Mind as Multiplicity,
Society as Suggestion

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The world may be viewed as a myriad of "To Whom It May Concern" messages.
- Norbert Weiner

But such pre-set signs are, of course, only a part of the communicative equipment of the dumb. Harpo Marx does not need them. And dogs and horses, hawks and elephants, also make themselves understood to those who are normally with them, whether members of their own species or human beings. And the human beings return the favour. "Making oneself understood" is an immensely wider field than "talking." It supplies the context, and the only possible context, within which human talking makes sense.
- *Beast and Man*, Mary Midgley, p 234

Freudian psychology expanded the concept of mind inwards to include the whole communication system within the body – the autonomic, the habitual, and the vast range of unconscious processes. What I am saying expands mind outwards. And both these changes reduce the scope of the conscious self. A certain humility becomes appropriate, tempered by the dignity or joy of being part of something much bigger. A part – if you will – of God.
- Gregory Bateson[1]

Meaning is created for me by vast networks of background contexts about which I consciously know very little. I do not fashion this meaning; this meaning fashions me. I am part of a vast background of cultural signs, and in many cases I have no clue as to where it all came from.
- Ken Wilber, *The Marriage of Sense and Soul* (1998)

One would say that the child is playing with the ball, were it not equally true that the ball is playing with the child.
- Eugen Herrigel, *Zen and the Art of Archery* (??)

0. Introduction: The World as Suggestion

A suggestion: For a thought experiment, let's put aside the familiar idea of ourselves as rational agents who make intelligently self-interested choices in accord with pre-existing beliefs and desires. Instead, let's think of ourselves as driven by suggestions (much like this one) to feel, think and act in suggested ways – usually, in alternative, competing ways – that we go along with or turn down in the course of managing our lives. Naturally, you will ask why you should go along with this suggestion, and I will shortly offer reasons for doing so.

First though, a few words about the concept of suggestion itself. The word is used here with its usual double meaning: First, suggestions make

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1 *Form, Substance and Difference*, in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, p 467-468

proposals; they raise, point out and advocate a certain possibility. But also, like hypnotic suggestions, they also casts a little spell. The secondary meaning is important, because many of the suggestions put to us are not processed consciously, and may not be so easy to reject: Apart from the objective cost in refusing a suggestion from your boss or your spouse, there is usually some emotional hook or 'spin' that makes them easier to go along with than to turn down. Typically, a suggestion not only requests your consideration, but also creates a little field of perception and emotion that must be overcome (if only by a stronger suggestion) before it can be rejected. The art of loading suggestions in this way was the classical study known as *rhetoric* – indispensable for anyone aspiring to a career in politics or law, or any position of leadership.

The well-framed suggestion not only proposes something, but propagandizes and lobbies for it – as I am doing here in writing this piece. As everyone is doing all the time, with every utterance they make.

suggestion vs information

We often think of communication as a transmission of information. For engineers, interested only in the *size* of the messages being sent but indifferent to their *content*, the mathematical definition in terms of bits and bytes is useful and appropriate. But for the theory of human relationships it will not do at all. Typically, human (and animal) communication is not a reduction of uncertainty, but a directing of attention to some thing or possibility combined with an endorsement of some kind – a kind of pointing, fraught with an emotional tone. Politicians communicating with their constituents, managers communicating with their workers, teachers communicating with their students, parents communicating with their children, friends just chatting over a cup of coffee, are not reducing one another's uncertainties – at least, not until some definite alphabet of possibilities is pre-agreed upon. Corresepondingly for biologists, psychologists and social scientists, s*uggestion* rather than *information* is the proper unit for the inter-communicating systems that they wish to study. The communication exchanged between a newborn and its mother is highly suggestive, and therefore meaningful, for both of them. They exchange suggestions and "make themselves understood" long before they can exchange anything that could be parsed or quantified as information. As Mary Midgley points out, it's this innate suggestive communication that makes informative communication possible.

I will not further belabor this point,[2] but take it for granted here that all communication can be seen as a presentation or exchange of suggestions in the above sense. Rather, I use the present essay to focus on some implications of this idea – first for the concept of *mind*, and then for the theory of society and government.

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2 Having already done so in two previous books: *Sharing Realities* and *The ecoDarwinian Paradigm.*

living by suggestion

All such theory must begin from some assumptions about human nature – for example, that men and women are sinful creatures fallen away from God's Divine Plan (*per* most traditional religious thinking), or that human lives are properly defined by their alloted social roles (as in Confucian thought), or that we are game-theoretically rational, self-interested beings with an innate capacity "to truck and barter," as in Adam Smith's treatise on *The Wealth of Nations*. In the past, social and political theories have invariably been stunted by over-simple assumptions like these. We have yet to see a comprehensive social theory grounded in what is known today about human biology and 'human nature.' Since Darwin's time, we have learned to see ourselves not as embodied spirits but as human animals – as a primate species, with some peculiar specialties. Crucially, these include an aptitude for making, using, and teaching the use of tools, and for social living through customs, technologies and organizations grounded in symbolic communication. It is high time that our political and religious thinking caught up with this anthropological self-understanding. We can expect little peace in the world until it does so.

The suggestion offered here is that we should form the habit of seeing ourselves most basically as human suggestion processing systems (or *suggers* for short), whose autonomy consists in receiving, comparing, evaluating and finally acting upon suggestions that we receive from and through our bodies, from our environments and from other people. As with other species, the suggestions we work with fall into ranges and categories that our nervous systems evolved to notice and deal with. To a unique degree, we are specialized to deal with suggestions about relationships with other people and with abstract suggestions about workable materials and their possible uses and products. We live by constructing elaborate patterns of behavior from repertoires – known as *cultures* – that are comprised mostly of previously received and internalized suggestions from other persons, though instinct and temperament also play a role. Selecting, combining and varying on such repertoires, we are highly versatile 'production systems' – only loosely analogous to stored-program computers or cybernetic guidance systems.

As anthropologists have described, such cultural repertoires, known to vary quite radically from one society and group to another, largely replace the detailed, specific "instincts" that most other creatures live by. The human animal has instincts too, but these seem rather vague and malleable by comparison with those of other creatures – propensities for kinds of experience and learning, rather than for specific behaviors. Primarily, human animals are guided or driven (I want to avoid the word 'controlled') not by instinct but by suggestions from our respective cultures – suggestions that typically compete with one another, even within a single 'culture,' and certainly around the world and over time.

As we all know, the evolution of these cultures is complex and subtle. We make our cultures by living them, of course, but not in a fully conscious or deliberate way. Though many great men and women have made identifiable contributions to culture, what is transmitted finally is an often garbled, misunderstood or over-simplified resultant, of the messages they bequeathed. In fact, culture can be compared to a kind of ecology – an ecology of mind, as in the title chosen by Gregory Bateson for his collection of scientific papers and essays.[3] On this great metaphor, the ethnogapher's problem is not just to document the key features of such an ecology, but to explain how that system 'hangs together' – how it regulates (i.e. *governs*) itself, and how it evolves slowly over time – by analogy with the more familiar bio-ecologies of the natural world.

To such explanation, the idea of communication as suggestion, and of ourselves as suggestion processors, makes useful contribution. My purpose in this paper is to indicate how Bateson's concept of an 'ecology of mind' can be unpacked and studied as a flux of suggestions along the lines to be discussed.

structure of this paper

Its first section takes up what might be called the human guidance system – how the human organism is driven, guided, influenced (again, not strictly speaking *controlled*) in its daily living, and through all the days of its life. Obviously, we have a great deal of autonomy, but are not completely free agents. The problem here is to understand and account for the direction that we receive and rely on without deprecating our autonomy in responding to that direction. Thus it seems clear that neither of the familiar stories is satisfactory: We are not meat robots, driven by computer programs – sequences of executable instructions, like the software that runs my laptop. Nor are we are free spirits, "made in the image of God," who are not "always already" shaped and encumbered by family background and social environment. Most accurately, with the knowledge and language now available, we should see ourselves as organic systems generating individual streams of consciousness and behavior in response to the current suggestions we receive, and those we received and "took on board" in the past.

Where the first section of this paper develops this concept of suggestive guidance, the second reviews the salient features of human biology that make us the clever, social, emotion-driven suggestion processors that we are. The third and fourth sections build on this perspective to discuss culture, society and government, as the inescapable context of our individual lives. This is done first from the bottom-up, from the perspective of culture, and then top-down from that of government. In both these sections, the focus is on *society* as a system, a kind of entity – something more than just a lot of people doing things with and to each other. As with the human individual, our problem here is to see the social

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3 *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Gregory Bateson

system on its own terms, accounting both for the necessities and the randomness of what we call *history* – the self-organizing patterns of human life.

This social system surely has suggestive influence in our lives. As a structure of suggestive guidance it is much more than just the sum of what people do. Yet at the same time, there is no such *thing* as society apart from its people and their doings. The problem is to get this conundrum right; and to do so, we must review the twin concepts of (bottom-up) culture and (top-down) governance – the latter building to an apex in specific institutions of formal government. We want to understand first culture and then government in this double way: both as *products* of social interaction, and as *sources* of the suggestions guiding our interaction.

Finally we come to the great question: What is *mind*, anyhow? Conceiving ourselves as living beings endowed with *mind*, what are we? As Bateson points out in the second epigraph to this paper, we have learned to understand this concept not as a personal essence or possession, but as an emergent feature – first, of a communication system within the body, and second, of the whole social and cosmic communication system of which we are a part. Both these ideas, Bateson says, "reduce the scope of the conscious self," but here, inserting Carl Jung's distinction, we can correct him a little – to argue that both changes reduce the conscious *ego*, but potentially enlarge the conscious *self*.

Why just potentially? Because this revised idea of mind as an embeddedly emergent feature of biological and social processes is too complex to grasp without some understanding of the science behind it, and because this science directly challenges (though it does not in all respects contradict) a few thousand years of religious and philosophical thinking. It needs a willing suspension of disbelief to put aside traditional ways of thinking for an open-minded consideration of the novel '*ecoDarwinian*' paradigm of mind, an effort that relatively few people have time or inclination to make. Still, attitudes change slowly even without much conscious reflection, and the sciences of mind will continue to advance – as they should. Religious thought (where real thought exists in this area, which tends instead to make a virtue of uncritical *faith*) will need to come to terms with the results of this science, as it eventually came to terms with Galileo, with an Earth displaced from the center of the universe, and with the brute fact that Scripture cannot be understood literally without willful ignorance and intellectual dishonesty. But these new ideas of mind cut much closer to the bone of human self-understanding than the heliocentric theory ever did, and we can expect them to be causing cultural indigestion for many years to come.

