FICTIONS

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SOMMARIO / CONTENTS

STORIES, JOKES, DESIRE, AND INTERDICTION: THE COGNITIVE AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL ORIGINS OF SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION

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W HY tell a story? We tell each other stories all the time. Often they are so conventional as to seem barely stories at all:

> Teacher: Why are you late?
> Student: Sorry – I missed the bus.

Whether it is true or not, this simple story of missing the bus may be all that is required to smooth over any hard feelings. There are, however, circumstances in which this excuse will be inadequate. Suppose it is my wife who asks why I am late and that we have now missed our reservation at a posh restaurant on the occasion of our wedding anniversary. It is unlikely that she will be satisfied with this rather lame excuse. I will have to put more effort into my story, which had better be commensurate with the magnitude of my crime. Stories, Charles Tilly says, «often carry an edge of justification or condemnation» (2006, p. 64) and accordingly they bring with them praise or blame of the protagonist.

Praise or blame of the protagonist is the very essence of tragedy. Consider the story Macbeth tells his wife in response to her questions about his absence from the banquet at which King Duncan is feasting:

> Lady Macbeth
>   Why have you left the chamber?
> Macbeth
>   Hath he asked for me?
> Lady Macbeth
>   Know you not he has?
> Macbeth
>   We will proceed no further in this business.
>   He hath honored me of late, and I have bought
>   Golden opinions from all sorts of people,
>   Which would be worn now in their newest gloss,
>   Not cast aside so soon. (1.7.30-36)[1]

At this point in the play, Macbeth stands at a crossroads. On the one hand, he is pulled by an insatiable desire to become king; on the other, he is wracked by guilt at the thought of murdering Duncan, king of Scotland, who is at this very moment a guest in his house. Prior to Lady Macbeth's entry, we overheard a remorseful Macbeth condemn himself for contemplating the murder of his beloved king:

> Besides, this Duncan
> Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been

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[1] All references to Shakespeare's plays are to act, scene, and line number(s).

> So clear in his great office, that his virtues
> Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against
> The deep damnation of his taking-off. (1.7.16-20)

This is why he tells his wife that they will proceed no further in this business. We now understand why he has turned his back on the feast at which the king sits. It is because he feels guilty that he is prevented from playing the role of gracious host. He cannot reconcile his murderous ambition with the pleasure and honor being heaped on him by the king, who has graced Macbeth with this personal visit to his home. These pangs of conscience show Macbeth's humanity, and we admire him for being, in his wife's words, «too full o'th' milk of human kindness» (1.5.17).

Of course, Lady Macbeth knows this too, which is precisely why she has come to find him. Her arrival during this scene is indicative of the spiritual battle going on *within* Macbeth. She represents the return of Macbeth's inner ambition, which reemerges to overwhelm the opposing 'humane' forces of conscience and guilt. Praise for Macbeth is quickly followed by blame, as we see him return to the cruel desire that gripped him on the heath outside Forres. Now Lady Macbeth returns him to the path of ambition first personified by the three weird sisters. «I am settled,» Macbeth says, «and bend up / Each corporal agent to this terrible feat» (1.7.80-81). Then, as if to remind himself of the difference between outward appearance and inward reality, he promises to conceal his dark desires: «False face must hide what the false heart doth know» (1.7.83).

Macbeth is a tragedy and therefore an admittedly extreme example. Do all stories involve questions of praise or blame? Aren't some stories simply descriptive accounts of the facts? Must they involve intimations of accusation and guilt? When Macbeth looks at his hands he does not just see Duncan's blood. He sees an appalling accusation:

> What hands are here? Ha! They pluck out mine eyes.
> Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
> Clean from my hand? No, this hand will rather
> The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
> Making the green one red. (2.2.63-67)

<center>★</center>

It is tempting to explain our habit of storytelling in more prosaic, operational or value-free terms by appealing to the natural sciences. This is the 'cognitivist' strategy pursued by Mark Turner (1996) in his discussion of stories, projection, and parable. Stories, Turner says, are made up of elementary perceptual and sensorimotor patterns which he calls «images schemas» (p. 16). These are basic categories of objects and events that are absolutely necessary for the individual to navigate the physical world. I know that the milk can be poured into the glass, that the rock will smash the window, and that the doorbell announces the presence of a visitor on my doorstep. According to Turner these sequences of events may already be called stories. But as Turner himself realizes, the really striking thing occurs when these sequences are projected onto each other to create «parables» (p. 17) or stories with additional layers of *metaphoric* meaning.

Consider the following example of a parable. If I say, «The shit is going to hit the fan,» I have painted a pleasingly vivid picture of a turd being spattered to all points of the compass. The image gets its peculiar richness or salience from the actual experi-

ence of watching a soft and squishy object like a turd hit the sharp and rapidly turning blades of a fan. Turner's main point is that cognition builds from the ground up. You need the perceptual experience first in order to work your way up to the purely abstract or aesthetic pleasure of applying the image of the splattered turd to a situation totally removed in space and time from it. This is where the trick of parable or 'narrative projection' comes in. You apply the brute perception of the shit hitting the fan to a totally different situation, say, the stock market crash of 2008. Imagine you are chancellor of the exchequer and you have just learned that a major U.S. investment bank is about to declare bankruptcy because it has been investing billions of dollars in mortgage-backed securities that are now worthless because the original assumption that investing in property was 'safe as houses' turned out to be painfully wrong. Lo and behold, house prices have fallen and the original haste with which people bought property is now only matched by their haste in unloading it. The question on everyone's mind is: how will the stock market react in the morning when it discovers that this huge bank can no longer pay its ignorant and now extremely unhappy creditors? As the acknowledged expert on these matters, you reply by saying: «The shit will hit the fan».

Naturally this is not a technical explanation. Nonetheless it possesses a powerful economy that elegantly captures the salient aspects of the situation. First, there is the contradiction between the general humbleness of the object and the strict taboos surrounding its management. Shit, like money, is a totally ordinary human object. Most of us experience it at least once a day. But its unsightliness and, in particular, its disagreeable odor, which generates strong feelings of disgust in all those who come across it, mean that it must be dealt with discretely, with delicate attention to prescribed protocols and rituals. «Please close the door and open the window. And don't forget to wash your hands!»

Secondly, there is the contrast between order and disorder or, more precisely, between contained and uncontained shit. No one knows exactly how far the shit will spread, but we can be sure that its general noxiousness will be radiated far and wide and that it will be fairly evenly distributed throughout the affected area, which in this case includes not just the United States but the entire global economy. No one will get out unscathed. Those closest to the fan will no doubt be covered in more shit than others further away from the point of contact. But even those well outside the area of immediate impact will come away stinking of shit.

As an explanation of how the mind works, I have nothing against the general cognitivist picture of how stories are built up from their component parts in our everyday perception of the world. Surely Turner is right to point out that our metaphors exhibit a strong bias toward more primitive perceptual and motor functions. These latter functions reach deep into our evolutionary past to a time well before humans acquired the ability to use symbolic or metaphoric representations (language). We need to perceive the world with our senses before we can attempt to represent it collectively in symbols or words. Nonetheless, there is one thing that this account of the origin of stories leaves out, and it is the most important question of all. Why?

Note that it is not enough to say that we tell stories because that is the way nature constructed us. Turner's account of the literary mind is based on the predictive power of science, and, in particular, on the predictive power of evolutionary theory. At one point he argues that the «motivations for parable are as strong as the motivations for color vision or sentence structure or the ability to hit a distant object with a stone» (1996, p. 5). I do not wish to dispute this claim on its own terms. Clearly we are

adapted for storytelling, and for language too. What I do wish to dispute is the notion that the only serious or legitimate explanation can be a scientific one told from an external, third-person, value-free point of view.

Let me explain what I mean. Suppose John gets sick, and I accuse the old woman who lives on the heath of poisoning the well from which John has recently drunk. In doing so I have identified a cause for John's illness, namely, the old woman. But my explanation is freighted with all kinds of moral assumptions that stand outside the scientific notion of a cause. Far from being an objective third-person view of the world, mine is bound up with a narrative of judgment and condemnation. What causes John's illness is not any impersonal or natural mechanism, but the very devil himself working through one of his agents, in this case the old woman who lives on the heath.

