartment instead of without).

So far, no one agrees on whether any scenario is devoid of true paradoxes (impossibilities). However, the threshold approach outlined above can establish firm building blocks on the way to constructing scenarios. For this to be effective, studies on the origin of life ought to be explicit with the thresholds they address, the parameters involved, and the relationships between these parameters, following the example of the error threshold.

Resource availability

Lead Contact

Further information and requests for resources should be directed to and will be fulfilled by the Lead Contact Philippe Nghe (philippe.nghe@espci.psl.eu)

Materials Availability

This study did not use or generate any reagents

Data and Code Availability

This study did not use any dataset or code

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Author Contributions

All authors contributed equally to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare no competing interests.

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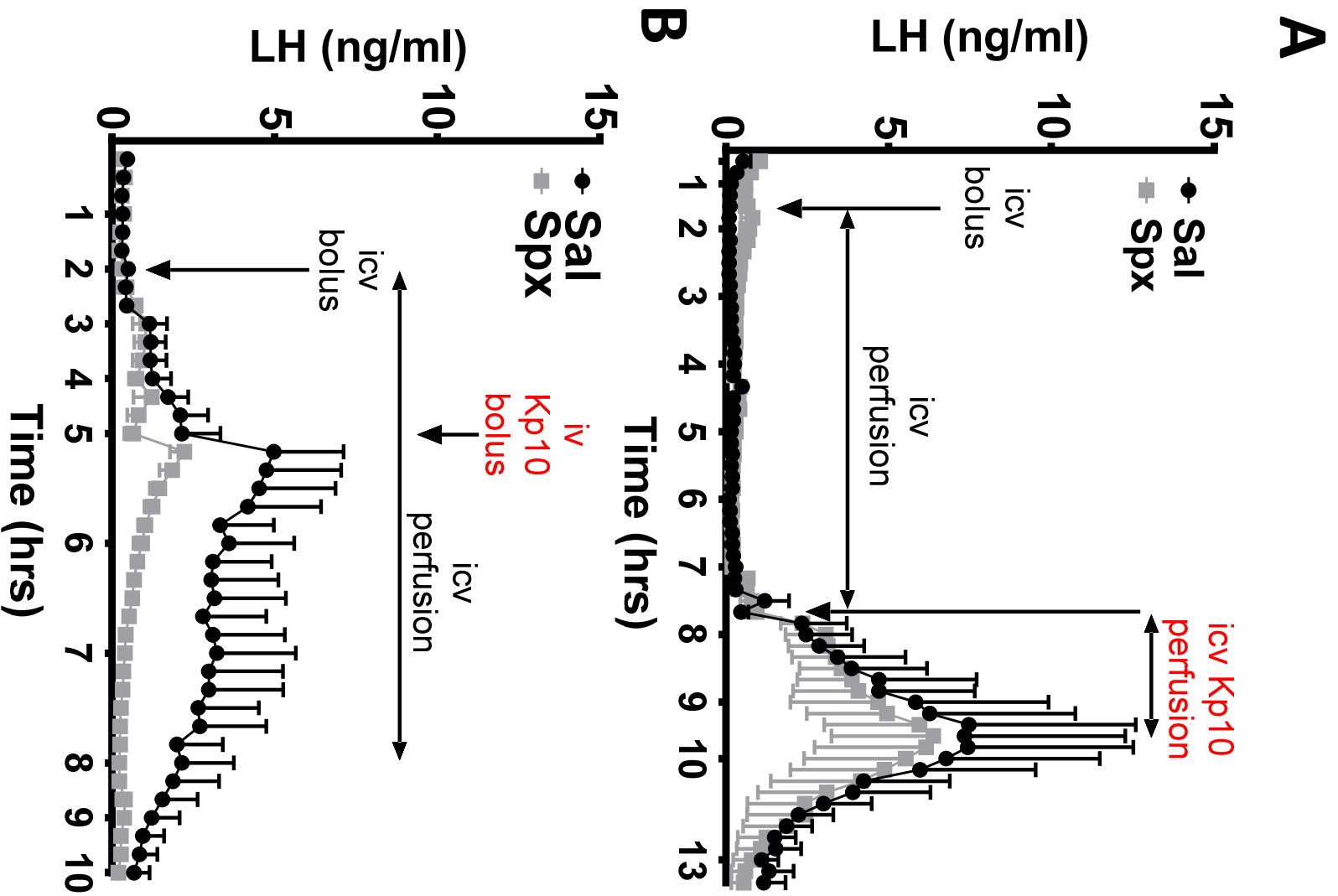


Figure 2

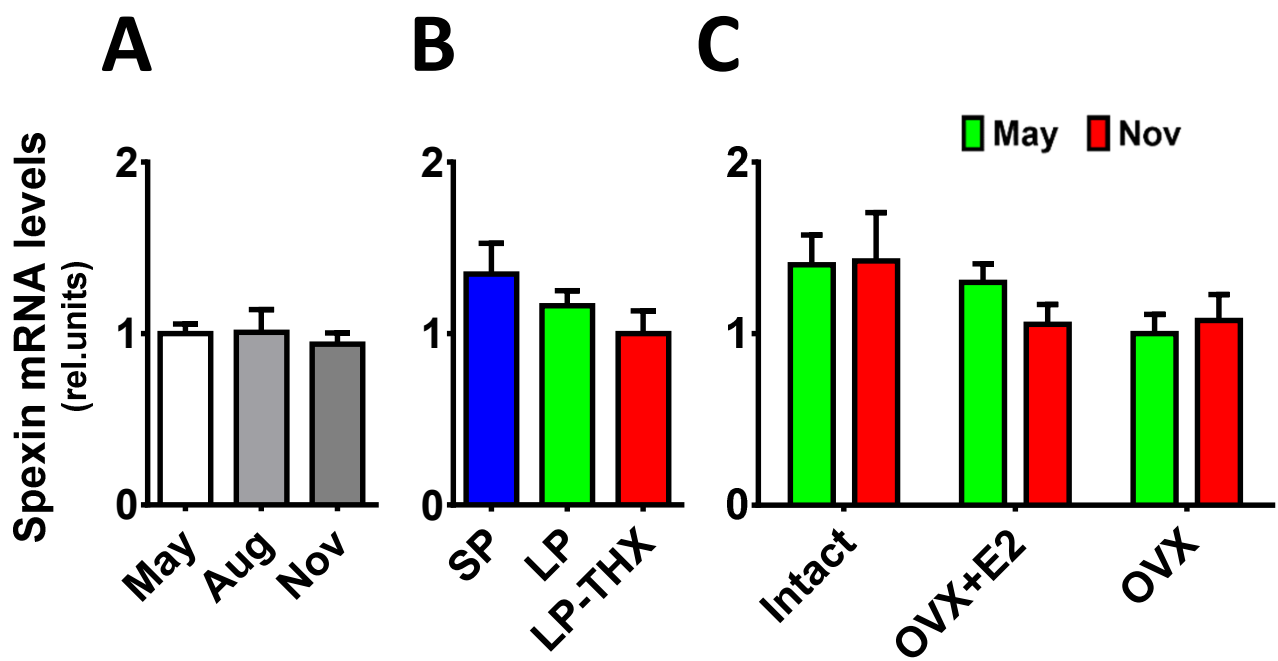


Figure 3