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# Running on Emptiness: The Failure of Symbolic Thought

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> "If we do not 'come to our senses' soon, we will have permanently forfeited the chance of constructing any meaningful alternatives to the pseudo-existence which passes for life in our current 'Civilization of the Image.' " David Howes

To what degree can it be said that we are really living? As the substance of culture seems to shrivel and offer less balm to troubled lives, we are led to look more deeply at our barren times. And to the place of culture itself in all this.

An anguished Ted Sloan asks (1996), "What is the problem with modernity? Why do modern societies have such a hard time producing adults capable of intimacy, work, enjoyment, and ethical living? Why is it that signs of damaged life are so prevalent?" According to David Morris (l994), "Chronic pain and depression, often linked and occasionally even regarded as a single disorder, constitute an immense crisis at the center of postmodern life." We have cyberspace and virtual reality, instant computerized communication in the global village; and yet have we ever felt so impoverished and isolated?

Just as Freud predicted that the fullness of civilization would mean universal neurotic unhappiness, anti-civilization currents are growing in response to the psychic immiseration that envelops us. Thus symbolic life, essence of civilization, now comes under fire.

It may still be said that this most familiar, if artificial, element is the least understood, but felt necessity drives critique, and many of us feel driven to get to the bottom of a steadily worsening mode of existence. Out of a sense of being trapped and limited by symbols comes the thesis that the extent to which thought and emotion are tied to symbolism is the measure by which absence fills the inner world and destroys the outer world.

We seem to have experienced a fall into representation, whose depths and consequences are only now being fully plumbed. In a fundamental sort of falsification, symbols at first mediated reality and then replaced it. At present we live within symbols to a greater degree than we do within our bodily selves or directly with each other.

The more involved this internal representational system is, the more distanced we are from the reality around us. Other connections, other cognitive perspectives are inhibited, to say the least, as symbolic communication and its myriad representational devices have accomplished an alienation from and betrayal of reality.

This coming between and concomitant distortion and distancing is ideological in a primary and original sense; every subsequent ideology is an echo of this one. Debord depicted contemporary society as exerting a ban on living in favor of its representation: images now in the saddle, riding life. But this is anything but a new problem. There is an imperialism or expansionism of culture from the beginning. And how much does it conquer? Philosophy today says that it is language that thinks and talks. But how much has this always been the case? Symbolizing is linear, successive, substitutive; it cannot be open to its whole object simultaneously. Its instrumental reason is just that: manipulative and seeking dominance. Its approach is "let a stand for b" instead of "let a be b." Language has its basis in the effort to conceptualize and equalize the unequal, thus bypassing the essence and diversity of a varied, variable richness.

Symbolism is an extensive and profound empire, which reflects and makes coherent a world view, and is itself a world view based upon withdrawal from

immediate and intelligible human meaning.

James Shreeve, at the end of his Neanderthal Enigma (l995), provides a beautiful illustration of an alternative to symbolic being. Meditating upon what an earlier, non-symbolic consciousness might have been like, he calls forth important distinctions and possibilities:

. . . where the modern's gods might inhabit the land, the buffalo, or the blade of grass, the Neanderthal's spirit was the animal or the grass blade, the thing and its soul perceived as a single vital force, with no need to distinguish them with separate names. Similarly, the absence of artistic expression does not preclude the apprehension of what is artful about the world. Neanderthals did not paint their caves with the images of animals. But perhaps they had no need to distill life into representations, because its essences were already revealed to their senses. The sight of a running herd was enough to inspire a surging sense of beauty. They had no drums or bone flutes, but they could listen to the booming rhythms of the wind, the earth, and each other's heartbeats, and be transported." Rather than celebrate the cognitive communion with the world that Shreeve suggests we once enjoyed, much less embark on the project of seeking to recover it, the use of symbols is of course widely considered the hallmark of human cognition. Goethe said, "Everything is a symbol," as industrial capitalism, milestone of mediation and alienation, took off. At about the same time Kant decided that the key to philosophy lies in the answer to the question, "What is the ground of the relation of that in us which we call 'representation' to the object?" Unfortunately, he divined for modern thought an ahistorical and fundamentally inadequate answer, namely that we are simply not constituted so as to be able to understand reality directly. Two centuries later (1981), Emmanuel Levinas came much closer to the mark with "Philosophy, in its very diachrony, is the consciousness of the breakup of consciousness."