Contrast this with a scientific explanation of John's illness. Suppose we test the water and determine that it contains harmful bacteria that likely caused John's illness. We could further test our hypothesis by taking a sample from John's excrement to see if the same bacteria has indeed passed through his gut. There is in theory no end to this process of observation, hypothesis formation, and empirical testing. Science can progress to ever deeper levels of explanation to identify the biological, chemical, and physical causes that govern the relationship between bacteria and the human digestive system. The point is that these causes exist independently of my view of the situation as a punishment inflicted on John. More precisely, my view does not so much identify a cause as construct a narrative of praise or blame. Furthermore, my narrative depends on concepts that do not inhere in the relation between bacteria and John's gut. On the contrary, they exist only within the cultural and symbolic order of language users like myself.

This is not to say that these moral concepts are therefore illusory or meaningless. To the contrary, the human world depends upon narratives of praise and blame, for they are the basis of moral judgment. They are the nuts and bolts of our 'symbolic niche,' and we would do well to resist the temptation to deprive ourselves of them altogether by attempting to describe our world exclusively from the third-person point of view. Cultural anthropology has taught us to be respectful of the often bizarre explanations other people give for things that we assume can be better explained by science. These explanations may strike us as irrational but they nonetheless possess a logic that we should attempt to understand. The logic of praise or blame is specific to the human conceptual universe. It is no surprise that it is also the main ingredient of stories.

Turner's cognitive account scrupulously ignores this anthropological and historical aspect of stories. What it offers instead is a mechanism for explaining how stories develop out of their component cognitive and neurological parts. First you get the perceptions or image schemas; then you combine the perceptions together to get basic narratives or spatial stories; and finally you combine the narratives together to get parables, which is to say fully fledged *symbolic or narrative meanings*. But nowhere in this account is there an explanation of why this development proceeds the way it does. There is no account of the specifically anthropological function of stories.

No doubt we are meant to assume that the development Turner describes is 'adaptive,' in the general biological sense that telling stories contributes to the survival of the species. But this raises a rather peculiar puzzle. If the literary mind is adaptive in the biological sense, as Turner implies, then how are we to explain the curious fact that it is so obviously lacking in other species? If there is, ontogenetically speaking, a

natural progression from basic perception to symbolic meaning and stories, why is it that only humans have managed to make the leap from the association of individually acquired perceptions to the collective sharing of those perceptions symbolically? How do you get from something we share with all other animals (the ability to represent the external world internally) to something that only we do (share those internal representations publicly and symbolically)?

Note that this is not a purely biological question. It is an anthropological question because, as far as we know, humans are the only animals that make use of words or symbols in addition to lower-level indexical signs. The process of metaphoric projection that Turner regards as crucial to storytelling is a basic constituent of language. As the neuroscientist and evolutionary anthropologist Terrence Deacon (1997) has shown, words may be defined as metaphors that have displaced their more basic perceptual and sensorimotor roots. Words are 'metaphoric' in the sense that their reference cannot be predicted on the basis of individual perception and intention alone.

There is of course no question that human beings are biologically adapted for the acquisition of words. But language is not guaranteed by biology alone. It requires the cultural and social input of other language users in order to become 'fixed' in the brain. This is a most peculiar fact about language and culture, and it deserves some attention in any discussion of the cognitive roots of narrative. Children are born with an enormous genetic plasticity. They are imitation machines that rapidly acquire the characteristics of their particular culture, including their particular language. Without culture, humans would be utterly helpless. A human that could not communicate symbolically could not acquire the basic understanding necessary to navigate the complexity of its world. Consider, for example, the rules and customs of marriage. These rules and customs are not genetically transmitted. They are culturally transmitted and consequently must be relearned by each new member of society. The attraction of anthropology as a discipline relies a great deal on this fact. The great variety of social and cultural practices that can be observed among humans is a consequence of the genetic plasticity of our species.

But the observation that human ontogeny relies on the interaction or feedback between a genetically plastic substrate and a culturally diverse environment leads to a paradox. It is obvious that children acquire language by receiving linguistic feedback from mature language users. But how did the very first language users manage this coevolutionary feat? With no existing language users to imitate, they would have to invent language from scratch. But we have just conceded that children will not acquire language without external feedback from other language users. So how did the first language users manage to do it? They would literally have to lift themselves up by their own bootstraps.

Here we arrive at the problem of human origin. We find ourselves in a rather nebulous and poorly defined area between the natural and human sciences. Let us therefore pause to state the question as precisely as possible. If humanity may be defined as, in Clifford Geertz's terms, «an incomplete, an unfinished animal» (1973, p. 46), in the sense that it requires the nongenetic input of culture in order to complete itself, how do we account for the origin of this nongenetic input? Either it originated from within the genetic system itself, in which case it must be reducible to biology (the materialist position), or else it came from outside it, in which case we need an additional, nonmaterialist explanation for its origin, one that does not reduce it to the strictly biological level of explanation. Let us call this the 'interpretivist' or 'anthropological' position.

One can put this yet more starkly by referring to the structure and function of language. The commonsense view of words is that we learn them by associating them with their real-world objects. The child learns the word *cat* by associating it with a real cat. But in fact this notion of language will not do, for very soon the child will be using phrases like, «He let the cat out of the bag!» in reference to her brother who has spoiled the surprise she was planning for mummy. But there was no cat and no bag, only a beautifully prepared mud-cake that was about to be placed in front of mummy as she sat on the riverbank dangling her toes in the water. So how does the child shift so easily from reference to real cats, to reference to her brother's spoiling her surprise for mummy by using the phrase, «He let the cat out of the bag»?

The philosopher Edmond Wright (2005) has suggested that words are really mini-narratives that have the structure of a joke. Words are used to communicate, but they have a beautiful habit of missing their targets. This is because there are at least two perspectives behind any use of language (minimally, yours and mine). The trick is to begin a conversation by assuming that we both understand one another even if we do not, for without an initial sense that we are indeed attending to the same object, meaning would never even get off the ground. The joke, Wright says, takes advantage of this willingness to cooperate about meaning.

Let me illustrate with a joke:

> Why did the apple turn over?
> Because it saw the egg roll.

As Wright explains, jokes work because of the inherent ambiguity of the joint attentional situation. In the first sentence, there is an ambiguous element that only becomes apparent in the second sentence. On first hearing, «Why did the apple turn over?» we think of an apple and then search for a cause to explained why it turned over. But the answer, «Because it saw the egg roll,» while on the one hand reinforcing the image of the apple rolling on its side, also gives rise to a second interpretation. Instead of an apple we think of a sweet pastry. The clue to this second meaning comes from the word *roll*, which is both a verb (to roll) and a noun (a bun). The second interpretation gives us the idea of an *egg roll*, and this in turn causes us to rethink our original interpretation of the first sentence. The *apple turnover* and the *egg roll* are, respectively, sweet and savory snacks. This may even add a third interpretation to the joke in terms of the stages of the mealtime. The apple turnover is eaten after the egg roll, just as sweet follows savory, or dessert follows meat.

Wright emphasizes that jokes unfold by providing clues to additional layers of meaning to the original object of attention. We move from the apple, to the apple rolling, to the sweet pastry, to sweet in contrast to savory, to the stages of the mealtime, and so on. Jokes work by repeatedly returning to the original ambiguous element, each time under a new and unexpected guise. The recursive structure of the joke, Wright says, lies at the basis of narrative. Indeed, it lies at the basis of language. The joke or pun offers an excellent example of the structure and function of symbolic reference.