More on all these points below.

1. Suggestive Guidance

In the usual way of thinking, we conduct our lives by intending and doing things – making plans and carrying them out. We understand ourselves as

original intenders, original sources of volition, who form our desires and intensions "out of the blue," so to speak, by exercising our "free will." On this view, I can explain my actions (though only some of them, and up to a point) as instrumental to my desires. I put the kettle on the stove because I want a cup of coffee. I sit staring at my laptop because I want to finish this paper. If you ask why I want these things, I might be able to answer you with reference to some other desire of mine. But sooner or later, I am stymied. Such explanations of 'folk psychology' come to an end, or circle round upon themselves in a closed loop. For the sciences of mind and society this is frustrating. If I can't explain why I want the things I want, I have not explained much at all.

On the model proposed here, there is a chance of cutting deeper: We can see ourselves as guided or directed (I continue to avoid the word *'controlled'*) by the flux of suggestion that we receive from our own bodies and from the world around us, every moment of our lives. To these suggestions we respond – autonomously indeed, but from pre-existing behavioral repertoires – and in these responses, we conduct our affairs and manage our lives. We can see ourselves not as original sources of desire and intention; but rather as *suggers* – suggestion processors – who interpret, compare and weigh the suggestions we are exposed to, and construct responses to suit. There remain many old and new questions about this mental processing, and only some of these will be answerable. But it will at least be possible to treat desires and intentions as outcomes of the suggestion ecology, not as inexplicble manifestations of 'free will.'

the suggestions around us

Putting aside suggestions from the natural world and from the physiology of our own bodies, the suggestions from 'culture' are what mostly concern us here. And we see at once that these are of two kinds: Some are encoded in various artifacts: my coffee mug, the chair I'm sitting in, and my laptop are good examples. From long experience, each suggests what I can do with it – the possibilities that it 'affords.'[4] To a baby they suggest quite different possibilities: Mugs can be great to bang on laptops, if grandpa isn't looking. Other suggestions remain intangible as patterns of thought and behavior, propagated and maintained as personal and relational habits of people who belong to a certain culture – as my grand daughter, having learned to drink from a cup, is gradually starting to belong. In practice, most features of culture combine both these aspects. The things we use suggest their possibilities to us as we have formed the habit of using them. Think about your relationship with your car, for example. Or with your cell phone. Or with anything else.

So in a sense, we are all walking around 'hypnotized' (and self-hypnotized) by the suggestions from all sides – those we encounter in our homes and workplaces and streets, and those that we've completely internalized, that we re-create and modify, as best we can, when we find

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4 In J.J. Gibson's language. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Affordance.

ourselves in a new environment.

memes and re-suggestive structures

For the sources of these suggestions that guide our behavior, the word *'meme'* has been proposed – by analogy with the name '*gene*' for the little packets of information that guide our bodies' development. While there is no doubt that culture self-organizes, and that a kind of natural-selection is one of the drivers of its doing so, there are deep problems with this biological analogy that I will not go into here.[5] For the sources of these suggestions, I prefer to speak of *'re-suggestive structures.'* Though that phrase is clumsier than *'meme,'* it is far less misleading: The *use* of coffe mugs and laptops can be called 'scripts' or 'memes,' and I may do so myself; but the physical objects – the cups and laptops themselves – cannot be called 'memes' though their suggestive influence is obvious.

Admittedly, my insistence on the phrase 're-suggestive structure is a bit pedantic. Through whatever term, we put at point the re-combinant chunks of culture that propagate and influence people with relative autonomy from other such chunks. Amongst many other possibilities, I can have eggs over easy for breakfast, or I can have them scrambled or sunny-side up. I can order them with ham or bacon or sausage. The entries on a menu are re-suggestive structures that suggest these and other possibilities as I read it. I evaluate all these suggestions somehow, and re-combine them to place my order.

Meme theory makes the interesting point that such cultural chunks compete for space in people's brains and daily regimens, but it does not explain where the memes reside – from whence and how their suggestions to specific individuals on specific occasions are generated. By contrast, the notions of *suggestion* and *re-suggestive structure* make it quite clear that their sources are either physical objects or neural patterns – usually both of these, fitting together. The physical coffee mug beside my left elbow is a powerful source of suggestions that prevail and shape my behavior several times a day. I know where it came from and could trace how it was made. I can describe what it has in common with other mugs. I can account for the relative consistency of the suggestions it presents to you or me, and for its relative interchngeability with other coffee mugs. I can say flatly that is a presenter of suggestions to hold and drink from it in a certain way, with powerfully associated suggestions of certain common bereages: coffee, tea, hot chocolate and so forth. For all these reasons, the concept of a *'re-suggestive structure'* seems much more accurate than *'meme'* – much more descriptive of what is happening.

evaluation, choice and synthesis

But there may also be suggestions that I have had enough coffee for one morning, and that I am already starting to buzz. The question is, how do

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5 See Richard Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene*, (1976)

all these suggestions get evaluated in a human brain and synthesized as a continuing stream of conscious thought, intention and behavior?

That is not a question I will attempt to answer here. Nor could anyone answer it fully as yet, though it is remarkable how much we have learned. By now, we have a pretty fair understanding of the connection between *brain* and *mind* in general terms. Certainly, functionalists can now tell a much more detailed and coherent story about the brain-mind system than Cartesian dualists ever could. Not in full detail yet but without hand-waving, we can account for the full complexity of human thought and activity without appeal to any supernatural 'ghost in the machine.' We have no need of that hypothesis.

2. The Peculiar Primate

In North American culture at large, the basic animality of the human species is still a bitterly resisted idea. Among scientists, however, there is virtual consensus on our evolution as one primate species among several near relatives, and on the further conclusion that our remarkable human cognitive abilities are functions of our distinctively human brains and nervous systems. The 'minds' that we experience, and feel ourselves to be are not less wonderful (in fact, much more so) for being subtle by-products of physics, chemistry and complex organization with nothing supernatural about them. The claim is *not* that mind has been reduced to mindless physical matter; it is that physical matter can be shown to organize itself into systems so complex as to be aware of themselves as minds. We will take for granted here that the functionalists are basically correct: If ever the workings of the human organism and human societies are fully understood, there will be nothing left to explain about human consciousness and cognition.

As the argument for that position is lengthy and readily available elsewhere, I will not attempt to summarize it here, as doing so would only distract from my purpose.[6] But I do need to say a few words about the role of suggestion in human biology. My first task in this essay is to review what is now understood about our minds and their capabilities, showing how it would translate into suggestion language.

A good place to begin is with the traditional understanding of ourselves as generalists, free of instincts, endowed with free will and able to make whatever we like of ourselves:

> ``We have given you, O Adam, no visage proper to yourself, nor endowment properly your own, in order that whatever place, whatever form, whatever gifts you may, with premeditation, select, these same you may have and possess through your own judgement and decision. The nature of all other creatures is defined and restricted within laws which We have laid down; you, by contrast, impeded by no such restrictions, may, by your own free will, to whose custody

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6 For such attempts I can suggest Daniel Dennett's *Consciousness Explained*, Antonio Damasio's *The Feeling of What Happens*, and/or my own book, *The ecoDarwinian Paradigm*.

> We have assigned you, trace for yourself the lineaments of your own nature. I have placed you at the very center of the world, so that from that vantage point you may with greater ease glance round about you on all that the world contains. We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer. It will be in your power to descend to the lower, brutish forms of life; you will be able, through your own decision, to rise again to the superior orders whose life is divine.[7]"

Without altogether rejecting this vision of human self-creation and responsibility, from a different perspective it is readily seen that our will is shaped and constrained by our biology, life history and immediate circumstances. We pay a high biological price, generation after generation, for our human brains, and all that they make possible: symbolic thought and communication, the very rapid personal evolution that we call 'learning,' and our capability to make, use, and teach the use and making of increasingly complex tools. Given what is known today, we must correct Pico's story in significant ways:

First, the human animal was not *given* anything by anyone. Through processes of evolution – processes of genetic, ecological and cultural self-organization that we understand pretty well by now – the species struggled up from African forests and savannahs to its present precarious dominion. Second, the freedom that Pico lauds is not as great as we might wish, bringing its own limitations and forms of bondage. Certainly, it is not the absolute freedom of a God, a pure spirit, but only the relative freedom (*autonomy* would be the more accurate word) of a creature that must learn, in its own skin, how to evaluate and respond to the suggestions that its senses deliver. Third, that autonomy is enhanced, but also constrained and compelled, by '*culture*,' by the requirements of social living, and (from the top down) by some form of *government*. Those vague, troublesome notions of culture and government will be explored in the next sections, but the human creature that contrives and is guided by a culture and government must be considered first. The key point is that human anatomy is rather more specialized than may appear at first sight. It turns out that surviving as a generalist (fairly good at many things, outstandingly good at none of them) is itself a specialty, at least as demanding as any other.

the hominid complex

The family of hominids (or 'great apes,' as it is sometimes called) counts the orangutans, gorillas, chimpanzees and us humans amongst its living species, but includes a number of extinct species as well. Though we lack sufficient evidence to trace the lines of divergence, interbreeding and extinction with certainty, it's clear that all these creatures are near relatives of ours. Orangutans, whose line diverged from our own the furthest back – around 12 million years ago (mya), it is thought – have been known to use

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7 From Pico dela Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. See www.cscs.umich.edu/~crshalizi/Mirandola/

leaves to make rain hats and leak-proof roofs over their sleeping nests. Adult orangutans have been observed teaching youngsters how to make tools and find food. All the extant great ape species use tools to some extent and individuals from each have been taught the rudiments of sign language. All have opposable thumbs and the precision grip made possible thereby. (The other great apes have them on their feet also.) All are highly intelligent and highly social creatures, though to varying degrees and in somewhat different ways. We can speak then about a 'hominid complex' of traits that primate evolution had already made available, which then were recombined and further exagerated by evolution to produce our own, human kind, three other extant species, and a much larger number of extinct types along the way.