Eli Sagan (1985) spoke for countless others in declaring that the need to symbolize and live in a symbolic world is, like aggression, a human need so basic that "it can be denied only at the cost of severe psychic disorder." The need for symbols — and violence — did not always obtain, however. Rather, they have their origins in the thwarting and fragmenting of an earlier wholeness, in the process of domestication from which civilization issued. Apparently driven forward by a gradually quickening growth in the division of labor that began to take hold in the Upper Paleolithic, culture emerged as time, language, art, number, and then agriculture.

The word culture derives from the Latin cultura, referring to cultivation of the soil; that is, to the domestication of plants and animals—and of ourselves in the bargain. A restless spirit of innovation and anxiety has largely been with us ever since, as continually changing symbolic modes seek to fix what cannot be redressed without rejecting the symbolic and its estranged world.

Following Durkheim, Leslie White (1949) wrote, "Human behavior is symbolic behavior; symbolic behavior is human behavior. The symbol is the universe of humanity." It is past time to see such pronouncements as ideology, serving to shore up the elemental falsification underneath a virtually all-encompassing false consciousness. But if a fully developed symbolic world is not, in Northrop Frye's bald claim (1981), in sum "the charter of our freedom," anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1965) comes closer to the truth in saying that we are generally dependent on "the guidance provided by systems of significant symbols." Closer yet is Cohen (1974), who observed that "symbols are essential for the develop-

ment and maintenance of social order." The ensemble of symbols represents the social order and the individual's place in it, a formulation that always leaves the genesis of this arrangement unquestioned. How did our behavior come to be aligned by symbolization?

Culture arose and flourished via domination of nature, its growth a measure of that progressive mastery that unfolded with ever greater division of labor. Malinowski (1962) understood symbolism as the soul of civilization, chiefly in the form of language as a means of coordinating action or of standardizing technique, and providing rules for social, ritual, and industrial behavior.

It is our fall from a simplicity and fullness of life directly experienced, from the sensuous moment of knowing, which leaves a gap that the symbolic can never bridge. This is what is always being covered over by layers of cultural consolations, civilized detouring that never recovers lost wholeness. In a very deep sense, only what is repressed is symbolized, because only what is repressed needs to be symbolized. The magnitude of symbolization testifies to how much has been repressed; buried, but possibly still recoverable.

Imperceptibly for a long while, most likely, division of labor very slowly advanced and eventually began to erode the autonomy of the individual and a face-to-face mode of social existence. The virus destined to become full-blown as civilization began in this way: a tentative thesis supported by all that victimizes us now. From initial alienation to advanced civilization, the course is marked by more and more reification, dependence, bureaucratization, spiritual desolation, and barren technicization.

Little wonder that the question of the origin of symbolic thought, the very air of civilization, arises with some force. Why culture should exist in the first place appears, increasingly, a more apt way to put it. Especially given the enormous antiquity of human intelligence now established, chiefy from Thomas Wynn's persuasive demonstration (1989) of what it took to fashion the stone tools of about a million years ago. There was a very evident gap between established human capability and the initiation of symbolic culture, with many thousands of generations intervening between the two.

Culture is a fairly recent affair. The oldest cave art, for example, is in the neighborhood of 30,000 years old, and agriculture only got underway about 10,000 years ago. The missing element during the vast interval between the time when I.Q. was available to enable symbolizing, and its realization, was a shift in our relationship to nature. It seems plausible to see in this interval, on some level that we will perhaps never fathom, a refusal to strive for mastery of nature. It may be that only when this striving for mastery was introduced, probably non-consciously, via a very gradual division of labor, did the symbolizing of experiences begin to take hold.

But, it is so often argued, the violence of primitives — human sacrifice, cannibalism, head-hunting, slavery, etc. — can only be tamed by symbolic culture/civilization. The simple answer to this stereotype of the primitive is that organized violence was not ended by culture, but in fact commenced with it. William J. Perry (1927) studied various New World peoples and noted a striking contrast between an agricultural group and a nondomesticated group. He found the latter "greatly inferior in culture, but lacking [the former's] hideous customs." While virtually every society that adopted a domesticated relationship to nature, all over the globe, became subject to violent practices, the non-agricultural knew no organized violence. Anthropologists have long focused on

the Northwest Coast Indians as a rare exception to this rule of thumb. Although essentially a fishing people, at a certain point they took slaves and established a very hierarchical society. Even here, however, domestication was present, in the form of tame dogs and tobacco as a minor crop.