The pleasure derived from jokes and puns illustrates the unique human capacity for symbols. As Deacon (1997) explains, what distinguishes human from animal communication is the peculiar reference strategy of symbols. In all nonhuman communication systems, reference is guaranteed by proximity in time and space between sign and object. Deacon calls this reference strategy *indexical* because the sign/object relationship is structured by perceptually contiguous part-to-part or part-to-whole

relationships. More precisely, the relationship between the sign and its object is something that can be perceived and therefore learned by any organism with a nervous system. This is a somewhat different way to describe what Turner had earlier described as the «small spatial stories» (1996, p. 13) that make up our perceptual and sensorimotor representations. I associate a knock at the door with the arrival of a visitor because experience has taught me to expect this sequence of events in which the knock announces the person on my doorstep. Likewise I can construct the «image schema» or perceptual category of a container because I have experienced different kinds of containers many times before, including the container that is my house and which must be entered through doorways.

This is all well and good, but it is the next step of representing these perceptual categories *symbolically* that differentiates language from more basic indexical reference strategies. The knock at the door is a communicative strategy, but it is not yet symbolic. Structurally it is no different from the noise my cat makes when he scratches at the door to indicate he wants to come in. The cat has learned from previous experience that if he scratches at the door eventually someone will open it. Presumably the first time he scratched he was attempting to open the door himself. He knew that the door was blocking his passage and he knew from past experience that the door could be opened. So he attempted to force it by locking his claws around the edge of it, just as he had opened many other types of 'containers' before. But when this failed to produce the desired result, he learned to wait patiently for someone to open the door for him. In fact, now he simply paws at the door very lightly, instead of frantically clawing at it with all his might. He has learned to treat his scratching at the door as an *index* that eventually leads to the opening of the door. Notice that there need be no question that my cat intends to communicate with me. All that is required for him to use the sign is the consistent experience between his scratching and the door opening. I am merely a convenient accessory to the fulfillment of his desire.

According to Deacon, what makes the shift from indexical to symbolic reference so difficult for other animals, including notably our closest living relative the chimpanzee, is the recursive nature of the symbol-to-symbol relationships that must be acquired *before* reference to an external object can be produced. Word reference is created not by associating a word with its real-world object but by associating a word with other words. Cognitively speaking, this is a very peculiar and indeed highly counterintuitive reference strategy, at least from the point of view of the indexical reference system that characterizes the learning and communicative strategies of the rest of the animal kingdom. Why on earth indicate the presence of an object by referring not to the intended physical object but to another symbol? Poets, ironists, jokers, and liars do that sort of thing, but not honest truth-loving individuals. If I want an object, I'd better let you know exactly which object I want.

Unfortunately humans are notoriously indecisive and coquettish about not merely indicating but acting on their desires. When Hamlet stands behind his uncle with his sword raised to deliver the final death blow, he suddenly has second thoughts:

> Now might I do it pat, now 'a is a-praying;
> And now I'll do't. And so 'a goes to heaven,
> And so I am revenged. That would be scanned. (3.3.73-75)

Hamlet's resentment has been apparent from the beginning, but it is only thanks to the ghost's story of Claudius's duplicity that his resentment can be transformed into the more clearly defined goal of revenge. Now, at the end of the third act Hamlet fi-

nally gets the opportunity he has been aiming for. But as he prepares to kill Claudius, he reflects on the ethical consequences of his actions. He 'scans' his intended action by projecting the story of his revenge onto the story of Claudius's forgiveness, and he finds the contradiction intolerable. What if he sends Claudius to heaven? Better to wait until his victim is engaged in a sinful activity, such as the incestuous pleasures of the bed. Then Hamlet will have the satisfaction of knowing that he is sending Claudius to hell.

Playgoers witnessing this scene are also confronted by two conflicting narratives, but their interpretation is rather different from Hamlet's. Consider the iconography of the scene. On the one hand, we see Hamlet, sword raised and poised to strike an unarmed and unsuspecting man. On the other, we see Claudius, kneeling and striving to repent. Faced with this brutal contrast between vengeance and forgiveness, where should our praise or blame fall?

As John Vyvyan (1959) and Harold Goddard (1951) have pointed out, the scene is a fine instance of Shakespearean irony. At first we are inclined, somewhat uncritically, to side with Hamlet and his murderous quest for revenge. We want him to kill Claudius and we are disappointed when he puts up his sword. But on closer inspection of both *Hamlet* in particular and Shakespearean tragedy in general we notice a second, more ironic pattern. We notice that Shakespeare frequently distances himself from his tragic heroes, whom he subjects to sustained ethical criticism. Shakespeare shows us that the tragic hero's judgment is often flawed and that the ethical choices he makes frequently lead not to forgiveness and hope but to death and destruction. Praise and blame are now reversed. Where initially we were inclined to praise Hamlet and blame Claudius, we now regard Hamlet as the one driven by murderous thoughts and Claudius as the one who, though very far from perfect, is here portrayed more sympathetically than Hamlet. To be sure, Claudius's remorse is brief, and he is soon back to his conniving ways. Nonetheless he is shown to have a conscience and to harbor feelings of guilt, and his thoughts of repentance are rather pointedly being contrasted with Hamlet's obsession with murderous revenge. In the later romances Shakespeare will give much greater prominence to these moments of contrition, and there is a compelling argument to be made that the romances can be read as practical solutions to the ethical problems encountered by Shakespeare's tragic protagonists. Indeed, John Vyvyan, in his study of the «Shakespearean ethic,» makes exactly this argument.

Be that as it may, what I am concerned with here is the peculiar human habit of producing reference by an elliptical and highly counterintuitive strategy of deferring more salient empirical reference strategies. As we all know, words are conventional markers of their objects. The relationship between a word and its object is, as the Saussureans like to remind us, arbitrary. Nonetheless, there are many so-called 'natural' signs that we make use of besides arbitrary words. The most obvious example of this is pantomime. If I imitate a cat by crawling on all fours and meowing, everybody knows which animal I am referring to. Or suppose I am visiting a foreign country and do not speak the local language. Hoping to find a restaurant where I can get a meal, I inquire by pantomiming the act of eating. Obviously my interlocutor will have no idea what kind of food I want to eat, but it does not take too much imagination to figure out *that* I want to eat.

Of course, even in these 'natural' cases there is a massive metaphysical background in place that allows for communication to take place. In order to comprehend my gesture as a request to find a restaurant, my interlocutor must grasp that I am a foreigner and that I am hungry. Moreover, there must exist between us a cooperative desire to

communicate. My request for information must be understood and reciprocated. In short, there must be a shared desire to engage in the construction of what cognitive psychologists call 'joint attention.'

On the basis of his experiments with children and chimpanzees, Michael Tomasello (2008) has recently suggested that what differentiates humans from chimpanzees is that humans engage in cooperative attention or collective intentionality. Chimpanzees are very good at interpreting the intentions of others and therefore of anticipating what other chimpanzees will do. But they are not in the habit of engaging in cooperative communicative gestures. They understand a rival's intention to appropriate an object, and they correctly interpret the other as 'intending' the object. But if a human being tries to show a chimpanzee an object for the chimpanzee's benefit, the chimpanzee doesn't seem to understand this. For example, in an 'object choice' experiment, an experimenter hides a food object while a second person (the 'peeker') watches (Tomasello, 2008, pp. 39-40). Once the chimpanzee returns to the room, the second person points to the bucket in which the food has been hidden. The chimpanzees does not grasp that the human is trying to show them where the food is. They understand that the second person 'intends' the bucket, but they never make the second inference that this is where the food is hidden. Instead they randomly select one of the three buckets. When Tomasello modified the experiment so that the second experimenter couldn't actually reach the bucket but motioned toward it as though she wanted to get the bucket, the chimpanzees correctly identified the bucket in which the food was hidden. Tomasello interprets this to mean that though chimpanzees understand competitive intentions, they do not understand that another individual is deliberately trying to share information cooperatively or, in the sociobiological jargon, 'altruistically.' They assume only that if you want it, then it must be good for me too.

No doubt Tomasello's interpretation of this experiment is far from unassailable. What I find most interesting about Tomasello's general research program, however, is his suggestion that human language is based on scenes of joint attention in which a plural 'we' is generated over and above a singular 'I.' Chimpanzees are very good at judging the practical and instrumental intentionality of others, but apparently they do not engage in the construction of joint attentional scenes, in which a collective or shared intentionality is created over and above individual intentionality.

