

Re-Visioning our evolution: The missing psychospiritual aspect S. David Stoney

Introduction

To “re-vision,” to see again with new eyes, seems like a worthwhile goal. Nevertheless the phrase itself parrots the visuocentric bias of modern psychology and cognitive science. Is vision the best sensory modality on which to base our approach to the world? Or is vision the sensory modality that best fits with the separatist mode of consciousness that dominates — and which is required to get along — here at this extraordinary time (Stoney, 2021)? Perhaps better then to “Re-Vision” would be to “Re-Feel.” As we proceed with our considerations, we should recall Professor McGilchrist’s warnings about the sway of left hemispheric neural processing:

The awareness coming from the right hemisphere can embrace that of the left, but not the other way around... since the left hemisphere not only ‘takes in’ less, but understands what it takes in less well, our almost exclusive reliance on it, the servant, in contemporary western culture, is a problem of some considerable proportions. Indeed, like civilizations before us, which drifted further and further to the outlook of the left hemisphere, we would appear to be engaged in committing suicide, intellectual and moral — if not indeed literal; excluding whole aspects of reality resulting in a version of the world the ‘computes’ as far as the left hemisphere is concerned, but is grossly impoverished and lacking in meaning. One that is, in sum, more fit for a computer than a human being (McGilchrist, 2021, p. 1314-5).

Before engaging with the substance of this essay, I have several “asks” of you, my readers:

- 1) Acknowledge where we are today in terms of our consciousnesses. I believe — and Professor McGilchrist has made abundantly clear in his books about hemispheric dominance in the modern world — that we spend much of our time every day in a separatist mode of embodied consciousness dominated by left hemispheric neural processing. In truth we’ve created a world that not just supports such a consciousness but, in fact, demands it much of the time.
- 2) Exercise both your intuition and imagination, as well as trying to be open to insight, as you engage with this story. That will help in its understanding. These capabilities are strongest when the separatist mode of consciousness is relaxed and more right hemispheric neural processing is engaged (McGilchrist, 2021, pp. 254-7; 673-776).
- 3) Perhaps most important is to keep in mind the adage, “Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.” As you will see, this applies in particular to the periods in our evolution know as the Lower and Middle Paleolithic which ran between about 2 million and 200,000 years ago (e.g., Oppenheimer, 2004, Stringer, 2012).

The Missing Psychospiritual Component

Systems, scientific and philosophic, come and go. Each method of limited understanding is at length exhausted. In its prime each system is triumphant success: in its decay it is an obstructive nuisance. The transitions to new fruitfulness of understanding are achieved by recurrence to the utmost depths of intuition for the refreshment of imagination (Whitehead, 1933, p.159).

The Neo-Darwinian perspective on the evolution of our species is, I maintain, seriously incomplete. It is no accident that the component that has been left out is precisely one whose

omission generally supports the idea of human exceptionalism, continuous progress, and the superiority of the *status quo*. It is the component that our contemporary mindset, dominated as it is by left hemispheric neural processing, is *least* comfortable with and *least* able to understand. I call the missing component the *psychospiritual aspect* of human evolution. By 'psychospiritual' I refer, on the one hand, to our consciousness and knowing of self in the world, and, on the other hand, to our relation to that unknowable mystery of being and creativity that can be thought of as residing at the heart of the cosmos, that wholeness, that "ground of being" (McGilchrist, 2021) from which we have come and to which we shall return (Neumann, 1954).