We succumb to objectification and let a web of culture control us and tell us how to live, as if this were a natural development. It is anything but that, and we should be clear about what culture/civilization has in fact given us, and what it has taken away.

The philosopher Richard Rorty (1979) described culture as the assemblage of claims to knowledge. In the realm of symbolic being the senses are depreciated, because of their systematic separation and atrophy under civilization. The sensual is not considered a legitimate source of claims to truth.

We humans once allowed a full and appreciative reception to the total sensory input, what is called in German umwelt, or the world around us. Heinz Werner (1940, 1963) argued that originally a single sense obtained, before divisions in society ruptured sensory unity. Surviving non-agricultural peoples often exhibit, in the interplay and interpenetration of the senses, a very much greater sensory awareness and involvement than do domesticated individuals (E. Carpenter 1980). Striking examples abound, such as the Bushmen, who can see four moons of Jupiter with the unaided eye and can hear a single-engine light plane seventy miles away (Farb 1978).

Symbolic culture inhibits human communication by blocking and otherwise suppressing channels of sensory awareness. An increasingly technological existence compels us to tune out most of what we could experience. The William Blake declaration comes to mind:

"If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, 'till he sees all things through narrow chinks of his cavern."

Laurens van der Post (1958) described telepathic communication among the Kung in Africa, prompting Richard Coan (1987) to characterize such modes as "representing an alternative, rather than a prelude to the kind of civilization in which we live."

In 1623 William Drummond wrote, "What sweet contentments doth the soul enjoy by the senses. They are the gates and windows of its knowledge, the organs of its delight." In fact, the "I," if not the "soul," doesn't exist in the absence of bodily sensations; there are no non-sensory conscious states. But it is all too evident how our senses have been domesticated in a symbolic cultural atmosphere: tamed, separated, arranged in a revealing hierarchy. Vision, under the sign of modern linear perspective, reigns because it is the least proximal, most distancing of the senses. It has been the means by which the individual has been transformed into a spectator, the world into a spectacle, and the body an object or specimen. The primacy of the visual is no accident, for an undue elevation of sight not only situates the viewer outside what he or she sees, but enables the principle of control or domination at base. Sound or hearing as the acme of the senses would be much less adequate to domestication because it surrounds and penetrates the speaker as well as the listener.

Other sensual faculties are discounted far more. Smell, which loses its importance only when suppressed by culture, was once a vital means of connection with the world. The literature on cognition almost completely ignores the sense of smell, just as its role is now so circumscribed among humans. It is, after all,

of little use for purposes of domination; considering how smell can so directly trigger even very distant memories, perhaps it is even a kind of anti-domination faculty. Lewis Thomas (1983) remarked that "The act of smelling something, anything, is remarkably like the act of thinking itself." And if it isn't it very likely used to be and should be again.

Tactile experiences or practices are another sensual area we have been expected to relinquish in favor of compensatory symbolic substitutes. The sense of touch has indeed been diminished in a synthetic, work-occupied, long-distance existence. There is little time for or emphasis on tactile stimulation or communication, even though such deprivation causes clearly negative outcomes. Nuances of sensitivity and tenderness become lost, and it is well known that infants and children who are seldom touched, carried and caressed are slow to develop and are often emotionally stunted.

Touching by definition involves feeling; to be "touched" is to feel emotionally moved, a reminder of the earlier potency of the tactile sense, as in the expression "keep in touch." The lessening of this category of sensuousness, among the rest, has had momentous consequences. Its renewal, in a re-sensitized, reunited world, will bring a likewise momentous improvement in living. As Tommy cried out, in The Who's rock opera of the same name, "See me, feel me, touch me, heal me. . . "

As with animals and plants, the land, the rivers, and human emotions, the senses come to be isolated and subdued. Aristotle's notion of a "proper" plan of the universe dictated that "each sense has its proper sphere."