For example, chimpanzees engage in collective activities such as hunting. But chimpanzee hunting is a rather ad hoc affair in which the prey (usually the much smaller red colobus monkey) is chased down by a group of chimpanzees. It is tempting to see this hunting behavior as a carefully orchestrated group activity, and indeed some primatologists have implied this by using vividly anthropomorphic terminology to describe the chimpanzee hunt. Thus there is the 'driver' who chases the prey, the 'blockers' who prevent the prey from escaping, and the 'ambusher' who goes in for the kill (Tomasello, 2008, pp. 173-74). But according to Tomasello, this vocabulary suggests a level of coordination and collective intentionality that he believes to be wholly absent. The explanation introduces assumptions that are in fact quite unnecessary. What really happens is that each chimpanzee behaves competitively in terms of his own intention to capture the prey. There is no construction of a collective 'we' that would enable, for example, each hunter to exchange roles, so that if I am now the 'blocker' I could take the role of 'ambusher' because you will in turn take over my role as 'blocker.' On the contrary, each chimp reacts in terms of the pragmatic situation rather than in terms of a shared and symbolically imagined goal. And the proof

of this is that when the prey is finally captured by one of the chimps, there is no obligation to share the food. The chimp that captured the prey gets to eat it all if only he can hold on to it long enough. Naturally there is a certain amount of harassment from the others, which quickly arrive to 'beg' food from the winner. But as Tomasello points out, the best strategy for the winning chimp is simply to gulp down as much of the food as possible while tolerating a certain amount of stealing. If he were to get distracted from eating his prey by attempting to fight off competitors, which by now include not merely those that participated in the hunt but other late arrivals attracted by the prospect of fresh meat, he would only end up losing the entire prize.

Recall that this comparison with chimpanzees was prompted by our discovery of a central paradox in human evolution. Biologically speaking, humans are remarkably plastic. There is no genetic constraint on what particular type of social or cultural organization is acquired by a human being. An infant taken from one culture may be placed in another and it will have no difficulty acquiring the culture of its new society. (There may be ethical reasons for not doing this, of course, but this does not change the fact that it can be done with relative ease.) We can generalize this observation to say that incomplete human biology is completed by one of the many forms that human culture takes. In the hominid line, genetic plasticity is complemented by diverse forms of *cultural constraint*.

But why do we need cultural constraint? The philosopher and anthropologist Ernest Gellner answers this question by saying that constraint is a necessity of *any* form of social organization, whether human or animal. However, if you do not get constraint from genetic sources, which is the general case in all nonhuman animal societies (from insects to chimpanzees), then you must get it from culture. Since human biology is so open-ended, humans are forced to impose constraint extra-genetically. Cultural constraint substitutes for genetic constraint. In a self-conscious parody of eighteenth-century social-contract theory, Gellner says: «Man is born genetically free, but is everywhere in cultural chains» (1995, p. 48). We have thrown off our genetic chains, but only to impose shiny new cultural ones.

Gellner's general theory of culture relies on an original and highly illuminating interpretation of Durkheim. Durkheim (1912) realized that the old empirical model of culture, which he found in the nineteenth-century anthropology of Max Müller (but which can be traced back to Hume and is still evident in the work of the last great Victorian anthropologist James George Frazer), was fundamentally flawed. Our concepts are not merely generalizations of our sensory experience of the world. One doesn't learn the concept of a tree by associating it with other trees. On the contrary, our concepts are drummed into us by ritual. Ritual repetition of our concepts is not done in the service of a natural protoscientific curiosity with the empirical world. It is done in the service of society, which will not tolerate freethinking individuals who do not share the same concepts – and in particular the same *moral* concepts – as everybody else.

Why will society not tolerate spiritual freethinkers? Because freethinking is just another word for epistemological chaos. The empirical theory of knowledge, Gellner (1989, pp. 56-57) notes, is an absurdity. We do not learn our concepts by generalizing on the basis of individual experience. Our concepts are not formed by associating similar perceptions. If that were true, our concepts would never match up with one another. Anything can be associated with anything. «Free association,» Gellner says, «is really a pleonasm: *association* is inherently free and undisciplined» (1989, p. 57). Indeed it is positively chaotic. What is needed is not the empiricist's notion of the

blank slate, but the very opposite. The random 'noise' of individual perceptions must be constrained and ordered by something that transcends those random perceptions. For Durkheim that something is the sacred. The sacred is a symbolic projection of the moral order imposed by society on the individual through elaborate and rigidly imposed rituals.

Durkheim adds a fundamental ingredient to our anthropology that is notably lacking in Turner's cognitive account of the origin of narrative. This is the problem of religion and, more precisely, of the anthropological specificity of the moral concepts by which we construct the human-symbolic world. The fact that these moral concepts are only available symbolically does not undermine their evolutionary significance. On the contrary, they are the minimal, generative foundation for the many social and cultural forms humans have adopted throughout their history. But why did these forms originate? Where did they come from, and what was their source?

Let us approach this question from a variety of angles. Reconsider the evidence from primatology. Tomasello makes the observation that the competitive nature of chimpanzees makes it very difficult for them to engage in cooperative tasks like food sharing. As we have seen, this is evident in their hunting behavior. But it is also something that has been studied in more carefully controlled laboratory conditions. For example, two chimpanzees were presented with food that could only be obtained when they both pulled simultaneously on two ropes that were attached to a platform on which the food had been placed. An interesting finding of the experiment was that when the food was divided into two piles, one in front of each chimpanzee, there was a «moderate amount of synchronized pulling.» But when the two piles were combined into a single pile in the center of the platform, coordinated pulling «fell apart almost completely» (Tomasello, 2008, p. 184). Tomasello speculates that what made the task so difficult for the chimpanzees was that they had no concept of sharing or reciprocity. If the chimpanzees had intended to share the food, then it would have made no difference whether the food was in a single pile or whether it was in two piles. But food sharing requires the knowledge that we have a jointly shared goal in mind and that we are cooperating in order to achieve that shared goal. In other words, the concept of reciprocity is a logical element of collective intentionality. In order to see that *we* are pulling on the ropes, I must grasp the fact that your input, while being distinct from mine, nevertheless shares the same overall goal as mine. If I pull too hard on my end of the rope, then this will upset your end of the platform and our shared goal of reaching the food will not be achieved. Chimpanzees apparently do not make this step of reversing roles or adopting the other's perspective, and this is why they find it so hard to cooperate.

Recall that our original question was about the peculiar reference strategy of language. The main difficulty was explaining the shift from one reference strategy (indices) to another (symbols). The problem was that symbolic reference requires a counterintuitive negation or unlearning of previously given indexical reference strategies. Symbols refer by delaying or deferring direct contact with the world.

There are a number of experiments that poignantly demonstrate the difficulty that this kind of reference strategy poses for chimpanzees. In one 'object choice' experiment conducted by Sally Boysen and cited by Deacon (1997, pp. 413-14), chimpanzees were presented with two unequal piles of candy. Unsurprisingly, the chimpanzees always selected the larger pile. The experiment was then complicated by adding an interesting 'social' twist. The pile selected by the first chimpanzee was given to a second chimpanzee. Interestingly, the chimpanzees did not change their behavior. They

continued to select the larger pile. But when the larger pile was given to the second chimp, it was obvious from the first chimp's frustration that this was not the intended result. Despite repeated trials, the chimps could not seem to learn that in order to get the larger pile they had to select the smaller one. Why was this seemingly simple task so difficult for the chimps?

Deacon suggests that the extreme salience of the immediate stimulus (the large pile of candy) makes it difficult for the chimpanzees to override the obvious motor response. Reaching for the smaller pile instead of the larger one is just too counterintuitive for the chimps. As Deacon explains, the task is basically an exercise in undermining habitual and extremely obvious stimulus-response patterns. In order to succeed in the task, the chimpanzees must be able to hold in mind the salience of the immediate stimulus but refrain from responding in the habitual fashion. As Deacon puts it, «the presence of such a salient reward undermines their ability to use the stimulus information against itself» (p. 414). Confronted with a highly desirable object, the chimp cannot negate the salience of the immediate stimulus in order to conceptualize its opposite. It cannot reconcile reaching for the lesser object in order to get the greater one.