Though we cannot know what the future holds, we can say that to-date at least, us humans represent the furthest development of this hominid complex – as if evolution had been aiming at us all along, although we know for sure that that is not how evolution works. However, it is simply a fact that orangutans, gorillas and chimps have been reduced to threatened populations in a few scattered regions and to specimens in human zoos and laboratories, while our own kind overruns the planet.

the Baldwin effect

Although evolution is blind and intrinsically aimless, the living creatures subject to it have purposes of their own. In their attempts to survive and reproduce, the creatures themselves give their future evolution a kind of purpose. More than one hundred years ago, the psychologist James Mark Baldwin pointed out the mechanism through which this happens:

Through the 'Baldwin effect,' as it is now called, living creatures, in effect, select the selection pressures that operate upon them as they respond to consistent suggestions from their environments. Exploiting whatever plasticitity of physiology or behavior that they possess to meet life's challenges, they encounter selection criteria that correspond to the strategy they are pursuing.

For example, given a generic browsing creature that eats both grass or leaves, and local conditions which make leaf eating the more rewarding of these alternatives, natural selection will cause individual animals with even the slightest prefererence for leaf eating to fare better and leave more offspring than those with a preference for grass. As they do so, whatever genes either exagerate the preference for leaves, or make the creature more efficient at obtaining, eating or digesting them will tend to become more prevalent in the populations, as genes with the opposite effect become less so. In due course, if those conditions persist, a new species of specialized leaf-eaters – perhaps with longer necks to reach the higher, more tender leaves – may evolve on this corner of the savannah, while more specialized grass-eaters may evolve elsewhere, and while the generalists may either remain or be driven to extinction by their more specialized kin.

Baldwin's idea is still controversial, and biologists are understandably nervous about a concept that comes so close to vindicating Jean-Baptiste

Lamarck, who argued (a half century before the publication of Darwin's theory) that giraffe's necks grew longer as they stretched them to get at leaves, and that this stretching got passed along to their offspring. That does not happen; all that does get handed down are the enduring opportunities and problems of leaf-eating. Many instances of this Baldwin effect have been found – even in our own species. A notable recent example is the gradual elimination of lactose intolerance, as human populations got used to keeping live stock and drinking their animals' milk.[8]

In Baldwin's sense, then, a certain purposefulness can be discerned in the blind processes of genetic shuffling and natural selection. Though in themselves these pursue no intentions at all, and have no awareness of the directions they are taking, they are guided nonetheless by suggestions not only from the environment, but from the creatures who try to cope with it – and who either prosper or die off as the environment evaluates their suggestions.

Seen in this light, the hominid complex was its own self-reinforcing outcome, and our humanity is a condition that our distant ancesors imposed upon themselves and their progeny. As primates became more versatile, curious, manipulative, imitative and social, they put these same traits at a premium. Males competed in them; females chose mates who were better at them; infants who inherited them had better chances of surviving long enough to grow up and pass them on. Though the details of our ancestry are not and may never be completely known for want of sufficient evidence, it is quite clear that we acquired exagerated versions of these traits through the same Baldwinian feedback that gave the giraffe its exageratedly long neck.

the domesticated ape

If we had to charaterize the hominid complex with a single word, the word '*domestication*' might be a good choice.[9] With the possible exception of our loss of body hair, all the distinctive human traits – erect posture, skilful hands, tool use, symbolic thought and intricate social living by creatures who remain distinctly *individual* – probably evolved *pari passu,* side by side and in equal steps, with our increasingly domesticated life-style. As we became more human, we lost the taste and aptitude for living in the wild. As we abandoned that wildness, we placed selection pressures on ourselves to become more human. Thus, if we understand the word 'domesticated' as simply the opposite of 'wild,' then we can think of ourselves as a domesticated species. More even than our dogs and cattle, we are used to living among other humans, making ourselves serviceable to them and being cared for (however well or poorly) in return. The first species that Man domesticated was humanity itself.

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8 See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lactose_intolerance#Lactase_biology.

9 See Peter J. Wilson's book *The Domestication of the Human Species*.(1989)

We can surmise that this human self-domestication included (and placed a premium on) three key traits:

1) the habit and taste for life in a controlled environment;
2) the cognitive skills and temperament for group participation; and
3) the temperament for acceptance and submission to suggestive guidance from dominant others.

Neoteny, defined as the retention into adulthood of juvenile characteristics, may have played a role in the evolution of these traits. It has been argued, for example by Stephen Jay Gould, that homo sapiens is a neotenous species of chimpanzee. Various human traits – notably bone structure, cuteness, submissive suckinesss, and openness to learning – seem to point in that direction as does the long period of infancy and childhood, needed to accomodate the passage of a large brain through the birth canal, and the extensive cultural learning it then requires.

Be this as it may, it is clear enough that all the hominids were already groping toward a primitive domestication for millions of years before the first true humans appeared. Our close primate relatives live in small groups, use simple tools, and prepare comfortable places to sleep. Their social life is quite similar to our own in many respects. By comparison, the groups that humans form can be enormous; our tools have become incredibly sophisticated; and we do much more than sleep in our homes and factories and office buildings. But one can see, and can even trace in some detail, how we got to our present condition – how the human pattern evolved. We can even be pretty sure that the changes are still going on, that human evolution remains incomplete. There is a joke among anthropologists that we ourselves are the missing link between those anthropoid apes and the true human beings.

If we take the *manufacture* (as opposed to mere *use*) of stone tools as the marker, it is clear that by 2 or 2.5 mya, the hominid complex was getting off the ground. Hominids had already mastered the use of fire and may have begun to cook their food as early as 1.9 mya. The domesticated ape was becoming downright civilized!

Since then, of course, our self-domestication has made tremendous strides. Even our wars have been conducted in an increasingly organized and technologically sophisticated way – not at all the way animals fight. To this point at least, the hominid complex has had tremendous success, admittedly with one branch triumphing completely at the expense of its less fortunate relatives. A single hominid species now dominates the planet to an extent that is clearly dangerous for its own survival.

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So much for human biology. The logical next step for this essay on mind and society would be to show how 'human nature,' the hominid complex as evolved to-date and represented currently in ourselves, expresses itself collectively on the world's stage. We would like to understand how the

cognitive and then behavioral proclivities of individual men and women play out in public events and in the flow of history: in our families and tribes and nations, our ways of making a living, our wars and our religions and, beyond all this, in the continuing evolution of the hominid complex itself. But none of this can be attempted here, for two reasons: For one thing, we don't yet know enough about ourselves. Though much has been learned, much still remains unknown. And we have no way of knowing how all that's being learned about human biology and mind will be understood and deployed for human purposes in the long run, and what its results will be. The knowledge we're acquiring may prove liberating, or toxic – and is probably both, depending on its uptake by individual people.

For another thing, even if I knew – or thought I knew – where this story is going, the telling of it would not be possible here. The story of the hominid complex is much larger than that of humanity itself. How does 'human nature' play out in our history? The idea of doing this question justice in a single section of one essay is plainly ridiculous. So it must be left to the reader's imagination. All I will do here is make very brief mention of some recent research on human values and value judgments. These, it is turning out, are not entirely artifacts of culture and, therefore, not at our complete discretion. On the contrary, human value judgments – including our moral judgments – appear to have a significant component from human biology.

the biology of values

The tastes and values of any species are products of its evolution – part of its sensory equipment, one might say. The world that a creature's senses report to it is full of threats and opportunities, and those most critical to its survival are usually perceived as such, directly and with no need for secondary judgments. To a dung beetle, a cow pattie is a banquet. To a vervet monkey, a fast-moving shadow is death.

We humans are no exception, though our own hard-wired value system is more malleable and less fool-proof than most. We crave sweets too much. We enjoy and readily become addicted to substances that can kill us prematurely. By and large however, and *pace* Hume, our values **are** facts – or rather begin as facts – first of human biology and then of culture which is itself an expression and elaboration of our biology. *Per* the Baldwin effect, we can say that our values are suggested to us, first by the evolutionary history of our gene-line and then by facts of circumstance and life-style. We make choices about our lifestyles. All creatures do so to at least a minimal extent, and the values informing such choices tend to become part of its physiology. For humans, the range of choice is enormous – though again, much larger for some than for others.

Thus, it is by no means just a happy coincidence that fruit tastes sweet to us while fire feels painful, that sex is pleasurable and that babies look *cute,* that we value peace and justice while seeking to raise our status and/or gain a little advantage. All these traits evolved because, on balance, they contributed to the survival and reproductive success of the individuals

who shared them. Each functions, in effect like an independent module, driven by promptings (that is to say, by suggestions) from its own centers in the brain. These will often conflict with one another. There is no automatic coherence amongst them.

Certain key values have been directly liked to specific structures in the brain. Other values are believed to have a biological basis, though the structure(s) involved have not been found as yet. Though research in these areas is far from complete, results to-date show pretty clearly that values are not so much conceived and rationally judged as directly perceived, in the first instance. Stimulations of specific neural centers are experienced as pleasant, painful, frightening, and so forth. Situations that lead to firing in one or more of these areas are associated with their frequent consequences and experienced and classified accordingly.

The basic distinction between pleasure and pain – what does and does not feel good – must be the oldest and most primitive feature of the human evaluation system. More subtle are the so-called *affects*, described as physiological programs that appear to run whenever triggered by a sufficient stimulus, and that underpin our feelings and emotions.

A crucial distinction is being drawn here: The idea is that *emotion* is a cognitive and culturally patterned phenomenon, while *affect* is a physiological one – a reflex, like the eye-blink or knee jerk that can be elicited by any sufficient stimulus. The latter seem to happen automatically, and can be elicited in infants. They lack as yet the cognitive dimension of emotion, and may or may not be consciously perceived; but they co-assemble readily with one another and with learned associations as well. In doing so, they become what we call *emotions* – culturally patterned and individually configured responses to fraught situations of many kinds.