Freud, Marcuse and others saw that civilization demands the sublimation or repression of the pleasures of the proximity senses so that the individual can be thus converted to an instrument of labor. Social control, via the network of the symbolic, very deliberately disempowers the body. An alienated counter-world, driven on to greater estrangement by ever-greater division of labor, humbles one's own somatic sensations and fundamentally distracts from the basic rhythms of one's life.

The definitive mind-body split, ascribed to Descartes' 17th century formulations, is the very hallmark of modern society. What has been referred to as the great "Cartesian anxiety" over the specter of intellectual and moral chaos, was resolved in favor of suppression of the sensual and passionate dimension of human existence. Again we see the domesticating urge underlying culture, the fear of not being in control, now indicting the senses with a vengeance. Henceforth science and technology have a theoretic license to proceed without limits, sensual knowledge having been effectively eradicated in terms of claims to truth or understanding.

Seeing what this bargain has wrought, a deep-seated reaction is dawning against the vast symbolic enterprise that weighs us down and invades every part of us. "If we do not 'come to our senses' soon," as David Howes (1991) judged, "we will have permanently forfeited the chance of constructing any meaningful alternatives to the pseudoexistence which passes for life in our current 'Civilization of the Image'." The task of critique may be, most centrally, to help us see what it will take to reach a place in which we are truly present to each other and to the world.

The first separation seems to have been the sense of time which brings a loss of being present to ourselves. The growth of this sense is all but indistinguishable from that of alienation itself. If, as Levi-Strauss put it, "the characteris-

tic feature of the savage mind is its timelessness," living in the here and now becomes lost through the mediation of cultural interventions. Presentness is deferred by the symbolic, and this refusal of the contingent instant is the birth of time. We fall under the spell of what Eliade called the "terror of history" as representations effectively oppose the pull of immediate perceptual experience.

Mircea Eliade's Myth of the Eternal Return (1954) stresses the fear that all primitive societies have had of history, the passing of time. On the other hand, voices of civilization have tried to celebrate our immersion in this most basic cultural construct. Leroi-Gourhan (1964), for instance, saw in time orientation "perhaps the human act par excellence." Our perceptions have become so time-governed and time saturated that it is hard to imagine time's general absence: for the same reasons it is so difficult to see, at this point, a non-alienated, non-symbolic, undivided social existence.

History, according to Peterson and Goodall (1993), is marked by an amnesia about where we came from. Their stimulating Visions of Caliban also pointed out that our great forgetting may well have begun with language, the originating device of the symbolic world. Comparative linguist Mary LeCron Foster (1978, 1980) believes that language is perhaps less than 50,000 years old and arose with the first impulses toward art, ritual and social differentiation. Verbal symbolizing is the principal means of establishing, defining, and maintaining the cultural world and of structuring our very thinking.

As Hegel said somewhere, to question language is to question being. It is very important, however, to resist such overstatements and see the distinction, for one thing, between the cultural importance of language and its inherent limitations. To hold that we and the world are but linguistic creations is just another way of saying how pervasive and controlling is symbolic culture. But Hegel's claim goes much too far, and George Herbert Mead's assertion (1934) that to have a mind one must have a language is similarly hyperbolic and false.

Language transforms meaning and commumcation but is not synonymous with them. Thought, as Vendler (1967) understood, is essentially independent of language. Studies of patients and others lacking all aspects of speech and language demonstrate that the intellect remains powerful even in the absence of those elements (Lecours and Joanette 1980; Donald 1991). The claim that language greatly facilitates thought is likewise questionable, inasmuch as formal experiments with children and adults have not demonstrated it (G. Cohen 1977). Language is clearly not a necessary condition for thinking (see Kertesz 1988, Jansons 1988).

Verbal communication is part of the movement away from a face-to-face social reality, making feasible physical separateness. The word always stands between people who wish to connect with each other, facilitating the diminution of what need not be spoken to be said. That we have declined from a non-linguistic state begins to appear a sane point of view. This intuition may lie behind George W. Morgan's 1968 judgment that "Nothing, indeed, is more subject to depreciation and suspicion in our disenchanted world than the word."