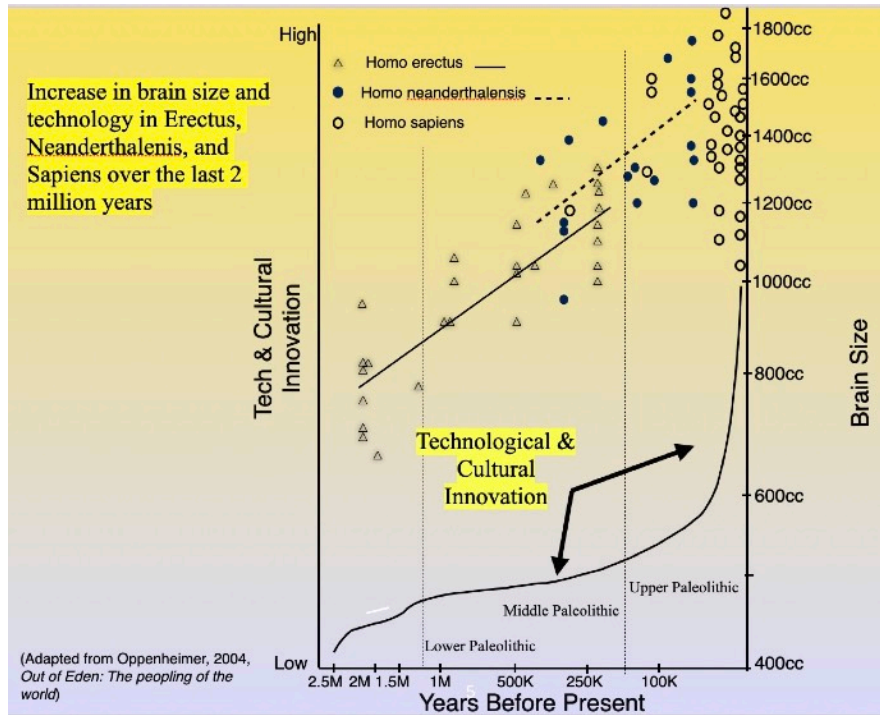
All too often the psychospiritual aspect is ignored or considered too difficult to know to be addressed, but surely this is a point of view biased by left hemisphere neural processing. In fact, anthropologists (Levy-Bruhl, 1926; Winborn, 2014) and others (Barfield, 1988; Cotterell, 2014; Woodcock, 1997) recognize that there was a time in our evolution when what today we take as opposites shared a noncontradictory mutuality in the consciousnesses of our hominid ancestors. This participatory mode of consciousness was not troubled by paradox and resembles a way of knowing where the individual is at once him or herself and at the same time an integral part of a living world and cosmos. McGilchrist (2021, p. 706) cites Nietzsche's notion of bodily knowing as exemplifying this ancient mode of consciousness, "The body is a great sage, a *Many* with *One* purpose, a war *and* a peace, a flock *and* a shepherd... There is more sense in thy body than in thy best wisdom." McGilchrist suggests that this bodily knowing is free of the narrow, separatist kind of knowing provided for by left hemispheric neural processing in the world today. He goes on to say that bodily knowing understands "a purpose that includes the free and the determined together, conflict and harmony together, multiplicity and unity as one; that opposites coincide." These comments by Nietzsche and McGilchrist show quite starkly the problem we have in trying to describe the features of our primal, radically interconnected consciousness, a consciousness that I maintain blossomed when a certain critical brain size and organization were reached over a million years ago in our hominid ancestors.

This was the time of *Homo erectus* and his cousins in the Lower and Middle Paleolithic, a period that stretched from about 2.5 million years-ago until about 200,000 years-ago. At 2 million years-ago *erectus* brain volume had increased to about 800 cc, about twice as large as the brain volume of chimpanzees, and by 200,000 years-ago reached 1,000 to 1,200 cc, almost the volume of modern *sapien* brains, i.e., 1,100 to 1,600 cc (Mithen, 1996; Oppenheimer, 2004). The figure below illustrates brain volume over time for *Homo erectus*, *Homo neanderthalensis*, and *Homo sapiens*. It also shows a curve representing technological and cultural advance.

Brain growth in Homo was, at least in part, a response to the need to survive in the face of an unrelenting climate that cycled between long, dry, cold glacial phases and short, wet, warm interglacial phases (Potts, 1996; Stanley, 1996). *Erectus* brains grew in conjunction with their adaptation to this harsh environmental whipsaw, while brains of other primates and other mammals did not because *erectus* had domesticated fire and used it for cooking their food. Cooked food was partially digested food, better able than raw food to supply the calories for their growing, energy-hungry brains (Wrangham, 2009). *Erectus* was a remarkable species. Not only did she persist for over a million years, up until well after the appearance of *sapiens* around 200,000 years-ago, but by 1 million years ago had spread to the levant, Europe, and to the far East (Sale, 2006). Of course, as *erectus* brains were growing in size, they were also undergoing neuronal reorganization, particularly of the cerebral cortex and its fiber connections.

Homo erectus and Participation Mystique

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the reign of *erectus* was neither its persistence or



the success of *erectus* in spreading around the globe. On the contrary, the fact that this successful species did not develop much in the way of stone technology or cultural advance, is a mystery that cries out for consideration. Their principle stone tools were handaxes (see below) and the chips produced in making them. Why was the handaxe the peak of *erectus* stone technology for over a million years? Their longevity as a species, their spread around the globe, and the planning, skill, and artistry in their handaxes argue against concluding that they were incapable of anything more complicated. What, then, can account for the long period of technological and cultural stasis that characterizes their reign?



Great Handaxe from Furze Platt, Berkshire, Natural History Museum, London, UK

I believe the answer becomes obvious if we explicitly reject the notion that they were too primitive, too ignorant, too much the savage to have existed any other way. No, the reason they didn't change, to put it in the simplest terms, was because *they did not want to*; they did not feel a need to change. The explanation for this lies in the participatory mode of consciousness that they had developed as their brains reached a critical size and type of organization. What the French anthropologist Lucian Levy-Bruhl (1926) called *participation mystique* dominated this mode of consciousness. This mode of consciousness was an ancestral, preliterate type of consciousness that entailed an almost selfless, direct interconnection between the individual and his/her lifeworld (Cottrell, 2017). Here are quotes from what various authors have said about *participation mystique*.