Nine distinct affects are recognized today, identified with double names like *Enjoyment/Joy* and *Interest/Excitement* to distinguish them from the emotions to which they give rise. *Enjoyment/Joy* is signalled to others with a smiling face, while Interest/Excitement is signalled with the attitude called 'paying attention': eyebrows down, eyes tracking, close listening. These are the two positive affects. They feel pleasurable, presumably to reward us for getting into the situation that triggers them. Then there is the neutral affect, *Surprise/Startle*, signalled by raised eyebrows and eyes widened and blinking, which makes a sudden interruption so that attention can be paid to a new situation. The other six affects are negative – not pleasurable at all: *Distress/Anguish, Anger/Rage*, *Fear/Terror*, *Disgust*, *Dissmell* and *Shame/Humiliation*. These too are signalled to others with characteristic behaviors and serve their various purposes. With one exception, I will not further discuss them here.[10]

Shame/humiliation plays a central role in human sociability, and was

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10 I have done so elsewhere in the essay called *Shame and Personality*, included in this collection. See also *Shame and Pride: Affect, Sex and the Birth of the Self*, Nathanson, (1994) from which that essay stems.

probably the most recent to evolve. Marked by a drooping posture with head and eyes averted, it serves a purpose of renunciation, allowing the organism to (literally) turn away from something otherwise desired and desirable. That is simple enough and, like the other affects, can be observed even in infants. But the emotions connected with it are exceedingly complex and highly patterned by culture, ranging from mild social embarrassment to a mortal shame that cannot be assuaged except by suicide. It's scarcely an exagerration to say that *shame/humiliation* is part of what makes us human, as the story of Adam and Eve suggests: It is this affect that lets us shape our own activities and even our motivations according to the wishes and attitudes of others. Without it, the intricate dance of social life would scarcely be possible.

Quite recently, it has been shown that more abstract values too may have a biological basis.[11] The so-called Moral Foundations Theory proposes five "innate and universally available psychological systems" as the basis for ethical intuitions that seem all but universal, however many exceptions and cultural elaborations are found. The first, called *harm/care*, underlies what we call empathy and the virtues of kindness, gentleness, and nurturance. The second, *fairness/reciprocity*, gives rise to an innate valuing of justice, personal rights, and autonomy. These two are liberal and individualistic values, keenly felt by almost everyone. The remaining three – *ingroup loyalty*, *authority/respect* and *purity/sanctity* – are more controversial. They represent group values, typically enforced by groups on deviant individuals and, for that reason, are inimical to values of autonomy and personal freedom. The suggestions stemming from these five value systems are ineluctably in conflict with one another; and they help to rationalize, even when they do not directly motivate, our warfare and our milder political quarrels. Due to our differences of temperament and upbringing, they vary greatly in the weights that people give them and in our evaluations of them one against another. Like shame, those last three 'conservative' value systems make for a great deal of unhappiness and cause a lot of trouble. But, also like shame, social life would be impossible without them. Probably a gentle compromise amongst these five moral 'instincts' is the best we can hope for.

Finally, some recent work by Bjorn Grinde and Daniel Gilbert on "the pursuit of happiness" is worth a mention here.[12] Grinde has argued that the emotion of happiness, like other human emotions has a biological basis in the affect system. Gilbert cites experiments that he and others have done to argue that humans are poor judges of what will make us happy or unhappy – prone to errors of judgment in predictable ways. If we think of happiness

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11 Introductions to Haidt's work can be found at http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/haidt07/haidt07_index.html and http://faculty.virginia.edu/haidtlab/mft/index.php

12 See Bjorn Grinde's book *Darwinian Happiness*, (2002) and *Stumbling on Happiness*, (2007) by Daniel Gilbert. See also this book's website at http://www.randomhouse.com/kvpa/gilbert/index.html.

as a sort of generic, unattainable goal like the carrot permanently dangled before the nose of a cart horse, then we can see why its frantic pursuit must be the root cause of human suffering, just as the Buddha said.

The extent to which such universally observed values are mandated in the biology of our species remains controversial. As Daniel Dennett puts it, hunters everywhere throw their spears pointy end first, presumably without a gene commanding that they do so. Nor do the human tendencies in these directions make us any less responsible for our personal judgments of right and wrong. We still have to live as best we can according to our lights, and must endure the consequences of our personal and collective mistakes. Still, their ubiquity makes a case that something other than 'culture' is at work. These are either evolved characteristics of the species or practical necessities of social living – either way, traits that culture itself must respect.

summing up

Where does all this science leave us in our quest for self-understanding? That is the question I began with, as I embarked (about 12 years ago) on the program of reading behind this essay.

One interim finding is that our ancient idea of ourselves as pure and rational spirits trapped in needy, mortal bodies is no more than a poetic manner of speaking – and a misleading one. Coherent and rational agency is no innate faculty of the soul, but a learned skill (to whatever extent it has been learned) and, at best, no more than a first approximation to what is really going on. We are not reasoning creatures whose Reason is sometimes distorted by emotion. We are creatures with affect-driven emotions who can sometimes reason fairly accurately when the conditions are right. We are inherently conflicted beings, fashioning our responses on the fly to a great variety of competing suggestions. We are habitual seekers of the satisfactions we have learned to seek, and avoiders of situations that we have learned are unpleasant – even when the unpleasant things would be of benefit to us in the long run, and when the satisfactions have mortal consequences. Not especially rational in our small life choices and still less so in our big ones, we must understand ourselves as *addicts* of a sort – adapted and habituated to whatever.

Another ancient idea is now confirmed by science: We are not truly individual beings. Or we should recognize, at least that our individuality is only partial and permanently problematical. I once heard a Zen teacher – Albert Low, in Montreal – describe two games that he claimed all living creatures, and certainly all human ones, must play: *Look At Me!* is the game of self-assertion, with whatever we take to be self-interest as its corollary. It's a pursuit of glory in some form: as power or wealth or knowledge, or outstanding achievement, or all of the above. *Who Am I?* is a very different game about secure identity, attachment and belonging. It's the search for a secure social location, with well-defined coordinates.

The permanent tension between these games is at the core of our

nature as social animals, and has been expressed in many different ways: Kant wrote of our "unsocial sociability." Rabbi Hillel asked, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am for myself only, what am I?" Gurdjiev spoke of learning to feed "both the wolf and the sheep entrusted to one's care." However formulated, the finding is that we are not solitary animals like the big cats, nor herd animals like cows and sheep. We are not even pack animals like wolves. Least of all are we automatically and unreservedly social creatures like the bees and ants. The hominid complex has shaped us as ineluctably social, yet permanently individual beings: "One chimpanzee is not a chimpanzee," Robert Yerkes once said. Still less is a single human fully human. And yet, on the bottom line, we live and die alone.

3. Culture

As anthropologists first used this term, 'culture' referrerd to the tools and ideas – artifacts and 'mentifacts' – that a people hold in common, live by, and pass along to their children. For the study of all those tribes that white men encountered, which had remained relatively isolated from one another and from the mainstream of history, this idea of culture was natural and useful. The problem with it today is that very few peoples have remained isolated and static in this way. More and more, anthropologists find themselves studying groups which have by now adapted in some fashion to the ways of European or other intruding peoples, and also to much more extensive contact with one another. Traditional cultures are scarcely pure these days. They have blended and been modified by one another into a rich, syncretic stew – showing the bits and pieces of what they were originally, but no longer with their original flavors. At the same time, the attention of anthropologists has shifted to include the folkways of European and other colonizers – peoples whose cultures were very far from static and homogeneous as compared with the self-contained cultures first studied. With these changes, the notion of 'culture' became vague and controversial, leaving its students with troublesome questions of methodology: What exactly is the 'culture' of a complex, rapidly changing society like our own? Where and how should we study and analyze it?

In this essay, our idea is to think of culture as a flux of influential suggestions – and, behind that flux, as a co-evolving system of *re-suggestive structures*, the reliable sources of suggestive influence that guide our activities along fairly stable and predictable lines without literally controlling us.

material culture – stigmergy

It's clear enough that our artifacts – our buildings and furniture, streets and roads, machines and tools, books and CDs, and whatnot else – give definite shape to our lives, a different shape than prevails elsewhere where the artifacts are different. The artifacts guide us *to* their use, by suggesting that we can do easily what would otherwise be more difficult. And they

they guide us *through* their use by suggesting just how we should use them, sometimes just by the way they fit our bodies and sometimes with detailed instruction manuals and help facilities. It's clear as well that all these artifacts get designed and made in the complex interplay between designers, marketing people and consumers. And many other types, of course. To think of all these artifacts generically as 're-suggestive structures' is apt not only because they purvey suggestions to us, but because they originate as physical embodiments – *incarnations*, so to speak – of the flux of suggestions that created these particular artifacts in the first place. In fact, everything we make and use serves a double function: It is used for whatever we use it for – mostly for the purpose for which it was specifically designed. At the same time, it serves as a re-transmitter of the values, purposes and knowledge that went into its creation in the first place. The tool is not only an artifact of the culture that it embodies. It propagates that culture as it is manufactured, sold and used. Thus, an ancient pot or jug not only held grains and liquids but broadcast the idea of holding grains and liquids – of carrying them and storing them, in other words. Today a car not only takes people from place to place but propagates the idea that such transportation is cheap and easy – as it was, before the roads became congested and the price of gas went through the roof. A gun not only kills things, but propagates an idea that a squeeze of the trigger, a mere crook of the index finger, gives a power over lives.

Along these lines, the concepts of suggestion and re-suggestive structure make the material dimension of culture readily intelligible. Things are not just more or less useful things; they are receptacles and sources of ideas. Whatever their specific use, they are media of communication as well.

There is a useful word, *'stigmergy'*, for this type of communication via to-whom-it-may-concern messages inscribed on the environment. The term was coined by entomologists studying the behavior of ants and termites and other social insects, from the Greek words *stigma*, meaning 'sign,' and *ergos* meaning 'work.' Literally then, stigmergic communication causes and guides work through markings on the environment. It is the mechanism that allows an ant hill to be *much* more intelligently adaptive in its collective behavior than any individual ant. There is no master ant in the colony who takes reports from his minions, and issues orders telling them what to do. Instead, the ants direct each other by leaving chemical trails as they move – different kinds of trail in different situations. The individual ants are basically just simple organic robots that blindly follow those chemical trails. But the trails get much stronger when numerous ants are going to the same place (for example, where food can be found and lugged back to the ant hill), and these trails evaporate over time when that food source is exhausted, so that the ants who follow them find nothing to bring back. In this way, the ant hill as an entity can take account of and respond to changes in its environment that are wholly beyond the ken of any single ant. The complex building activities of termite colonies are

based on this same trick. Our own brains seem to work in quite a similar way, construing a rich world for the whole organism that means nothing at all to its individual neurons.