Communication outside civilization involved all the senses, a condition linked to the key gatherer-hunter traits of openness and sharing. Literacy ushered us into the society of divided and reduced senses, and we take this sensory deprivation for granted as if it were a natural state, just as we take literacy for granted.

Culture and technology exist because of language. Many have seen speech,

in turn. as a means of coordinating labor, that is, as an essential part of the technique of production. Language is critical for the formation of the rules of work and exchange accompanying division of labor, with the specializations and standardizations of nascent economy paralleling those of language. Now guided by symbolization, a new kind of thinking takes over, which realizes itself in culture and technology. The interdependence of language and technology is at least as obvious as that of language and culture, and results in an accelerating mastery over the natural world intrinsically similar to the control introduced over the once autonomous and sensuous individual.

Noam Chomsky, chief language theorist, commits a grave and reactionary error by portraying language as a "natural" aspect of "essential human nature," innate and independent of culture (1966b, 1992). His Cartesian perspective sees the mind as an abstract machine which is simply destined to turn out strings of symbols and manipulate them. Concepts like origins or alienation have no place in this barren techno-schema. Lieberman (1975) provides a concise and fundamental correction: "Human language could have evolved only in relation to the total human condition."

The original sense of the word define is, from Latin, to limit or bring to an end. Language seems often to close an experience, not to help ourselves be open to experience. When we dream, what happens is not expressed in words, just as those in love communicate most deeply without verbal symbolizing. What has been advanced by language that has really advanced the human spirit? In 1976, von Glasersfeld wondered "whether, at some future time, it will still seem so obvious that language has enhanced the survival of life on this planet."

Numerical symbolism is also of fundamental importance to the development of a cultural world. In many primitive societies it was and is considered unlucky to count living creatures, an anti-reification attitude related to the common primitive notion that to name another is to gain power over that person. Counting, like naming, is part of the domestication process. Division of labor lends itself to the quantifiable, as opposed to what is whole in itself, unique, not fragmented. Number is also necessary for the abstraction inherent in the exchange of commodities and is prerequisite to the take-off of science and technology. The urge to measure involves a deformed kind of knowledge that seeks control of its object, not understanding.

The sentiment that "the only way we truly apprehend things is through art" is a commonplace opinion, one which underlines our dependence on symbols and representation. "The fact that originally all art was 'sacred' " (Eliade, 1985), that is, belonging to a separate sphere, testifies to its original status or function.

Art is among the earliest forms of ideological and ritual expressiveness, developed along with religious observances designed to hold together a communal life that was beginning to fragment. It was a key means of facilitating social integration and economic differentiation (Dickson, 1990), probably by encoding information to register membership, status, and position (Lumsden and Wilson 1983). Prior to this time, somewhere during the Upper Paleolithic, devices for social cohesion were unnecessary; division of labor, separate roles, and territoriality seem to have been largely non-existent. As tensions and anxieties started to emerge in social life, art and the rest of culture arose with them in answer to their disturbing presence.

Art, like religion, arose from the original sense of disquiet, no doubt subtly but powerfully disturbing in its newness and its encroaching gradualness. In

1900 Hirn wrote of an early dissatisfaction that motivated the artistic search for a "fuller and deeper expression" as "compensation for new deficiencies of life." Cultural solutions, however, do not address the deeper dislocations that cultural "solutions" are themselves part of. Conversely, as commentators as diverse as Henry Miller and Theodor Adorno have concluded, there would be no need of art in a disalienated world. What art has ineffectively striven to capture and express would once again be a reality, the false antidote of culture forgotten.

Art is a language and so, evidently, is ritual, among the earliest cultural and symbolic institutions. Julia Kristeva (1989) commented on "the close relation of grammar to ritual," and Frits Staal's studies of Vedic ritual (1982, 1986, 1988) demonstrated to him that syntax can completely explain the form and meaning of ritual. As Chris Knight (1996) noted, speech and ritual are "interdependent aspects of one and the same symbolic domain."

Essential for the breakthrough of the cultural in human affairs, ritual is not only a means of aligning or prescribing emotions; it is also a formalization that is intimately linked with hierarchies and formal rule over individuals. All known tribal societies and early civilizations had hierarchical organizations built on or bound up with a ritual structure and matching conceptual system.