Deacon refers to this experiment in order to emphasize the counterintuitive reference strategy of symbols. But I think the experiment is more pertinent than Deacon realizes, for one could in fact define symbols as consciously constructed aesthetic devices for using «stimulus information against itself.» Recall our discussion of jokes. The question «Why did the apple turn over?» seems to invite a causal explanation for the apple's movement. The apple turns because it was pushed by something. But the answer, «Because it saw the egg roll,» unexpectedly transforms the original object (the apple) into something new (a pastry). This is a pretty good example of using stimulus information against itself.

The process of undermining our habitual indexical perceptual and sensorimotor associations is a useful way to think of the cognitive strategy of symbolic reference. We normally think of symbols as functioning like words, in the sense that their relationship to their objects is purely arbitrary and conventional. But in fact it is more accurate to think of symbols as undermining or otherwise modifying previously given indexical reference strategies. For example, when a child plays with a toy car by pushing it along the carpet while simulating the noise of an engine, it is treating the toy as an analogy or simulation of a real car. This symbolic play or pretense is enhanced by adding the appropriate iconic and indexical reference strategies that normally help us identify real cars. The toy bears the same shape as a car, it has wheels and moves like a car, and it makes the same noise. But of course cars do not belong in living rooms and do not drive on carpets, and you cannot pick them up with one hand. The transformation of the object into a symbolic representation requires a highly selective focus on particular elements of the immediate perceptual environment. Using the shape of the car as a kind of stable iconic and indexical reference point, the child moves outward from this to fill in the rest of the picture. The carpet becomes a road, the coffee table a bridge, the sofa a mountain. Eventually the child may decide that it does not even need the stable iconic and indexical reference point. Perhaps next time the car will be a stick or an eraser. Eventually it will be as abstract as the word *car*.

It is tempting to apply this story of the child's symbolic play to the story of the origin and evolution of language. For it seems quite plausible to argue that symbolic reference must have evolved gradually from already existing 'natural' signs. Tomasello (2008, pp. 222-23) himself proposes this kind of story when he argues that words are

really just «dead metaphors» that have had all iconicity and indexicality bleached out of them. Purely arbitrary and conventional words, Tomasello argues, are preceded by iconically and indexically motivated symbols. Thus the first use of symbols involved ostensive pointing (indexicality) and pantomime (iconicity).

I can see why Tomasello wants to make this argument. It seems much more plausible to argue that originally symbols were highly motivated. Once they had been accepted into the lexicon, however, the original iconic and indexical reference strategies became redundant. If I know that you are referring to an antelope when you pantomime an antelope, then it becomes much easier for you to abbreviate the pantomime into a more easily produced representation. Initially the representation required a full-fledged imitation of the antelope just in order for me to understand what you mean. But after a while you can reduce your representation to one salient aspect of the pantomime. Perhaps you simply imitate the shape of the antelope's horns by raising your arms over your head. Eventually, as a communicative tradition is established, even this gesture becomes further conventionalized. Perhaps all we need to do now is simply crook two fingers on the right hand to signify 'antelope.'

This story makes a lot of sense, and I do not doubt that more elementary iconic and indexical reference strategies played an important role in the origin and evolution of language. However, there is a danger in postulating this kind of scenario because it gives the impression that symbols originated from the ground up. The scenario seems to be saying that symbols are natural abstractions from more basic perceptual and sensorimotor associations. I have already criticized Turner for making this assumption in his account of the origin of narrative. In general, Tomasello is much more cognizant of the difficulty of explaining the shift from indices to symbols. His emphasis on 'we' intentionality, for example, shows that he is aware that something important happens to our individual perceptions and intentions when they come into contact with someone else's perceptions and intentions. Joint attention is not simply the sum of two independent intentions which happen to coincide. On the contrary, joint attention requires a shift from the first person singular to the first person plural, from the 'I' to the 'we.' In order to cooperate with you, I must further understand that we are doing something together. Only then can I understand what it is like to be you. The 'we' assumes that our roles can be reversed.

This is in fact a minimal definition of a conversation. A conversation requires both a speaker and a listener. But these roles must be reversible. Conversations in which only one person does the talking offend our sense of reciprocity. The speaker must in turn become a listener, and the listener a speaker. Conversations have fairly strict rules of turn-taking or reciprocity. If we feel that our interlocutor is not playing by these rules, we quickly lose interest and make our excuses. One of the great secrets of psychoanalysis is that it creates a privileged (i.e., sacred) space that sanctions the transgression of this basic rule of turn-taking. In the therapeutic situation, you get to do all the talking while someone else is forced to listen. Of course, you will have to pay good money for the privilege of having such a devoted and attentive listener.

Rather than think of words as evolving naturally from more basic perceptual associations, we should think of them as imposing clearly defined constraints on the individual's empirical perception of the world. This is the lesson we learned from Durkheim. It is only after we have mastered the counterintuitive and labor-intensive shift to symbolic reference that we can begin to reinterpret the world in terms of socially constructed symbols rather than individual experience. This counterintuitive and labor-intensive task is something that religion specializes in. Pragmatically speak-

ing, religion specializes in the careful and meticulous control of behavior in terms of highly counterintuitive ideas that are available only to other symbol users who share the same counterintuitive behaviors and customs. This reinforcement of behavior cannot rely on the random associations of individual experience. There can be no natural genetic or ontogenetic progression by which the individual moves its way from the 'profane' perceptions of subjective experience to the 'sacred' categories of religion. On the contrary, religion imposes social constraints on individual experience from above, in top-down fashion. It does this by incorporating the individual into the group through carefully constructed rituals of initiation and membership. It does not say: «Follow your desires because that is all there is.» It says: «Your desires are incomplete and meaningless until they have been shaped by this particular ritual.»

This is admittedly a rather dramatic way of putting it. But I think the dramatism is key. Durkheim thought that the «collective effervescence» generated by ritual was indispensable to religious thought. Emotions must be at a peak in order for these moments to be remembered and absorbed into the lifeblood of the individual and the community to which the individual belongs. The symbolic patterns of religion thrive on narratives of praise and blame, us and them, gods and devils, heroes and villains. Not for them the humdrum categories of everyday perception and experience.

We need to think of the shift to symbolic reference in these more explicitly dramatic terms. The construction of symbolic objects by the individual cannot rely on sensory experience alone. Even in the case of modern human ontogeny, it is clear that the existing genetic bias for symbolic reference requires in addition to this genetic bias a significant amount of external cultural support to be instantiated in the brain. An interesting discovery of Tomasello's research in this regard is that it is very hard for children under two to undermine preexisting robust and instrumental affordances of objects by treating them purely symbolically or aesthetically. For example, children under two find it very difficult to interpret a cup as a hat, or a pencil as a hammer, for example by putting the cup on their heads, or hammering with the pencil. These counterintuitive symbolic interpretations are difficult for the child because the objects possess obvious instrumental functions that dominate the child's everyday perception of the world. The cup is for drinking, the pencil for drawing. These more basic iconic and indexical affordances tend to override the child's relatively undeveloped capacity for symbolic association and metaphoric processing.