One level up, human societies also make rich use of stigmergic communication through material suggestions left on, or lying around in, the environment. Societies are configured, in large part, by their own artifacts and other physical traces in much the same way that ant hills and termite colonies are configured by those pheromone trails. You can see this principle at work by taking a walk in the park, noticing all the unplanned paths where grass has been worn away by people who've taken shorter routes than the park's designers laid out for them. Today our roads and superhighways follow routes once taken by Indians through their forests. There is a story[13] that the standard gauge for railroad tracks in England today matches the wheels of Roman chariots, because the horse-drawn carts that followed would move most easily if their wheels could stay in the ruts left by the chariot wheels on the muddy, unpaved roads. The Web page cited recounts this tale in amusing detail, but says it could find no evidence for it. True or not, however, entering the search words 'railroad tracks,' 'gauge' and 'Roman' on Google, you can find numerous references to the story. The search results themselves, in the order that they appear, are a fine example of human stigmergy in action!

ideational culture

Stigmergy is a powerful method of communication, and a very powerful idea. Human cultures use it a lot. But not all re-suggestive structures are written onto the environment – at least not in any obvious way. The languages we speak, the music we listen to, the values and ideas that we uphold and fight about are also sources of suggestive influence. Before the invention of various recording media, such patterns existed only in peoples' heads, in a form that will be understood in physical terms only when we can trace in detail how ideas are represented as patterns of neural firing. Until then, and even afterwards for sheer convenience, we must use a mental language for this dimension of culture: *concepts*, *ideas*, shared *values* and so forth. Many books have been written about 'capitalism,' but there is no place (except everywhere) in the modern world where you could find capitalism as such. As a key feature of our culture, it is not an artifact, but an idea about the augmentation of private property that we have in common, whether we like this idea or not.

Like the stigmergic culture of material artifacts and inscribed tracks, such ideational culture is not the work of anyone in particular, and no persons entirely representative of it can be found. Rather, it emerges through processes of tacit convergence in the interactions of people who live and work together or in close proximity. How is this possible? What forces pull our concepts, values and behaviors together into more or less coherent patterns, as against the centrifugal forces pulling these features

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13 See http://www.truthorfiction.com/rumors/r/railwidth.htm. .

apart? Given that people everywhere are driven by circumstance and impulse to act in their own, increasingly divergent ways, how does the necessary convergence occur?

Language is a good example of what has to happen. People come from different families, with slightly different vocabularies and speech habits. Vocal tracts are configured differently. Yet long before there were language academies and dictionaries and grammar handbooks, the people of a certain region came to use a common set of words pronounced in roughly similar ways with roughly similar grammar. People of nearby regions, though speaking slightly differently, could usually understand each other. They could do so, presumably, because they needed to: They needed to speak in such a way as to make themselves understood, and needed to stretch their faculties of understanding to make sense of the variations they were likely to hear. They could interpret suggestions of incomprehension from their interlocutors and adjust their speech accordingly. They could pick up suggestions from context, from past linguistic experience and from their own usage and could interpret the sounds they were hearing roughly as intended. This was, in fact, how they learned to talk as infants – picking up important cues from the sounds and gestures of their care-givers, and experimenting with their own sounds and gestures to make themselves understood.

These forces for convergence are still at work, and all the handbooks of usage in the world do not avail against colloquial idiom. When I was a boy, I was taught both at home and at school that the correct answer to the question "How are you?" is "I'm well." Today, everybody around me says, "I'm good"; and, though it still grates on my ear, I long ago stopped correcting my daughter when she took it up. But I don't hesitate to "Go slow!" when I feel a need for caution, nor am I inhibited about splitting infinitives or ending my sentences with prepositions, or beginning sentences (and even paragraphs) with 'and,' 'but' or 'so.' So, when it serves my purpose, I do not hestitate to boldly write sentences that generations of school kids had been flunked for.

Mutually intelligible language is possible, we can see, partly because we have innate predispositions (suggestions from our very brains and bodies) to imitate the sounds and gestures of people around us. Most fundamentally, language and other forms of communication are possible because we are sensitive to the attitudes and responses of others. We learn to expect their expectations, so to speak – anticipating these and managing our vocal productions so as to to "make ourselves understood." In this way the centrifugal forces of personal temperament, life history and sheer chance are countered by centripetal forces of accomodation to match the capabilities, desires and expectations of others. We "go along to get along," collaboratively building and tearing down, maintaining and modifying the ideational as well as the material features of culture in the process.

selfish 'memes'

One crucial insight about cultures is that they are not cut out of whole cloth (as the structuralists once insisted). On the contrary, they can be broken out into relatively independent 'chunks' that propagate, thrive and dwindle more or less like biological species. Though life on Earth is ultimately a vast unity in its genetic code and fundamental chemistry, it has configured itself into innumerable distinct 'species' – roughly, populations of organisms sufficiently similar to be capable of breeding and reproducing their kind. Quite similarly, though society too is a vast unity, it seems to be comprised of organizations and people driven by autonomously propagating chunks of culture. To emphasize their analogy with the genes, Christopher Dawkins gave the name 'memes' to these chunks, and that usage has caught on. Partly because the analogy with genes is imperfect, and to emphasize their role as sources of suggestion, I prefer to think of these chunks as 're-suggestive structures.' By whatever name, however, these structures resemble genes in two interesting respects:

First, like the genetic patterns, they compete for limited resources – energy and bio-mass in the case of genes, human attention and commitment for the memes (or re-suggestive structures) of culture. Chunks of culture compete as shapers of human time, energy, and allegiance: I can pick up this book or that one. I can pick up a book or turn on the television. I can attend this church, or that one, or none at all. In general, as individuals in a society we can choose more or less freely from the cultural repertoires available to us, and we can combine and re-combine the possibilities more or less at will. We can do anything, but not everything – and certainly not everything all at once.

The second analogy with the genes is that these chunks of culture are essentially 'selfish' in the sense that Dawkins pointed out: Their propagation is 'blind' to the welfare of the societies and individualsfor whose allegiance they compete. On the whole, like genes, they may thrive better if they further our human interests – help us to live, and gain the means of living, to mate and to raise our children. But they need not help us, and often don't. Some very successful cultural patterns – war, racism and ideological univeralism for three examples – do us much more harm than good, destroying lives or blighting them on an enormous scale.

Though the analogy with genes can be misleading, Dawkins' basic point is undoubtedly correct. Culture need not be a coherent structure. More precisely, such coherence as it often acquires is not a given, but derives rather from the ecological balance toward which chunks of culture evolve as they influence real people in real situations, and compete with one another to do so. The apparent seamlessness of simple cultures is a consequence of their having had a long time to evolve in a fairly stable natural environment, given only limited contact with similarly evolving neighbors. The culture of a complex society, interlinked by extensive trade relations, intermarriage and warfare, can have no such luxury. Studied by

anthropologists as at a given point in time, it need have little coherence. It will look, rather, as the modern world appears to us: a patchwork of re-suggestive structures suggesting varied and contradictory ideas, values and courses of action to us suggers – their human propagators and recipients.

Nonetheless, the chaos of competing suggestions usually does get stabilized to a remarkable extent. Though the tempo of social change continues to accelerate, our lives are not yet totally chaotic. Most of us live day after day in the same house or apartment, work at the same job or career, dress and eat, amuse ourselves, and do whatever else we do in a varied but recognizably consistent way – leading fairly stable lives. We raise our children somehow. We live and go to bed, at least for considerable stretches of time, with the same partner. The next task is to understand how this degree of coherence is possible.

patterns of relationship

Both for the stability and the turmoil of our daily lives, the key idea is *relationship*. Like mind itself, a relationship is not a material thing but a complex pattern of actions that people do with and to each other, and of suggestions that they exchange in doing so. This exchange creates a kind of 'binocular vision' as each individual necessarily tries to see things not only through his or her own eyes, but through the eyes of the other person. "Binocular vision adds a dimension," as Gregory Bateson observed, and this added dimension is one reason why intimate relationships are so interesting and so difficult. You not only see but also respond and behave always for yourself, of course, but partly too for the other person and for the relationship as a whole. You get the benefit of this added dimension in your life, but pay the price of being pulled a little off center by the relationship's demands. In a good relationship, you know it's worth it, and pay the price willingly. When a relationship goes sour, the price seems too high. But either way, there is this cost-benefit dimension to our involvements with others. Anyone who has gone through the break-up of an important relationship has experienced the freedom of being his or her 'real self' again, along with the bereavement of significant loss. Anyone who has been through several such relationships can remember being a slightly different person in each one of them, whatever stable elements of character were brought to each.

It's not only a truism but a tautology to say that relationships of all kinds – friendly and hostile, formal and casual, arms-length and intimate – are what hold society together. A society is comprised not of individuals as such, but of individuals-in-relationships. Cultures, with their various material and ideational elements, are also characterized by typical patterns of relationship. Standard patterns of relationship, known as *scripts* to social psychologists, are among the most basic ideational components of any culture: What are the expectations between, for and from a married couple, a parent and child, a boss and subordinate? In a new situation, how could you organize responsive behavior without some 'role model' (pre-internalized, more or less appropriate re-suggestive structure) suggesting

what to do?

Specific types of relationship are defined by their characteristic *scripts* – their characteristic structures of re-suggestion. But relationships as such have some interesting formal properties which cannot help but be reflected in societies and their evolved cultures.

To begin with, relationships of any duration must be *almost* re-entrant. That is to say, in their daily, weekly, monthly and yearly cycles, they must not erode their own premises and pre-conditions. Each cycle must end in such a way that the next one can begin as expected. They must re-create themselves each time around. This means, in particular, that they must suggest their own recreation – preferably, but not necessarily, by keeping their participants happy and producung good results. The relationship of enemies may remain quite stable so long as both survive, though their quarrel makes neither happy.

Societies too must be approximately re-entrant for as long as they endure, though their component relationships are shifting all the time, with old ones collapsing and new ones being formed. But re-entrance is only a relative property, not an absolute one. Always, there is a small increment or small depletion which makes each new cycle commence under slightly different circumstances than the one before. Capital is accumulated or capital is drawn down. In the new fiscal year, the firm, the nation, and the whole world are either slightly richer or slightly poorer than in their last tour around the sun. Many of the small changes from one cycle to the next will cancel each other out, but some accumulate until, sooner or later, the system reaches a tipping point and topples into some new configuration with a new conception of its own normal state, and new re-suggestive structures in support.

A second feature of relationships as such is that they are basically of two kinds, though mixed and alternating types are also possible. As pure types, however, relationships are either symmetrical or complementary: Either the parties want and do the same things with and to one another, or they want and do different things that somehow mesh together.