Examples of the link between ritual and inequality, developing even prior to agriculture, are widespread (Gans 1985, Conkey 1984). Rites serve a safety valve function for the discharge of tensions generated by emerging divisions in society and work to create and maintain social cohesion. Earlier on there was no need of devices to unify what was, in a non-division of labor context, still whole and unstratified.

It has often been said that the function of the symbol is to disclose structures of the real that are inaccessible to empirical observation. More to the point, in terms of the processes of culture and civilization, however, is Abner Cohen's contention (1981, 1993) that symbolism and ritual disguise, mystify and sanctify irksome duties and roles and thus make them seem desirable. Or, as David Parkin (1992) put it, the compulsory nature of ritual blunts the natural autonomy of individuals by placing them at the service of authority.

Ostensibly opposed to estrangement, the counterworld of public rites is arrayed against the current of historical direction. But, again, this is a delusion, since ritual facilitates the establishment of the cultural order, bedrock of alienated theory and practice. Ritual authority structures play an important part in the organization of production (division of labor) and actively further the coming of domestication. Symbolic categories are set up to control the wild and alien; thus the domination of women proceeds, a development brought to full realization with agriculture, when women become essentially beasts of burden and/or sexual objects. Part of this fundamental shift is movement toward territorialism and warfare; Johnson and Earle (1987) discussed the correspondence between this movement and the increased importance of ceremonialism.

According to James Shreeve (1995), "In the ethnographic record, wherever you get inequality, it is justified by invoking the sacred." Relatedly, all symbolism, says Eliade (1985), was originally religious symbolism. Social inequality seems to be accompanied by subjugation in the non-human sphere. M. Reinach (quoted in Radin, 1927) said, "thanks to magic, man takes the offensive against the objective world." Cassirer (1955) phrased it this way: "Nature yields nothing without ceremonies."

Out of ritual action arose the shaman, who was not only the first specialist

because of his or her role in this area, but the first cultural practitioner in general. The earliest art was accomplished by shamans, as they assumed ideological leadership and designed the content of rituals.

This original specialist became the regulator of group emotions, and as the shaman's potency increased, there was a corresponding decrease in the psychic vitality of the rest of the group (Lommel, 1967). Centralized authority, and most likely religion too, grew out of the elevated position of the shaman. The specter of social complexity was incarnated in this individual who wielded symbolic power. Every head man and chief developed from the primacy of this figure in the lives of others in the group.

Religion, like art, contributed to a common symbolic grammar needed by the new social order and its fissures and anxieties. The word is based on the Latin religare, to tie or bind, and a Greek verbal stem denoting attentiveness to ritual, faithfulness to rules. Social integration, required for the first time, is evident as impetus to religion.

It is the answer to insecurities and tensions, promising resolution and transcendence by means of the symbolic. Religion finds no basis for its existence prior to the wrong turn taken toward culture and the civilized (domesticated). The American philosopher George Santayana summed it up well with, "Another world to live in is what we mean by religion."

Since Darwin's Descent of Man (1871) we have understood that human evolution greatly accelerated culturally at a time of insignificant physiological change. Thus symbolic being did not depend on waiting for the right gifts to evolve. We can now see, with Clive Gamble (1994), that intention in human action did not arrive with domestication/agriculture/civilization.

The native denizens of Africa's Kalahari Desert, as studied by Laurens van der Post (1976), lived in "a state of complete trust, dependence and interdependence with nature," which was "far kinder to them than any civilization ever was." Egalitarianism and sharing were the hallmark qualities of hunter-gatherer life (G. Isaac 1976, Ingold 1987, 1988, Erdal and Whiten 1992, etc.), which is more accurately called gatherer-hunter life, or the foraging mode. In fact, the great bulk of this diet consisted of plant material, and there is no conclusive evidence for hunting at all prior to the Upper Paleolithic (Binford 1984, 1985).

An instructive look at contemporary primitive societies is Colin Turnbull's work (1961, 1965) on pygmies of the Ituri forest and their Bantu neighbors. The pygmies are foragers, living with no religion or culture. They are seen as immoral and ignorant by the agriculturalist Bantu, but enjoy much greater individualism and freedom. To the annoyance of the Bantu, the pygmies irreverently mock the solemn rites of the latter and their sense of sin. Rejecting territorialism, much less private holdings, they "move freely in an uncharted, unsystematized, unbounded social world," according to Mary Douglas (1973).