In a particularly poignant experiment, Tomasello (1999, pp. 85-86) demonstrates how hard it is for children under two to interpret nonarbitrary objects in purely symbolic terms. Children aged eighteen to thirty-five months were asked to give the experimenter an object. In the first stage of the experiment, the experimenter simply asked for the object by name. All the children responded appropriately. In the second phase, the experimenter asked for the object by holding up a toy replica of the object (e.g., holding up a toy hammer in order to get the real hammer). Interestingly, the children under twenty-six months had extreme difficulty with this task. They reacted by reaching for the toy held up by the experimenter instead of providing the requested object. Children over twenty-six months, however, had no difficulty interpreting the toy object symbolically as a request for the object represented. Tomasello suggests that the reason the task presented difficulties for the younger children is because they «engaged with the toy object as a sensory-motor object» (1999, p. 86). This engagement prevented them from interpreting the object as a symbol of something else, namely, the real object the experimenter was requesting. This is an interesting finding because it suggests that symbolic iconicity, far from being a natural stepping

stone toward language, is in fact something children grasp only once they have already mastered fully arbitrary words (e.g., «Juice!», «Bird!», «Cookie!»). I interpret this as additional evidence that, phylogenetically speaking, the origin of language represents a radical break from preexisting animal forms of communication. There is no shortcut from perceptually based modes of iconicity and indexicality to arbitrary and conventional symbols. The unbounded human capacity for metaphor, narrative, and other forms of symbolic analogy begins with the 'vertical' separation between the central object and the intersubjectively shared sign.

Let us return for a moment to Deacon's explanation for why Boysen's chimpanzees had such difficulty with the problem of counterfactual causation. Faced with a highly salient stimulus they could not defer their desire for the object in order to conceive of an alternative scenario in which selecting the less rewarding object meant obtaining the more rewarding one. Deacon described the solution to this problem as the ability to use «stimulus information against itself» (1997, p. 414). In effect, the chimpanzees had to decouple the highly salient iconic and indexical links between the perception of the object and its appropriation in order to insert a new, highly counterintuitive link in which the object could be enjoyed only by reaching for a less rewarding stimulus. Because of the salience of the original motivating stimulus, however, this transfer of iconic and indexical reference strategies proved too challenging for the chimps.

I think this problem of using stimulus information against itself provides a clue to explaining the problem of language origin. The problem of competition among individuals living in the same social group or community will be most pronounced in the context of a highly salient appetitive stimulus, namely, food. We can postulate therefore that it is the increasingly problematic nature of individual desire within the social context that provides the conditions for the human adaptation to language. Note that in its most general form this problem is not specific to humans. All societies, whether human or animal, are obliged to develop mechanisms to control individual desire if the community is to be maintained. What appears to be unique in the human case is that the solution to this problem is cultural rather than genetic. The language adaptation is not something that developed genetically in the brain of one individual and then spread by a process of natural selection to that individual's lucky language-using descendants. The most obvious problem with this 'hopeful monster' theory is that there would be no one for the first language-using individual to talk to, so no reason for the mutation to be selected for. Of course, it is possible to argue that once this individual had offspring there would be a ready-made language-using community in place. But this kind of theory rather egregiously ignores the neurological facts of how language is processed in the brain. As Deacon's research shows, language is a highly distributed neurological process that recruits existing brain functions for its own symbolic and cultural purposes. There is no language organ in the brain, so no possibility for a mutation to produce one.

What this means is that we must not look to the brain if we wish to explain why language originated. Nor can we understand the exact nature of the problem by straightforward analogy to any of the other forms of animal communication that predate language. The lack of a biological precedent for symbolic reference is why Deacon calls language an «evolutionary anomaly» (1997, p. 34). More precisely, the difficulty of applying the standard biological model of natural selection to language is that symbolic reference cannot be genetically assimilated. Brain structure and function do not map directly onto symbolic structure and function. Rather, what seems to happen during human ontogeny is that different areas of the brain are recruited

for the symbolic function during the child's social and cultural maturation. The rapid rate of cultural change from one generation to another means that the genetic system cannot keep pace with culture, which consequently remains inassimilable to genetic processes. In the human case, nature has found it most convenient to leave the problem of social constraint to culture rather than biology. This is why we need an anthropological explanation for human universals like language, narrative, and metaphor.

This suggests that it is the individual's relationship to other humans rather than to the natural environment that represents the 'originary' problem for humanity. Symbols were the solution that humans discovered to solve the problem of intraspecific competition over scarce resources. This discovery may be described as a 'miracle' in the sense that there is no question that the first symbol users could know ahead of time that symbols would provide a solution to the problem of how to live together in large social groups. It is only from the perspective of subsequent history that we can look back on this event and congratulate ourselves on the brilliance of our ancestors' discovery of symbolic communication.

So what exactly was the problem that our ancestors had to solve? In order to answer this question, we need to abandon the widespread modern prejudice that the primary and therefore motivating function of language is to refer to objects in the real world.[1] But words are not merely tools by which to refer to the objects we desire (or, as the case may be, do not desire). More fundamentally, they are 'barriers' to the unproblematic fulfillment of desire. A word is a kind of prohibition. It defers contact with reality by substituting itself in place of reality. Words are humanity's consolation prize for not obtaining the real. More precisely, a word is a substitute for the thing because the thing is too dangerous to appropriate outside the mimetic context of symbolic and communal prohibition.

This is the basic lesson of religion. It is concretely illustrated and reinforced by the practice of ritual sacrifice, which in many societies is explicitly connected to the distribution of food. Individual desire must be deferred before the meal can be enjoyed. Consumption takes place within the communal context of the group as a whole (even if this communal context is later internalized by the hermit who lives and fasts by himself). The pleasures of the mealtime are fundamentally social rather than appetitive. More to the point, these pleasures entail a host of social obligations that are accessible only to those who participate in the feast and thereby contribute to the social emotions that the ritual distribution of food is designed to foster. The elaborate social ceremony that surrounds large public feasts is designed to highlight this paradox or contradiction between individual desire and communal prohibition. The reason Macbeth shuns the banquet at which Duncan sits is precisely because he is too ashamed to share the meal with the man he intends to kill. The conflict between desire and prohibition is too much for him to bear in the public context of the communal feast, and that is why he broods resentfully in the shadows of his own castle, visited only by his cruel wife who represents the ambition that is relentlessly feeding his antisocial and insatiable desires.

In her absorbing study of the Chewong of the Malay Peninsula, Signe Howell notes how the tribe prepares for the distribution of the food caught by the hunter:

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[1] This theory of language can be traced to the Enlightenment and to the empirical theory of knowledge of philosophers such as John Locke and David Hume.

All food caught in the forest is brought back and publicly revealed immediately […]. As soon as a carcass is brought back, and before it has been divided up, someone of the hunter's family touches it with his finger and makes a round touching everyone present in the settlement, each time saying *"punén."* […] This is another way of announcing to everyone present that the food will soon be theirs, and to refrain from desiring it yet awhile. (1984, p. 185).

The word *punén*, Howell explains, does not refer directly to the meat but to something much more intangible. *Punén* is a sacred word that refers to the threat posed by conflicting desires among the tribe's members. In the case of the distribution of meat, it acknowledges the tension between individual appetite, on the one hand, and collective prohibition, on the other. Thus the ritual invocation of *punén* is occasioned by critical moments in the ethical life of the tribe, and this is exemplified by the problem of distributing desirable and scarce resources such as meat.

What is of particular interest to us here is the way that the prohibition of desire is being communicated symbolically. Consider the structure of the ritual. The meat is presented publicly where all can see it, but only so that each onlooker can be reminded, one by one, of the association between the meat and its prohibition. From the point of view of the individual, the urge to appropriate the food must be very great. But from the point of view of the tribe, this urge must be constrained if the meat is to be properly shared. This constraint applies to everyone, including the hunter himself, who could have devoured the meat alone in the forest. In order to avoid this state of affairs, the Chewong take all necessary precautions. They place strict taboos on individual desire. This is the point of the ceremony in which someone from the hunter's family touches first the meat and then each individual while simultaneously uttering the word *punén*. The ritual serves as a reminder that despite the salience of the immediate stimulus, the desire generated by this stimulus must be controlled and constrained. Patience will eventually be rewarded by each member receiving a just portion of the food. The utterance of the word *punén* reminds each individual that there is a price to be paid for those who do not play by the rules. The Chewong ritual is a good example of using stimulus information against itself.