Whether symmetrical or complementary, the parties to relationship must adjust their actions to one another according to the suggestions they receive. Relationships become possible to the extent that people are attentive and responsive to each other's suggestions. If this responsiveness falters, relationship ends.

With approval and good reason, we quote Lord Acton's dictum that "Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely." Nonetheless, despite our dreams of universal equality, symmetrical relationships tend to be unstable. Most relationships tend to become complementary over time even if they do not start out that way. There will be suggestions to specialize and share resulting the gains even where the balance of power and distribution of benefits are equal. But such equality cannot last because any tiny advatage tends to accumulates over time, due to the so-

called 'Power Law' or 'Matthew Principle[14]' that those who have get more. It is in consequence of this Power Law that popular web sites, showing highest ranking in the search engines, attract more hits and become more popular still. Similarly, popular high school dates become still more attractive because it brings prestige to be in their company; rich people get richer because wealth attracts opportunities to make money; poor people get poorer because their poverty renders them helpless and easy to screw.

A third formal property is that relationships tend to become recombinant and hierachical. To remain fairly stable under changing conditions, their parts, or human members, must be able to combine with each other in alternative ways, and must not be irreplaceable in the relationships thus formed. Thus subatomic particles re-combine in various ways to form protons, neutrons and electrons which combine to form atoms of the various chemical elements. These, in turn, re-combine to form the (literally) millions of kinds of molecule. In almost empty space, molecules collect into stars and solar systems and then into clusters and galaxies. At every scale, we find wholes comprised of interchangeable parts, which themselve form parts of still larger wholes.[15]

society as a structure of relationships

Thus, in human societies everywhere we find pecking orders, chains of command and pyramidal organizations with incuments whose status is marked by tremendous differences in pay and privilege between those at the bottom of the organization chart and those at the top. A complex society has many such organizations, and there is probably no help for this. From the organizational perspective, these hierarchies endure (while they do) because they are stable – re-entrant and self re-creating – and because they are effective for divvying up responsibilities and work loads and getting a job done.

Accordingly, in both the Old World and the New – in Egypt, Mesopotamia, China, pre-Columbian Mexico, and other places – ancient empires built massive pyramids of stone at enormous costs in labor and political will. Why did they do it? To the rulers who commanded them and the laborers who built them, what did they mean?

There's no way we can know for sure, and the specific functions of these structures certainly varied. Their sheer size must certainly have been a political statement: "See what a mighty ruler I was! See what I caused my people to undertake and accomplish!" But these were not their only great building projects, and the pyramid builders typically built other envelope-pushing structures as well – walls, temples, canals, aqueducts, and whatever else. So why pyramids also?

I don't know of any text that tells us. The only way to get at the pyramids' significance for their builders is to notice what they still suggest

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14 Matthew 13:12

15 Also known as the 'Holon Principle.' See *The Ghost in the Machine*, Arthur Koetler, (1967) and discussion at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holon_(philosophy).

to us. The pyramid remains a powerful symbol of social organization in the abstract: On one hand, the pyramidal shape reminds of social inequality – of the chief executive's supreme command of wealth and power, and the proportionately lesser dignities of those in the successive below him. But on the other, it makes a statement of social stability and solidarity, asserting that every worker like every stone has his place in the grand scheme of things, and makes his contribution to the whole.

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The upshot is that societies can be conceived as self-organizing systems of interpersonal relationships guided by re-suggestive structures that are both physical and cognitive in nature; and we have seen that social relationships tend to be (or soon become) re-entrant, re-combinant and hierarchical in character. They tend to be complementary because symmetric relationships are unstable, fraught with competition and conflict. They tend to be recombinant because the permutations and combinations for complentary relationship are endless, with some of these possibilities proving to be stable. They tend to be hierarchical chiefly because of the power law or Matthew principle that more accrues to those who already have much, and because suggestions are not evaluated on equal terms – each coming weighted with the status or 'prestige' of the one who makes it.

People are not born ready for, and comfortable in such relatively static, hierarchical relationships, but can become accustomed to them, can learn to accept them as "the natural state of affairs" – as indeed, for the reasons just reviewed, they tend to be the natural state. Given widespread habituation to unequal, complementary relationships between individuals with well-understood duties and responsibilities we have the novel possibility of complex organizations with top-down governance and orderly replacement of their chiefs. In short, we have the possibility of stable governing institutions – perhaps the central feature of what we call 'civilization.'

4. Government

From one perspective, government can be seen as a kind of official protection racket on the scale of a whole society. Paying the impost buys you protection from rival mafias both internal and external, who are sure to come at you with their own 'offers' if your current 'protector' can't keep them out. At its most basic, that is all a government need be to its subjects, and its suggestive structure is very simple: "Pay up, or else . . .!" Some governments around today are scarcely more than that.

In due course, however, government usually becomes more symbiotic with its society – organizing its subjects' work-lives (and even the rest of their lives to some extent) and providing them with diverse services and spectacles in return for its demands. To understand the nature and role of

government, we must explore the motivation for all its operations that are *not* directly aimed at the extraction of revenue. For any particular government, we'd want to know why it provides the particular mix of service and spectacle that it does, beyond the pure protection game. That is only one question among many that we'd ask about a government, but one that cuts to the core of its political process.

A straightforward way to think about it is to imagine how you would operate as an old-style king – an autocratic war-leader and sovereign (two distinct roles, often combined). Some things you'd do for your own benefit would have beneficial side-effects for the society as a whole: When you build roads for your armies and harbors for your fleets, your merchants and peasants can use them also. When you introduce a coinage system to facilitate collection of your taxes, it also stimulates commerce. If you hunt down and execute not just your own personal enemies, but 'public enemies' as well, you suppress feuding and prevent people from taking vengeance into their own hands – greatly strengthening your position, as your subjects lose the habit of making war or fighting on their own behalf. In general. you would aim to keep peace amongst your subjects – partly to get them on your side and make them stronger against external threats to your crown, and partly for your own convenience to keep them easier to tax and govern.

At the same time, to raise and keep a cadre of support, some things you'd do would inevitably favor one class or segment of your people against another, and might be harmful or very costly to your society as a whole. Because you cannot be everywhere at once, you'd find that you can only govern through local 'notables' – landowners, priests, rich merchants and other important people – whom you would need to keep on your side, against the 'unwashed masses' if necessary. To do this, you would need to pay them generously, or allow them to pay themselves by collecting their own revenues – of course, with some considerable kickback to you. Yet since these same notables would have interests that conflict with yours, and might even have ambitions to replace you, you'd need to keep them in their place. To do so you would at least *pose* as a champion of the people against their immediate, local oppressors. You might need to do more than pose, occasionally.

Some things that you found yourself compelled to do, you'd try to organize for your own convenience, and in a way that would redound to your benefit. Since people come clamoring to you with their petitions and grievances, you'd try to get them to do this in an orderly way, in designated places and at regular times. As the volume of such cases grew, you'd deputize assistants to hear them and render judgment in your stead, leaving a right of appeal to keep it clear that you had the last word. To keep hard cases to a minimum, you'd seek to make your judgments as predictable as possible. Thus you would issue 'laws' and try to follow your own precedents. You'd advertise 'the king's justice' as a public service, and charge for it accordingly. In short, you would organize a legal system.

To prevent people from killing you when they grew tired or annoyed with your rule, you might try to invest your regime and person with a superstitious aura of sanctity, or divinity even. In any case, you'd want to keep the priests on your side, to help in keeping the peasants manageable, and (in a time before radio and television) as a line of communication to your subjects. Thus, you would find it worthwhile to subsidize religion, enlisting it into the service of your regime to the extent possible.

You would build public works of various kinds – temples, lighthouses, aqueducts and what not – not just for their utility value, but as monuments to your power, to demonstrate the wealth and ingenuity at your disposal. As well, you'd put up monuments of no public utility at all, to remind people of your military victories and all your other accomplishments.

Apart from all these building efforts, you would do quite a lot simply for day-to-day show. To impress everyone (not least, yourself) with your magnificence and generosity, you'd keep a splendid court, dressing and dining sumptuously and punishing anyone attempting (or even seeming to attempt) to compete with you in this 'royal manner.' You would organize parades, pageants, games and spectacles of various kinds. You'd take your show on the road and tour the kingdom with it, forcing your 'local notables' to show their loyalty by putting you up and footing the bill for their hospitality. In addition to easily defensible fortresses and castles, you would build palaces that advertised your power precisely by *not* being defensible against serious attack – by showing that your reign did not depend on massive walls against its own subjects. You would build the wall around the city, against external enemies – not around yourself. Without being foolish about it, you would try to live as easily and graciously as possible among your people.

Still, everything you'd want to do would have its cost – in time or money or blood – and these would have to be raised somehow from people who had their own uses for these commodities. Especially in ancient times, most of your effort would go into collecting that vital revenue and keeping potential rivals at bay. What Finer has called "the coercion/extraction cycle,"[16] – the protection racket, in other words – would never be far from your mind.

This brief review shows the drift of any ruler's thinking. What distinguishes a legitimate king from a mafia boss remains a matter of scale, success, time and habit, adding up eventually to a difference in kind.The core of the ruler's problem is to differentiate himself from other tough dudes who would prefer to run their own protection rackets. Thus the dudes usually find themselves in competition not just to be the toughest (which goes without saying) but also the most acceptable and 'legitimate.' So it was in ancient times. So it still is today.

a suggestivist perspective

At this point, we must back up a step. Pursuant to this paper's *suggestivist*

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16 See Samuel Finer's *The History of Government from the Earliest Times*, (1997) p.15

perspective, we need to look at the flow of suggestions in the whole society, and at the relation of that flow to its government's commands. This requires that we see the ruler, or the regime, not only as a source of coercive suggestions *to* its subjects, but also as a recipient of suggestions *from them*. We need to think of the regime not only as an apex of power in its society, but also as an institution evolved by the society itself, to act as a clearing house and organ of reconciliation for all the suggestions in circulation – especially those that circulate amongst its governing elites. From that perspective, government will appear as a somewhat peculiar type of industry, not unlike a central nervous system, in some respects, providing society with certain cognitive services, defining and formally recognizing (not just producing) what are known as '*public goods*.'