The vast era prior to the coming of symbolic being is an enormously prominent reality and a question mark to some. Commenting on this "period spanning more than a million years," Tim Ingold (1993) called it "one of the most profound enigmas known to archaeological science." But the longevity of this stable, non-cultural epoch has a simple explanation: as F. Goodman (1988) surmised, "It was such a harmonious existence, and such a successful adaptation, that it did not materially alter for many thousands of years."

Culture triumphed at last with domestication. The scope of life became narrower, more specialized, forcibly divorced from its previous grace and spon-

taneous liberty. The assault of a symbolic orientation upon the natural also had immediate outward results. Early rock drawings, found 125 miles from the nearest recorded trickle of water in the Sahara, show people swimming. Elephants were still somewhat common in some coastal Mediterranean zones in 500 B.C., wrote Herodotus. Historian Clive Ponting (1992) has shown that every civilization has diminished the health of its environment.

And cultivation definitely did not provide a higher-quality or more reliable food base (M.N. Cohen 1989, Walker and Shipman 1996), though it did introduce diseases of all kinds, almost completely unknown outside civilization (Burkett 1978, Freund 1982), and sexual inequality (M. Ehrenberg 1989b, A. Getty 1996). Frank Waters' Book of the Hopi (1963) gives us a stunning picture of unchecked division of labor and the poverty of the symbolic: "More and more they traded for things they didn't need, and the more goods they got, the more they wanted. This was very serious. For they did not realize they were drawing away, step by step, from the good life given them."

A pertinent chapter from The Time Before History (1996) by Colin Tudge bears a title that speaks volumes, "The End of Eden: Farming." Much of an underlying epistemological distinction is revealed in this contrast by Ingold (1993): "In short, whereas for farmers and herdsmen the tool is an instrument of control, for hunters and gatherers it would better be regarded as an instrument of revelation." And Horkheimer (1972) bears quoting, in terms of the psychic cost of domestication/domination of nature: "the destruction of the inner life is the penalty man has to pay for having no respect for any life other than his own." Violence directed outward is at the same time inflicted spiritually, and the outside world becomes transformed, debased, as surely as the perceptual field was subjected to fundamental redefinition. Nature certainly did not ordain civilization; quite the contrary.

Today it is fashionable, if not mandatory, to maintain that culture always was and always will be. Even though it is demonstrably the case that there was an extremely long non-symbolic human era, perhaps one hundred times as long as that of civilization, and that culture has gained only at the expense of nature, one has it from all sides that the symbolic — like alienation — is eternal. Thus questions of origins and destinations are meaningless. Nothing can be traced further than the semiotic in which everything is trapped.

But the limits of the dominant rationality and the costs of civilization are too starkly visible for us to accept this kind of cop-out. Since the ascendance of the symbolic humans have been trying, through participation in culture, to recover an authenticity we once lived. The constant urge or quest for the transcendent testifies that the hegemony of absence is a cultural constant. As Thomas McFarland (1987) found, "culture primarily witnesses the absence of meaning, not its presence."

Massive, unfulfilling consumption, within the dictates of production and social control, reigns as the chief everyday consolation for this absence of meaning, and culture is certainly itself a prime consumer choice. At base, it is division of labor that ordains our false and disabling symbolic totality. "The increase in specialization. . . ," wrote Peter Lomas (1996), "undermines our confidence in our ordinary capacity to live."

We are caught in the cultural logic of objectification and the objectifying logic of culture, such that those who counsel new ritual and other representational forms as the route to a re-enchanted existence miss the point completely.

More of what has failed for so long can hardly be the answer. Levi-Strauss (1978) referred to "a kind of wisdom [that primitive peoples] practiced spontaneously and the rejection of which, by the modern world, is the real madness."

Either the non-symbolizing health that once obtained, in all its dimensions, or, madness and death. Culture has led us to betray our own aboriginal spirit and wholeness, into an everworsening realm of synthetic, isolating, impoverished estrangement. Which is not to say that there are no more everyday pleasures, without which we would lose our humanness. But as our plight deepens, we glimpse how much must be erased for our redemption.


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