In his 'generative' account of the origin of human culture, Eric Gans (1997) has suggested that language originates as a prohibition of a commonly desired object. The reason why humans pay such devoted sacred or aesthetic attention to texts is because symbolic culture is the way that humans defer their desire for immediate gratification. The 'text' (symbolic culture) is the generative site of the human. Gans does not mean this in a theological or metaphysical sense. In Gans's view, the puzzle of why humans refer to objects by negating the salience of indexically acquired stimulus associations is explained by an 'originary analysis' of the human propensity for mimesis, which involves both imitation and symbols. In fact, it is precisely the imitative component of symbolic representation that gives us a clue to understanding how you get from iconic and indexical reference strategies to wholly symbolic reference strategies – that is, to language.

It is easy to see how the propensity for imitation can be a beneficial adaptive strategy – how it can be 'selected for' in straightforward Darwinian terms. Imitating someone else's behavior is a faster way to learn a useful foraging strategy or hunting technique than time-consuming trial and error based on individual experience alone. However, there are costs to imitation, the most significant of which is the rivalry it produces. The more closely I imitate you, the more likely we are to become rivals. This applies especially to competition for scarce resources. But, as Gans points out (1997, p. 16), it is in the nature of imitation to lead us to compete for the same objects.

If I am constantly monitoring your behavior to get an indication of where the best food is, then sooner or later we will be competing for the last piece of food. As we saw in Tomasello's experiments, chimpanzees are very good at predicting the competitive intentions of other chimpanzees. Though they do not appear to point cooperatively, they do understand appropriative gestures as indicating the whereabouts of food.

Gans's contention is that this situation of competing desires eventually reaches a stalemate or situation of «pragmatic paradox» (1997, p. 20). Suppose I am imitating your foraging strategy, which has led you to a particularly abundant source of food, say, a tree loaded with our favorite kind of fruit. This is fine as long as there is enough fruit for both of us. Suppose, however, that it is still early in the season and the fruit is not yet ripe, except for one piece that hangs tantalizing within reach of both of us. Naturally we both want this one piece of fruit. But we cannot *both* have it. How will this situation be resolved?

The answer is obvious. The fruit will go to the toughest competitor. This is the basic principle behind the dominance order. In higher animal societies, the alpha imposes his will on the others. Contests over food or females are resolved by the dominance order, which gives some stability to what is an inherently labile situation. For example, in the situation where we are in competition for the same object, I have a choice. I can go ahead and get into a fight with you, or I can let you take it. But how am I to tell which is the best strategy? This is the point of the dominance order, which provides a framework for guiding my decision. If you are the alpha animal, then I will probably leave the desired object for you. The exception is if I am the beta animal and you are getting a bit long in the tooth. In this case, I may decide that now is a good time to contest your dominance. Conversely, you will also have a decision to make. You can respond to my challenge, in which case we will have the fight; or you may decide that your time is up and the object is not really worth the risk of an injury, in which case you and I will switch places in the hierarchy. The point is that the dominance hierarchy is a way of stabilizing the inherent lability of the imitative situation. Instead of fighting each time we converge on the same object of desire, the dominance hierarchy provides a rough guide as to how to behave in these situations of «mimetic crisis.» This allows imitative rivalry to prosper within certain pre-established limits. These limits may be contested, of course; but they will not be contested *all the time*. An animal social order that is always contesting its dominance hierarchy would not last very long.

What Gans emphasizes in his analysis of the ontology of mimesis is that all imitation, whether human or animal, assumes what he calls the «becoming-obstacle of the model» (1997, p. 16). If you are my model in the hunt for food, then this may well help me locate a food source. But when we converge on the last piece of food, you will no longer be a model but an obstacle. I cannot continue to imitate you without risking conflict. The specifically human solution to this «mimetic crisis» or situation of «pragmatic paradox» is to produce the linguistic sign, which prohibits rather than simply indicates the presence of the desired object.

Why produce a linguistic sign rather than simply fight it out? The return to brute coercion is, of course, always a standing possibility of the situation. We may assume that there were repeated moments in hominid evolution when similar conditions obtained without language's ever originating. What the hypothesis proposes, however, is that on at least one occasion the mimetic conflict over a commonly desired object led to a new method of dealing with this conflict. But once this new method had been discovered, it set the stage for a form of adaptation and evolution quite distinct from the previously available genetic pattern. The nongenetic transmission of imitatively

learned behaviors is the specifically human solution to the problem of competitive desire. And its mainspring is the 'generative' scene in which the first cultural sign was produced. Hence Gans's formulation that human culture originates as «the deferral of violence through representation» (1997, p. 5).

Why does Gans describe the origin of language as the solution of a «pragmatic paradox»? The situation is an instance of a pragmatic, rather than purely logical, paradox because the salience of the central stimulus (the food object) makes it difficult for me to back down and let you take the object for yourself. Instead I continue to imitate your appropriative gesture. But my imitation of you just makes you all the more determined to prevent me from having the object. So we are locked in this stalemate between imitation and conflict. The more I imitate you, the more I desire the object. But the more I imitate you, the more likely we are to come to blows.

The solution to this paradox comes when both of us abort our appropriative gestures and accept them as designating rather than attempting to appropriate the object. Instead of trying to possess the object for myself, I am now showing it to you as something we are both attending to together. But this must apply to you too, otherwise you could just help yourself to the object and there would be no understanding that we are both constructing a collective or joint 'scene of attention.' There would be no reciprocal exchange of the awareness that we are both attending to the same object. It is no good if only one of us interprets the gesture as a symbolic prohibition of the commonly desired object. For language to originate there must be collective participation in the production of the prohibition. No doubt this is why the Chewong are so concerned to publicly display the food while simultaneously announcing its prohibition to each member of the community. There must be a sense in which we are cooperating in the designation of the object as forbidden to each of us. The 'equality' of the joint attentional scene, the sense that we are equally prohibited from appropriating the object, is the basis for the reciprocity of linguistic exchange. It is because I am aware that we are both attending to the same interdicted object that I can understand your point of view as distinct from mine. Your gesture that points toward the object can be imitated by me and vice versa. Imitation is allowed to continue, but this time it is an imitation – a symbolic representation – of the object rather than an imitation of the other. In detaching itself from the appetitive goal of unmediated appropriation, the index-cum-symbol thematizes the conflictive structure of imitation.

What connects Gans's account to our previous discussion is the paradox implied in this transition from index to symbol. The scene only works because of the salience of the central object. The latter is desired but cannot be appropriated. The sign points to the object, but only to deny its accessibility. The sign says, «Here is the object, but you cannot possess it.» Gans describes this paradoxical oscillation between sign and referent as producing an aesthetic effect that is later explicitly formalized in the production of literary narratives in which the violation of the taboo is represented as a tragic spectacle for an audience of spectators. It is only because the symbol forbids unmediated appropriation that we can use the symbol as a vehicle for a purely imaginary satisfaction of desire. The production of the symbol leads the individual to imagine the transgression of the prohibition in a narrative of appropriation. This narrative will eventually be acted upon in the sparagmos – the ritual tearing apart of the central victim/object. But this violent act of appropriation cannot take place independently of an awareness of the preceding moment in which the transgression is imagined. In other words, appropriation is now haunted by the idea of guilt for transgressing the implied reciprocity of the exchange of signs on the periphery.

In *Totem and Taboo* (1913) Freud proposed that the origin of religion was to be found in a fantastic scene of primal murder. Jealous of the father «who keeps all the females for himself» (1950, p. 141) his sons killed him and consumed his flesh in the first totemic meal. «The violent primal father,» Freud says, «had doubtless been the feared and envied model of each one of the company of brothers: and in the act of devouring him they accomplished their identification with him» (p. 142). But after they had consumed the flesh, the brothers began to experience remorse, for though they had feared their father, they had also loved him. This remorse, Freud says, gives rise to the two fundamental taboos of totemism: «They revoked the deed by forbidding the killing of the totem, the substitute for the father; and they renounced its fruits by resigning their claim to the women who had now been set free» (p. 143).