As the market too functions as a clearing house and conciliator of competing suggestions, this perspective allows us to think of politics and economics in the same breath – as entwined with one another through the suggestions that pass within and between their respective sectors. In fact, it allows us to think of society as a single suggestion ecology with various dimensions never neatly separable from one another.

suggestions of desire

Within this social ecology, suggestions of desire are fundamental. An infant just cries to let the grownups know that it wants something. Around age two or so, it begins to learn the skills of negotiation, finding that it can get more of what it wants by strategically obliging the grown-ups. This lesson lasts a lifetime, and forms the basis for social living: We get along in society, and get what we want from it by convincing others – putting convincing suggestions to them – that we are or can be helpful to them. The money system and economic arrangements merely formalize and codify such negotiated understandings: that we want things, and will do work to get them. Political arrangements provide a similar framework for the threats and bluffing games. The outcome is a kind of generalized market of suggestions: a) that one wants something; and b) that one will do something (*for* others or *to* them) to get it. This suggestion market finds a kind of equilibrium through a generalized "Law of Supply and Demand," as people naturally try to get as much they can for as little risk and unpleasantness as possible.

In general, a suggestion of desire creates an expectation about one's future behavior. The infant's cry would be an example, suggesting that the kid will probably stop crying if you change its diaper or give it something to suck on. A merchant's advertisements are essentially suggestions of future satisfaction if you give him money for his product. The crucial point is that *desires will propagate via suggestion*, from one individual to another, in the form of threats and promised rewards. These may be explicit or only tacit, soundly backed or vapid, but are effective to the extent they serve to motivate others, generating further desires, intentions and expectations in their turn.

Provided that these exchanges are completely voluntary, we are in the

realm of economics and the 'free' market. But in a monopoly or 'company store' situation, they will not be authentically voluntary – and we quickly find that the 'economics' have a political component. We find too that threats motivate and propagate at least as powerfully as promises do, though not quite in the same way. The loan shark's threat to break your kneecaps, and the government's tacit threat to put you in jail for tax evasion are blatantly political transactions, but economic ones at the same time. Ultimately, there must be a political component in every market: a police force, a judiciary and a system of contract law to keep the market orderly: to defend property 'rights,' to suppress (unauthorized) piracy and theft, to ensure that promised goods are delivered, to make sure that agreed prices are duly paid.

power and authority

In this same vein, we can use the notion of suggestion to draw an important distinction between *power* and *authority*. Political *power* , from one perspective, is a capability to make suggestions that some other person(s), must weigh very strongly: to make an offer they cannot refuse. Power in the abstract is just a loose way of speaking: When people refuse to be bribed or intimidated, power disappears.

Then *authority*, sometimes called *'soft power,'* can be seen as closely related, but not the same thing at all. We might define it as a prerogative of influential suggestion. To have authority on a given matter is to be one that others look to for suggestive guidance about it – one whose suggestions take substantial weight from the position, status or reputation of the individual who makes them.

The reason why government usually becomes more than a pure protection racket is that the individual(s) with power tend to seek authority as well because naked power provokes resentment, making its enforcement expensive and risky. When people grant the ruler's authority, they not only submit to his power, but look to him for definitive suggestions on various matters. What should be the standard unit of weight or length? Should we drive on the right side of the road or the left? How should radio frequencies be allotted amongst those who wish to use them? In situations like these – and there are very many of them – it is far less important what decision is taken, than that a decision be taken and followed by everyone – so that everyone can *rely* on its being followed. When subjects look to their government with confidence that its power-backed 'suggestions' will be reasonably intelligent, impartial, and effectively enforced, then the regime has bolstered its power with the authority of custom and law, making it cheaper to defend and very much more secure.

government as a suggestion mill

As a refinement to our usual conception of government as the designated, 'official' perceiver and intender at the head of the body politic, we might think of it as a kind of mill, threshing and grinding the diverging

suggestions brought to it into a relatively homogeneous and official product. In this respect, it resembles the human brain which similarly receives a jumble of incoherent inputs from its body's various sense-organs, milling these into coherent streams of cognition and behavior. But we must remember that a government, like a threshing mill but not a brain, is a distinct business venture with interests of its own, often markedly divergent from those of the community it purports to serve. The threshing mill may be a farmer's co-op or a competitive business venture, or a lord's extortionate monopoly. The service provided may be fairly priced, obscenely kleptocratic, or anything in between. So it is with government.

The political suggestion mill may be corrupted by its own self-interest, or by the private interests that seek to dominate it. Most insidiously, however, it is readily corrupted by individual human communicators who find themselves compelled to define and position themselves as social actors, at the same time that they attempt to communicate. The so-called 'Abilene paradox' is a well-known example of how this can happen:[17]

> *On a hot afternoon, visiting in Coleman, Texas, the family is comfortably playing dominoes on a porch, until the father-in-law suggests that they take a trip to Abilene (53 miles north) for dinner. The wife says, "Sounds like a great idea." The husband, despite having reservations because the drive is long and hot, thinks that his preferences must be out-of-step with the group and says, "Sounds good to me. I just hope your mother wants to go." The mother-in-law then says, "Of course I want to go. I haven't been to Abilene in a long time."*
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> *The drive is hot, dusty, and long. When they arrive at the cafeteria, the food is as bad as the drive. They arrive back home four hours later, exhausted.*
>
> *One of them dishonestly says, "It was a great trip, wasn't it." The mother-in-law says that, actually, she would rather have stayed home, but went along since the other three were so enthusiastic. The husband says, "I wasn't delighted to be doing what we were doing. I only went to satisfy the rest of you." The wife says, "I just went along to keep you happy. I would have had to be crazy to want to go out in the heat like that." The father-in-law then says that he only suggested it because he thought the others might be bored.*
>
> *The group sits back, perplexed that they together decided to take a trip which none of them wanted. They each would have preferred to sit comfortably, but did not admit to it when they still had time to enjoy the afternoon.*

Suggestion processing is easily corrupted when leaders act for their own interests and not those of the body politic. It is corrupted when there are filters in place to prevent legitimate concerns from being suggested or heard. But this little story is instructive because the failure occurs in a small face-to-face group operating on consensus. In this case, the failure

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17 See *The Abilene Paradox and other Meditations on Management*, *Jerry B. Harvey.* Quoted from the Wikiedia article at *http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abilene_paradox*. See also '*groupthink*' and Gordon Allport's concept of '*pluralisitic ignorance*.'

happens because the protagonists are trying to please each other and self-censoring their own preferences and perceptions to do so. Similar results occur whenever suggestions are framed for effect instead of straight communication: to produce desired effects, or avoid undesired ones. In short, suggestion processing is readily corrupted because human persons have to define and position themselves as social actors, at the same time that they attempt to communicate. Anderson's famous parable about *The Emperor's New Clothes* makes this same point. Here too, the interlocutors come to a nonsensical result by speaking for effect rather than voicing their perceptions. It takes a child, one not yet schooled in correct social behavior, to shatter the collective delusion.

It is a human tragedy, part of our human condition, that in political situations people must speak almost entirely for effect. Governments play the crucial role of presiding over their society's political conversation, and then definitively articulating and implementing its results. What they cannot do is stand judiciously above that conversation being themselves constituted by it. How could so many individuals, competing for status in their groups and for influence over the collective decisions taken possibly speak honestly to one another, or hear correctly what is being said?

What governments do accomplish, with a success remarkable on the whole, is to stabilize and anchor the relationships of power and authority in society. It is not simply that the king keeps peace by being "the toughest son-of-a-bitch in the valley." A hereditary monarch or elected president is nothing of the sort. Rather he is himself installed and maintained by numerous SOBs who prefer to grant him authority rather than quarrel amongst themselves; and they do this because his power and authority make it that much easier for them to preserve and project their own. By delegating their power *upward* to the sovereignty, and making themselves its willing instruments, in competition for its preferment, they enlist that sovereign power into the service of their various local powers, great or small.

Much as they may resent the government's power when it curbs or collides with their interests, much as they may wish, or sometimes plot, to seat themselves on the king's throne, the 'local notables' have no wish to topple that throne because its power consolidates and legitimizes their own.Without the ruler's authority, and that of the system he heads, their own powers would be much diminished. To the extent that men and women below them actually look to them for suggestive guidance, they might continue to rule their various private roosts on their own authority. But their several coercive powers would either vanish, or become far more precarious without the sovereign's legal machinery and power to back it up. In effect, that is what happened in Europe with the collapse of the Roman empire. That is what happened in France in 1789 when the Crown fell into bankruptcy. When sovereign power breaks down, local power is thrown back on its own resources until a new sovereignty, usually more ruthless than the old one, establishes a general coercion/extraction

monopoly of its own.

5. Ecologies of Mind

The word '*mind*' is a deceitful noun. Minds are not substances. There is no such *thing* as as a mind, any more than there is such a *thing* as society. Both are pure abstractions – and no less legitimate for being so, both for contemplation and scientific study. Fundamentally, *mind* is a language that we use to experience and describe the suggestions we experience and respond to. All production systems that construct semi-autonomous responses based on the suggestions they receive can be credited with minds of a sort. Primitive organisms have very simple minds. More precisely, we should say that they *are* simple minds, as well as material bodies. Humans have (*are*) extraordinarily complex and sophisticated minds. Each of us has first-person access to precisely one of these – and knows about other minds partly from the suggestions it has received from others, and partly by analogy with his own.

Business firms and other organizations – and larger systems comprised of these, including whole societies and their governments – likewise must be considered to have and be minds of a sort, because it makes sense ask and study how they collectively respond to suggestions. It makes sense to inventory the re-suggestive structures (or *memes*, if you prefer) in such an entity's repertoire. It makes sense to ask what it believes, desires or intends. It makes sense, in fact, to think of mind as jointly created and shared amongst the individual persons and organizations that comprise the system as a whole. My own 'mind' (to the extent I can speak of it as personally *mine*) arises partly from the cells of my body, partly from the milieu and culture in which I was raised – and partly too from my individual life history within that milieu. Only this last is personally my own, in any strict sense. The cells of my body are just normal human body cells and my doctor treats them as such – with no more personalized respect than he gives to the amoeba in a test tube of swamp water. The cultural structures that influence me are shared with many others.

From one perspective, we correctly say that a mind *is* what a brain is *doing*; but it's really much more than that: The highly social human mind cannot be cleanly distinguished nor understood apart from the collective mind that formed it and of which it is part. We must recognize, then, that 'mind' is collective and social as well as personal, and that the Hindu story[18] about mind as a kind of cosmic bonfire properly complements the bottom-up materialist account. Neither story is complete without the other, and to grasp what mind is, we must learn to keep both in mind at the same time.