Carl Jung in *Psychological Types* (1921, para. 781) defined it as follows:

It denotes a peculiar kind of psychological connection with objects, and consists in the fact that the subject cannot clearly distinguish himself from the object but is bound to it by a direct relationship which amounts to a partial identity.

David Abram (1997, p. 57) in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, described the very act of perception itself as being "...inherently participatory, ...always involving, at its most intimate level, the experience of an active interplay, or coupling, between the perceiving body and that which it perceives." He also points out that language itself originally grew out of and reflected *participation mystique*. He said (pp. 81, 82),

...at the most primordial level of sensuous, bodily experience, we find ourselves in an expressive gesturing landscape, in a world that *speaks*...Indeed, if human language arises from the perceptual interplay between the body and the world, then this language "belongs" to the animate landscape as much as it "belongs" to ourselves.

Anne Baring (2013, p. 64) called that ancient form of consciousness "original participation" and spoke of it like this in *The Dream of the Cosmos*:

The Great Mother is the earliest name we gave to an immeasurable cosmic entity that was imagined in a way that may be almost incomprehensible to us now. Life at that time was lived in the dimension of the Mother, in participation and accord with the cosmic rhythms of her being, and this kept people in touch with their instincts and was the foundation of their fragile trust in life.

Erich Neumann (1954) considered selfhood itself, i.e., the appearance of self-awareness, to be a loss of *participation mystique*. In *The Origins and History of Consciousness* he said (p. 266):

The original situation which is represented mythologically as the uroboros corresponds to the psychological stage in man's prehistory when the individual and the group, ego and unconscious, man and the world, were so bound up with one another that the law of *participation mystique*, of unconscious identity, prevailed between them.

Joseph Campbell (1988, p. 47) in *The Way Of The Animal Powers*, noted how, over the ages, *participation mystique* linked humans to the earth and how it manifests today between mother and infant:

As the infant is linked to its mother in a profound *participation mystique*, even to such a degree that it will absorb, and thus inherit, her tensions and anxieties, so has mankind been linked to the moods and weathers of its mother Earth.

Owen Barfield's (1988, pp. 182-183) description of the effect of losing *participation mystique*, which he called "original participation," is telling:

The elimination of original participation involves a contraction of human consciousness from periphery to center - a contraction from the cosmos of wisdom to something like a purely brain activity - but by the same token it involves an awakening. For we awake, out of universal - into self-consciousness.

I think that an individual with the ancient participatory consciousness provided by *participation mystique* would experience the following

1. Find themselves to be intimately connected with others, the earth, and the cosmos
2. Know a direct interaction with spiritual reality
3. Know that they were living in what we would call a "sacred" reality
4. Find everything to be imbued with spirit: themselves, others, rocks, mountains, rivers, trees, and the creative heart of the universe
5. Know they were participating in the mystery of being (Source)
6. Know a sense of awe
7. Have little concept of a separate self or of a Nature 'out there'
8. Live a grounded, naturally meaningful life in a living world
9. Being extraordinarily content, feeling little or no desire or need to change

Yes, the earliest humans lived in a living world, one in which they were totally interdependent with the rest of its beings, animate and inanimate. Their deep appreciation of being interdependent with a living world was central to their lives and to their beliefs, i.e., to their worldviews, and to their experience of meaning in their lives (Shepard, 1973). Extraordinary satisfaction and contentment, together with low levels of individualism, led to extraordinary unity and cohesion within each natal group or band. I maintain that the persistence of such feelings accounts for the long period of *Homo erectus*' technological stasis that characterized their million year plus reign around the world.

To ignore this important period is to leave unacknowledged an extremely important part of our species birthing process. It is fair to say that understanding of our contemporary, separatist mode of consciousness, the world, and our place in it will remain unattainable so long as participatory consciousness and the psychological and spiritual features that arose during its reign are not appreciated. Although our access to participatory consciousness is considerably diminished in the modern world, it is likely involved in the phenomena of transference and projection. In addition, such a state also exists between the fetus in the womb and its mother, between mother and new born infant, and in falling in love. (Winborn, 2014). Furthermore, the animistic beliefs that *participation mystique* gave rise to are implicated in the later rise of religion (Peoples *et al*, 2016; Watts, 2020). That is another story, but with regard to the emergence of a radically participatory consciousness in our early evolution, it truly can be seen as the "Big Bang" for human spirituality.

Factors leading to the diminishment of the participatory mode of consciousness in the modern world are discussed in a separate essay (Stoney, 2022) entitled "Evolutionary Diminishment of Participatory Consciousness." The possible link between the full-blown participatory consciousness of our distant ancestors and the Whiteheadian notion of prehensions, the sharing of feelings in a somewhat conscious and interconnected world and universe, is briefly explored in that essay.

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