As Gans points out (2008, p. 166), all that is required to turn Freud's tendentious primal scene into a more self-consciously critical 'originary hypothesis' is the sign or word. Independently of the doctrine of the Oedipus complex, the experience of guilt is implied in the linguistic designation of the central victim. The brothers can only experience guilt for the murder because they have previously imagined the transgression of the father's prohibition of the women. And this imaginary transgression cannot take place without the prior origin of the word. In order for the father's prohibition to bring about the origin of religious interdiction (for example, in the incest taboo), it requires more than the animal dominance system first noted by Darwin and alluded to by Freud. The word is universal in its application of the taboo. It can be understood by all who participate in the murder. The animal dominance system, on the other hand, is incapable of enforcing the prohibition other than by physical coercion. The alpha animal lets you know he is the boss by inflicting pain upon you whenever you seek to appropriate something he does not want you to. Disputes over females or food are settled by one-on-one fights between the alpha and his challengers. But unlike the symbolic representations of culture, the animal dominance system cannot constitute itself as a collective scene, with a center and a periphery, in which all partake equally in the designation of the interdicted center through the production of the word or symbol. The moment of guilt occurs after the sparagmos when the object to which the word refers has been destroyed and devoured. But what generates the experience of guilt is the awareness of the disparity between word and deed. The word refers to the undeformed object in its original totality; but once the object has been devoured there is nothing left to figure the meaning of the word except the word itself.

Despite the tendentiousness of Freud's originary scene, it has at least one point in its favor. It grasps the *scenic* nature of human origin. It is easy to tax Freud's explanation with naiveté. How could the brothers experience guilt for their transgression if they did not already possess the concepts of guilt and transgression before they had killed the father? This criticism is certainly valid. But we must not get distracted by the question-begging nature of the theory. All functional theories of origin are question-begging in the sense that they seek to explain something by appealing to its subsequent use or function. In Freud's case the function of the totemic meal is to reenact the repressed desires of the Oedipus complex. If ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny (which, incidentally, it does not), then Freud can deduce the human phylogenetic pattern on the basis of the ontogenetic one. Just as the child must learn to repress its desire to kill the father, so too must his primitive ancestors.

What is less often remarked in criticism of Freud's hypothesis is that it is not yet truly minimal. Nonetheless, one can discern in Freud's originary scene the fundamental components of a more minimal scene of representation. Though Freud himself

never mentions language, he grasps the fact that what constitutes the scene *qua* scene is the centralization of the father as a figure of general sacred interdiction. Before the collective murder, the father dominated his sons, as the alpha animal dominates his subordinates. There is no question here of a communally imposed, symbolic interdiction of desire. But after the murder, the dominance pattern no longer obtains. Brute physical coercion gives way to the purely symbolic coercion of a community that imposes *on itself* the interdiction of individual desire. The father is transformed into a purely symbolic figure, who becomes, as Freud says, more powerful in death than life: «The dead father became stronger than the living one had been […]. What had up to then been prevented by his actual existence was thenceforward prohibited by the sons themselves» (p. 143).

Toward the end of his analysis Freud raises an interesting question. What if the murder never happened? What if the mere thought of killing and devouring the father was sufficient to generate the moral and sacred interdictions of religion? Implicit in this question is a recognition that symbols are irreducible to their empirical or material objects. The communal prohibition exceeds its object, just as the symbolic sign exceeds its real-world referent. As a figure of the scenic center, the father symbolizes the collective interdiction of desire. But precisely because of this collective interdiction the transgression of desire can now be privately represented within the imagination of each individual participant on the periphery of the scene. The experiences of remorse and guilt that Freud originally associated with the aftermath of the murder are now seen to be implied by the symbolic structure of the scene as a «*psychical* reality» (p. 159). The experience of guilt is possible only because the peripheral individual can imagine usurping the center whether or not he does so in reality. Imaginary transgression is a corollary of the sacred interdiction of the central object of desire.

In the final pages of his analysis, Freud suggests that Greek tragedy illustrates the paradoxical experience of originary guilt. Why must the tragic hero suffer? Because he must bear the weight of the audience's guilt. Why does the audience experience guilt? Because it is the real source of the protagonist's suffering. Freud calls the projection of the audience's guilt onto the protagonist «the product of a refined hypocrisy,» which derives from the «historical scene» of primordial murder by «a process of systematic distortion» (p. 156). The protagonist's suffering is not something that can be explained solely in terms of the play's content. It a formal condition of tragedy itself. The suffering of the tragic figure is a consequence of his occupation of the center, upon which the jealous attentions of the periphery converge. The tragic protagonist is thus an heir of the originary figure of prohibition, the symbolic father of Freudian doctrine. But as we have seen, the father is himself simply a figure for the inaccessibility of the center, which stands opposed to the multiple desires of the periphery as the god stands opposed to his worshipers, or as the symbol stands opposed to its referent.

The prohibition of desire wrought by the originary scene provides a context in which we may understand the anthropological basis of the hero's suffering. The tragic figure pays for his crime of occupying a center which he did not create but which was created for him by an author who is himself exploiting the mimetic paradoxes of symbolic representation. Our identification with and alienation from the central figure reproduces the originary mimetic paradox of the scene of representation. In Greek tragedy the peripheral spectator identifies with the protagonist, but this identification is possible only because we know that the hero will suffer for his occupation of the center. In the final moments of the tragedy the protagonist is punished when

he is shown to be a criminal guilty of transgressing the social order's most sacred taboos. Purged of his 'monstrous' desire for centrality, the audience member goes home consoled that he is not himself a tragic occupant of the center.

<p style="text-align:center">⋆</p>

So why do we tell stories? I began this essay by citing Charles Tilly's claim that stories are inseparable from issues of praise or blame. We tell stories because we wish to justify our own actions or condemn the actions of others; more rarely, we condemn our own actions while praising those of others. Our everyday stories are much less exalted than the masterpieces of a Sophocles or a Shakespeare, but they share the same concern for praise or blame.

As a historian, Tilly is not especially concerned with literary or sacred narratives. His concern is rather with the profane context of the everyday. But concepts of praise and blame are themselves traceable to originary paradox. Desire for the center is followed by resentment at its inaccessibility. But this inaccessibility is not coerced by brute force but generated by the originary structure of symbolic representation. Unlike the index, which requires no collective scene for reference to be communicated, the symbol depends upon the construction of such a scene. Language assumes a scene in which attention to a central object is mediated by the attention of the other. In its originary interdictive function, the word is implicitly also a narrative of praise and blame: praise for recognizing the prohibition, and blame for transgressing it.

It therefore should not surprise us that we cannot survive without producing narratives of praise and blame. Tilly expresses occasional gentle regret that the technical explanations of scientists and experts are so easily ignored by the public, which prefers narratives in which praise and blame are more clearly and more dramatically demarcated. But in large public debates one rarely expects nuance or subtlety. The closer a debate moves to a real crisis, the more clearly it falls into a pattern of condemnation and justification. This is the very pattern of tragedy, where identification (praise) is routinely followed by blame (resentment). We begin by admiring the protagonist: the attention we lavish on him is presented as the legitimate reward for his occupation of the center. But by the end of the play, praise has turned to blame: we no longer regard him as a hero but see him as a fallen figure who has brought unnecessary violence on himself and his community.

I have suggested that stories of praise and blame share a universal anthropological pattern, which can be traced to the origin of symbolic representation. Our relentless interest in jokes, irony, metaphor, tragedy, and narrative are not merely the ornamental accretions of a generally conceived primate intelligence. They are the defining mark of our species. Biologically speaking, symbolic reference is a highly unusual cognitive strategy, the origin of which cannot be explained by simply extrapolating on the basis of older indexical reference strategies. It is therefore a mistake to attempt to explain symbolic representation by referring solely to the biological and genetic causes that led to changes in the hominid brain. On the contrary, these genetic and neurological changes are a consequence of changes that took place 'outside' the brain. Practically speaking, what this means for students in the humanities is that we still have much to contribute when it comes to the speculative question of human origin. The critical interpretation of literary and cultural texts that is the bread and butter of work in the humanities is the necessary prerequisite to an originary analysis of human culture.

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