The upshot is that the traditional Western conception of mind as an intrinsically coherent node of consciousness or reason or *soul* – is

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18 Taken up by Buddhists as well. See, for example Bijoy H. Boruah's essay on Atman and Sunyata at http://www.katinkahesselink.net/tibet/atmsun.htm.

completely wrong. What we call 'the mind' is a multiplicity. The *self* is not a metaphysical given, but a high-level construct of physiological and cultural processes. At the neural level there is no chief executive in the brain – only an emergent context that constrains the brain's firing patterns in much the same way that an emergent sense of over-all meaning constrains our parsing of ambiguous words in a sentence. Yet the physicalist account of mind, though correct as far as it goes, misses the other side of the story. Those firing patterns are shaped – their underlying neural structures evolved to be sensitively shaped – by the world the organism lives in, and *lived* in as it developed. Thus we must see ourselves not only as material beings, but as cognitive beings also. The brain/mind system is an electro-chemical process from one perspective, but a suggestion process from another.

From either perspective and both, the conclusion is that our minds are not personally ours at all; and that is the thrust of the Bateson epigraph under the title of this piece – that the scope of 'mind' has been vastly enlarged by current science – both inward to the cellular and physiological level and outward to the social. As he says, you can think of these impersonal contexts as 'God,' if it so pleases you. But this 'God' of cosmic, biological and social context is nothing like the old guy with a beard who called the universe into being by intentional design and a speech-act. We can still admire Michelangelo's ceiling, and all those other paintings, but cannot take the geriatric superman story too seriously now. Even as metaphor, it is highly misleading; and the world awaits a naturalistic theology to delineate the human meanings of life – especially our sense of the sacred – in its contexts as we now understand them.

introspectivists wrong

In thousands of years of grappling with the central question of what it means to be human, religious teachers and philosophers arrived over and over again at an idea of cosmic context as the ground and matrix of our human lives – a 'perennial philosophy' as Leibniz called it, and as Aldous Huxley discussed in a well-known book of that title.[19] In their varied ways, the 'mystics' expressed very similar core ideas, using whatever imagery and language they had available. Actually, the best of these strange types were not deliberately mystical or mystifying at all. Rather, what they were practicing was a method of radical introspection, akin in some respects to the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl who wanted to set all concepts and theories aside so as focus on raw experience. As few today are prepared to contemplate *'nothingness'* – the experience of consciousness itself – as long and as intensively as they did, the great introspectivists (as I prefer to call them) still have much to teach. Provided we understand what they were up to, and read them in the right way.

These days, as we gain a scientific account of minds and their workings, it becomes possible to see what these thinkers got right with

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19 *The Perennial Philosophy*, Aldous Huxley (1944).

their method of introspection and their religious categories – and also what they got wrong. Our problem, if we make the effort, is to read the religious 'mystics' sympathetically and respectfully, without taking them more literally than they deserve – more literally than they themselves sometimes wanted to be taken. They were not fools or knaves, most of them. But they lived a long time ago, and had no way of knowing many things that are becoming known today. To be clear why their teachings must no longer be taken literally, let's begin with what they got wrong:

The central point is that their epistemology of revealed, unchanging truth can no longer to be taken seriously by serious people, however many still try to do so. As a path to knowledge we now have better paths available. Even as a basis and rationale for tribal solidarity, the various 'revealed truths' are causing more trouble than they are worth. Thus, Augustine's claim[20] that one should "believe in order to understand" scarcely has a leg to stand on. Whatever its value as a source of comfort, religious faith has no standing at all as a source of knowledge. The famous Bacon passage about beginning with doubts so as to end in certainies is a much sounder methodology.[21]

With the epistemological claims for 'revelation' thrown out, a number of traditional doctrines can be dismissed as pure wishful thinking, and/or as a regime's self-serving propaganda. Cultural absolutism is completely discredited. Some cultures and life-styles may be judged more life-furthering, than others, but there are no grounds for any notion that one society or culture or prophet is a "light unto the nations," with a mission to teach or rule over others. We make suggestions to one another: Never more than that.

Ideas of humanity as 'innately sinful,' or fallen away from a divine perfection are directly contradicted by our curren knowledge of biology, psychology and evolution. We know that humans are curious, greedy and self-preoccupied, and that we have marked tendencies to become anxious, angry, shame ridden or sadistic. A capacity for evil is certainly present, but so is a capacity for good. Above all, we know that humans are complex beings driven by contradictory impulses more often than not. We become, very largely, what upbringing and environment make of us. We know too that there is such a thing as temperament – the physiology you were born with and grew up with under the influence of genes and womb-environment. But there is no room at all for a doctrine of Original Sin, and every reason to reject that notion as life-denying and superstitious.

While our experience of life gives us every reason to prefer peace to war, thought to distraction and freely given service to indifference and idleness, it gives no reason at all to make a virtue of docile, unquestioning submission. Religion has been used to justify slavery, it has been used to

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20 Often attributed to Anselm, who was probably quoting Augustine.

21 "If a man will begin with certainties, he shall end in doubts; but if he will be content to begin with doubts, he shall end in certainties." from Francis Bacon's *The Advancement of Learning,* (1605).

justify torture, and it is constantly being used to justify war. And, though Marx's dictum is not the whole story, religion has often has been used as a political opiate – to peddle a fantasy of justice in an afterlife as imaginary compensation for very real injustices here.

What we know of biology and the mind leave no room for any 'life after death.' What we know of geology and astronomy leave no room for subterranean punishment of the wicked, or heavenly rewards for the just. Nor is there is any '*karma*' that carries over from one life to the next, determining your next incarnation. Justice is a human ideal – one of the re-suggestive structures. The only justice we can hope for is from our fellow human beings – to the extent our social arrangements can provide it. There is, however, a kind of justice, or *karma* if you prefer, in the ecological principle that "What goes around comes around." In the long run, people tend to get what they go after – good and hard.

introspectivists right

Once the supertitions are cleared away, it becomes possible to see what the 'mystics' got right. To begin with, they saw (as Freud did, and as modern neuro-psychology does) beneath the surface of conscious reason. They perceived human consciousness as embedded, *trapped* as they saw it, between the cthonic impulses of the body and what they called "the will of God, or of heaven": what we today would call society, custom and the imperatives of social living. Correspondingly, they understood the limitations of agency: the tendency of reality to deviate from what has been imagined, willed and planned. When they said that something desired would only happen "God willing," they were showing us and asking us to accept our lack of real agential control over in our own lives.

They saw, correctly, that life is lived in a context too vast for full human comprehension, though they under-estimated how much could be eventually be understood by patient, cumulative effort. They recognized that a full and meaningful life needs something more than worldly 'success' – that the pursuit of mere self-interest, even if wholly successful (as it never is), cannot be enough – that some sense of purpose, service and connection is needed before we can feel complete. Where they said that men were made to serve the gods, we today would describe ourselves as social creatures equipped by evolution with powerful needs for secure membership and social belonging. But we would have to take their point: Even recognizing that human society can never be *good* enough to make a proper object of devotion, we still feel this need to give ourselves to something greater, or at least bigger and more powerful, than ourselves.

Likewise, while rejecting the doctrine of Original Sin, we must admit that those introspectivists were correct to perceive evil – not just this or that bad deed or event, but something structural in human existence itself – as a problem for the thinking mind. How could life be so *good*, yet so full of wickedness, at the same time? The introspectivists knew that life was cruel to animals too, but saw correctly that this cruelty was not a *moral problem* for the animals. Animals feel fear and pain, but they don't

appear to *suffer* in the human existential sense. Life is hard, and it ends sooner or later, but death and hardship don't seem to poison the whole existence of animals as they do for us. They knew also that people, moved by greed and anger and folly, make their own and each other's lives much crueller and sadder than they need to be.

Where the introspectivists went wrong, we would now say, was in conceiving Evil and Good in anthropomorphic terms – as conscious powers working against each other. Today we'd have to say that Nature itself, including human nature, is both 'good' and 'evil' in human terms, and quite beyond such judgments on its own terms. The problem of good and evil (for us humans, it can't help but be a problem) is inherent in the ecological and Darwinian fabric of life itself. On its own terms, life is just an infection that some planets catch; and it's the human lot to be both part of it, but somehow outside it, at the same time. It's up to us to ameliorate that Garden, or transcend it, or endure it, as best we can.

The introspectivists, in general, saw a problem of human spiritual development and reconciliation – not the problem of global systems engineering as some would frame that same challenge today. For such development, they understood the importance of *practice*, though some greatly exagerated the role of orthodox *belief* – a mistake that that has always tempted intellectuals. As determinants of emotion and actual behavior, the suggestions from formal beliefs are weak compared with those of habit. One way to make religion intellectually respectable these days would be to accept that its stories are just didactic folk-tales, certainly not historically factual in their supernatural details, that must be taken with a grain of salt. It then becomes possible to chuck the creeds, and lay all emphasis on ritual and practice, now understood as a kind of inner technology, inducing desirable states of mind and social relationship. Obviously, such a move will be much easier for some religions than others. Christianity and Islam will find it especially difficult because they pin so much importance to their foundational narratives.[22] But yoga, zen and the martial arts already point in this direction: rich sources of spiritual suggestion with no addiction to historical myths, or to events that never happened.

In general, it should be understood that the introspectivists were mostly just doing the best they could with the tools they had available. The abductive method of hypothesis-and-experiment had yet to demonstrate its power; the value of systematic *doubt* had yet to be recognized. To acknowledge that they got some important things right, is not to condone the political uses that were often made of their teachings, nor to turn back from the Enlightenment. We need to break religion's superstitious spell. Having done so, we can give intuitions of life's context their due.

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22 But some Christians, notably the Episcopalian Bishop John Shelby Spong are already choosing and teaching a move of this kind as the only way to reconcile beloved religious forms with modern knowledge. See http://www.geocities.com/reuther_2000/spong.html and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Shelby_Spong.

"On the highest throne of the world," Montaigne wrote, "the king still sits on his own arse." A similar point could be made about the most profound and penetrating introspection: It is still only one's own mind that one is getting to know. That is why the critical methods of philosophy and science can lead to deeper and truer knowledge than introspection and earnest faith. At its best, introspection affords keen awareness of all the stuff that leaks into consciousness from the subconscious body-mind, and from the superconscious group-mind. It's all very interesting, even crucial in its own way, but in itself it's no proof of anything. "Garbage in – garbage out," as the computer types say.