

The Human Mind Over Time

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Dr. Norman Johnson, the lead character in Michael Crichton's mystery novel *Sphere*, observes that

... human thought, like our bodies, our way of thinking could easily have turned out differently, there was nothing inevitable about how we looked at the universe.

This is a compelling argument. There is growing evidence that early human-kind, prior to the emergence of homo sapiens, did indeed look at the world around them in a very different way. Some students of early man now believe that the Neanderthals had a much less aggressive outlook than homo sapiens and focused on close ties to fellows and harmony with the environment, and this accounts for the disappearance of the Neanderthals, their yielding to more aggressive moderns about 30,000 years ago.

We can't know when the basic patterns or directions of the human mind began to emerge, whether it was before the Neanderthals or after. We can only imagine that for endless centuries the human mind was virtually a blank slate. Speculation will continue on this question forever. All sorts of questions arise. For instance, was the human mind a blank slate when people 30,000 years ago made the great cave paintings? It is reasonable to conclude that tens of thousands of years of human thought lay behind the cave art, a species of civilization, though that is not quite an accurate rendering of that word under the circumstances of life say 50,000 years ago. Even at this late point, or what may be considered a late point from one perspective, the development of the values of the human mind surely was not inevitable. Perhaps homo sapiens could have taken an entirely different track, possibly less aggressive, less intent on the acquisition of skills and understanding. The role of feeling for the individual and the group could have been different in various ways. Then there was a period of about 20,000 years before the start up of what we now regard as true civilizations, perhaps beginning with the Sumerians. And also at this point one has to ask oneself why did the early civilizations develop in different ways instead of a single way. With the gradual emergence of civilizations in a recognizable way, the human mind evidenced a variety of departures. For instance, the roots of Greek civilization and the roots of Japanese civilization were utterly different. As they developed, they moved along different paths so that the outlook of the mind in each civilization turned out in a distinct way. To this day, after several centuries of modern experience and thought,

modern Greeks and modern Japanese are very different. Perhaps we shall learn that culture does not account for all differences, but, to bring forward a notion, alien to modern thinking, the machinery of the cells may be different in some respect. We would have a much better understanding if we had the DNA of everyone in the world, a development which is conceivable in the future.

In the meantime, there is need for more reflection on cultural differences over several millennia. Moderns still find it difficult to understand the differences in mind set between people in our world today and people who lived a thousand or more years ago. Consider the case of the Romans, a people we admire for their extraordinary feats of construction of roads, buildings and aqueducts which still exist after two thousand years. And our political institutions are derived in considerable measure from institutions developed in the Roman republic. In addition, we value the work of the Roman philosophers, poets and historians. But we can't understand the bloodthirstiness of the Roman people, their taste for cruel spectacles, and their lack of the feelings of mercy which have been distinctive of Christian civilization. How could they have been both philosophical and sadistic at the same time? Frequently, we misread the Romans.

And though many Westerners today are post-Christian in their mode of living and commitments, ancient Christian concepts of morality and human behavior are deeply embedded in their minds. They take mercy for granted, despite the fact that there isn't a specific Christian moral context. But the Roman world didn't know mercy before Constantine adopted Christianity as the official religion of the Roman empire. Well-born Romans had a code of behavior but it was primarily a matter of deportment for members of the upper class or for citizens of Rome. There was a vast Roman underclass treated almost as human debris to which the well-born didn't have any moral duty, and this element in Roman society could be treated with cruelty. There wasn't any concept of humanity and humane treatment as laid out by Jesus Christ, his apostles and other Christian believers. And where the Christian concepts are openly rejected, as in Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany, there is an immediate reversion to inhuman sadistic practices such as we saw in the gulag or the Nazi extermination camps. Certainly, the Christian "love thy neighbor" concept is not inevitable in different ideological or cultural contexts. The history of the twentieth century, the supposed century of science and liberal good will, actually was a history of the most widespread terror and torture directed against the most helpless in society. This grim reality should help us understand the differences we have with many peoples in the past and alert us to the dangers ahead in time even as there is so much talk of creating a more rational society. A highly rationalized society may not turn out to be a truly humane society, a society free of cruelty. Loren Eiseley, the great naturalist, undertook an immense journey backward and forward in time. To some degree, we can all do that, exploring the vast terrain of the human mind and heart, the great depths of time—nongeologic time. As we do so, we can probe the enormous wealth of insights which humankind has acquired through the experience of life under vastly different conditions. Different civilizations have interpreted life in different ways and developed perceptions of existence

which are varied almost beyond belief. Again, this shows that there was not a single track for early man to follow, but opportunities for cutting many tracks through the wilderness. God, theologians tell us, gave man free will from his earliest days. And man has used his freedom to construct radically different structures of belief and behavior for communities of varying sizes, including most certainly entire civilizations—the largest human structures we know. The study of a civilization is one of the most absorbing tasks humans can undertake. The range of human types within one civilization, let us say our own Western civilization, is incredible, including Greek philosopher, Roman soldier, monk, medieval knight, Renaissance artist, seventeenth century explorer.

Associated with each type within a single civilization over the centuries is an extraordinary spectrum of values and behavior, evidencing the fantastic variety possible for humanity in one mold. On top of this is what Herbert Lieberman has referred to as “the little normal variations in human behavior from one day to the next.” All of this has developed in a very short space of time—some may say 10,000 years, others may say 20 or 30,000 years or others may say 50,000 years when the first huts of mammoth bones were made for communal living. In a sense, civilizations may be seen as tracks for the mind, tracks which produce specific behavior. And we can’t help but wonder what other tracks might have emerged in the past, roads not taken, behaviors not developed. There are great imponderables in human history, not only in respect to why certain tracks were followed but why others were not discerned or utilized. The history of the mind is far more complex than we have considered in the past and the emergence of tracks—civilizations—is a matter of extraordinary mystery. Another pertinent question is: When did humankind develop emotions? How far back in time? Did Neanderthals have the same range of emotions as homo sapiens—love, pity, anger, disgust, humor? Do people in other, very different, civilizations have the same range of emotions that we Westerners have? I think not, at least not exactly the same. The mind is conditioned by the culture to a considerable degree, at any rate. Of course, we can’t know for a fact whether the mind was an emotional blank slate say 50,000 years ago. However, one also may conclude that a range of emotions came very early as necessary for human survival. It can be argued that strong emotions are necessary defense equipment for human beings.

We always need to bear in mind that we have only the most fragmentary knowledge about the early development of man. The fossil record is very thin, and we make all sorts of assumptions based on a limited number of bones. Aside from the size of the brain case, we know next to nothing about the development of the human brain. The place of the Neanderthals in human evolution is not really understood at all. Scientists make educated guesses. But our entire approach to early man is shot through with assumptions. Just as we know nothing about the emergence of human emotions, we know nothing about the development of logical processes in the mind. We tend to assume that 50,000 years ago, let us say, humans thought in much the same manner that moderns do, albeit with much less information. But again, this is an assumption for which we haven’t any evidence.

Indeed the more questions we ask about the development of the mind and human views of the surrounding world, the more we realize that we are groping in the dark. It is all very tantalizing, of course. It is necessary that we consider these matters because we need to understand our thoughts and feelings and whence they originated, how far back they existed.

All these questions are aspects of the basic question: What is man? This is a question that must be addressed today and in the ages to come. The final answer is probably beyond knowing. Nevertheless, we want to ponder all the developmental questions that may occur to us. Even partial answers are immensely instructive. The search for these partial answers is the most fascinating search in which we can be engaged. Ω

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