
Original Participation and the Recovery of Primal Mind

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The purpose of this essay is to go beyond recorded history into an exploration of mind in deep time—of human consciousness spanning a million years or more. It is a journey, both anterior and interior, into the primal mind of our early human ancestors. Early people displayed at times a remarkably “modern” aesthetic sense, and I think they also possessed—as the evidence suggests—a sacramental consciousness. Remembering and even re-awakening the primal mind can bring healing to our painfully dislocated modern consciousness. Doing so reminds us of who we truly are, and this may offer a safe haven for humankind in the throes of profound transformation and chaotic transition into the unknown. A process of deep healing takes place whereby the modern malaise of alienation and the “metaphysical absence” are replaced by the well-being of primal presence.

THE HAND THAT MAKES

In the beginning is the cutting tool.

—Gregory Currie¹

The study of human origins has revealed intimations of beauty and a strong drive toward perfection of form amongst our Acheulean ancestors: their elongated, symmetrical “tear-drop” handaxes make a compelling claim for an aesthetic sensibility over a million years ago and for “a very deep history of aesthetic production.”²

The Acheulean is a widespread archaeological industry found in assemblages throughout Africa and Eurasia and spanning huge swaths of time—up to 1.5 million years—only ending around two hundred thousand years ago when handaxes and cleavers were replaced by the hafted, pointed tools of projectile technology.

The early Acheulean—from around 1.7 to 0.8 million years ago—is the time during which the morphology of the human hand evolved into its present form. The main change was in the shape of the trapezoid bone in the wrist from pyramid-shape to boot-shape, which resulted in the expansion of the palmar aspect of the hand. This enabled these early humans to combine a power grip with a precision grip more effectively, making what was an already capable hand even better at making and using tools. The grip could now carry out more and more refined, two-handed manipulation of materials.

Whilst the human hand was evolving during this time into a shape that is essentially the same as ours today, the human brain was also growing—from its 600 cm³ (*Homo habilis*) around 2 million years ago, to its maximum 1500 cm³ in our Neanderthal cousins (*Homo sapiens neanderthalensis*) around three hundred thousand years ago, near the end of the Acheulean. The brain size of *Homo sapiens* has shrunk during the last twenty-eight thousand years and is around 1350 cm³ today.

A VITAL SENSE OF FORM

With their improving manipulative skills and enhanced cognitive powers, by around 1.4 million years ago the early Acheuleans were exhibiting an aesthetic awareness, which is rendered in the characteristic simplicity, symmetry, and sometimes beauty of the Acheulean handaxe. The so-called great handaxe tradition is the “longest-lasting entity in the human cultural record.”³ While the Acheulean is defined largely by the presence of handaxes, cleavers, and other large cutting tools, many of these artefacts nonetheless present a paradox. As Pope and colleagues observe:

The tool itself often displays such attention to detail in terms of symmetry and form that they appear over-engineered for the range of simple functional tasks envisaged. The finesse, exactitude and apparent aesthetic sense worked into what are essentially meat knives continues to demand an adequate explanation, an explanation which might throw some light onto the fundamental relationship between form and function in the material culture of early humans.⁴



The author/artist engraving a copper plate with the right hand using a precision grip on the engraving tool (burin) to drive it through the copper plate, and the left hand using a power grip to hold and resist the action of the burin. Used with permission from the artist.

These Acheulean makers had the intelligence, the aesthetic sensibility, and the hand-eye coordination to engage with materials in a manner that demonstrates consummate care, attentiveness, and skill. There is even the strong indication that the shape of these tear-drop “tools” in many cases conform to the aesthetic proportion of the “Golden Section,” a proportion expressed as the ratio 0.61: 1, used in classical architecture and also underlying the European A series of paper sizes, allowing an A4 sheet to be folded into two A5s, at the same time retaining the same proportion. Another proportion that longer

“tools” have been found to exhibit is the shorter ratio, 0.50:1 (also described as 1:2) where “the seamless gradient of proportion from 0.61 in shorter to 0.50 in longer bifaces may indeed be one of the most remarkable things about the Acheulean.”⁵

Clearly our Acheulean ancestors possessed a very acute, “modern” sense of proportion over a million years ago that manifests over eons in the form of their tear-drop biface. Yet the paradox of the Acheulean over-engineering and the acute sense of proportion displayed by these makers continues to puzzle archaeologists. One explanation offered by a leading archaeologist is that “the bifaces reflect a primitiveness or ‘otherness’ in the behavior of *Homo erectus*.”⁶

However this simply re-describes the problem. It not only side-steps the issue but also contradicts the earlier implied continuity and kinship between “us” and “them” in our shared acute sense of proportion. In the exploration of deep time, there is the continual danger of setting ourselves apart from the “object” of our study. The suggestion of a primitiveness or otherness in the behavior of *Homo erectus* drives a wedge between them and contemporary human beings when it is precisely the nature of that relationship that ought to be addressed. This is the impasse that arises when scientists try but fail to impose the dogma of their “single vision”—the “objectivity” and the materialistic assumptions of their utilitarian, uniformitarian, technological imperative—upon people from our past, who may simply have possessed a predominantly sacramental and open consciousness. As archaeologist Adam Smith points out: “If archaeology is to succeed in articulating the past with the present in meaningful ways, then we must actively resist the construction of rigid boundaries that set the ancient apart from the modern as an ontologically distinct ‘other.’”⁷

A LITURGY IN STONE

Stone is not only inert rock but a dormant intelligence, sluggish in our zone, dreaming and metabolizing a molecule at a time.

—Richard Grossinger⁸

Ceremonial, liturgical, and aesthetic concerns beyond the utilitarian may have been prominent in the Acheulean mind. If the artefacts are understood as having spiritual rather than utilitarian value in a world where such conceptual distinctions did not exist, they take on a different meaning, not so much as tools—useful objects that have been made needlessly ornate—but as emblems or prayers in stone, artefacts of a Pleistocene liturgy. The value of the seeming excessive attention to shaping

the form of the stone derives from an attitude of dedication—to a *devotional* interaction between the living stone and human being as one. Art historian T.J. Clark provides one way of apprehending this when he says, “Form is a way of capturing nature’s repetitiveness and making it human, making it ours—knowable and dependable.” He sees form as “controlled repetition,” as if the materials of the natural world invite us to carry out a variety of repetitive practices upon them; this variation in the sequence of operations had a logic and a “distinct semantic force” for our Pleistocene ancestors, enabling “comprehension and control, giving pleasure by reason of some kind of appropriateness, and so on.”⁹



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

In the context of a world in which all life is intrinsically sacred, the semantic force of these forms could be expressing an Acheulean spirituality; the emergence of the Golden Mean

through the shaping of an Acheulean biface could be the signature of a universal intelligence inherent in the Earth itself expressed through the stone, rather than an idea or intention inside the head of the artisan imposed upon inert matter.

Their repetitive actions and sequences of operations arising from the substances of Earth, with a logic and a meaning of their own, may have constituted the controlled repetition of religious ritual and even have incorporated the meditative chanting of prayer at a time before fully developed human language had emerged. As scholar Theodore Roszak reminds us in his seminal and powerful *Where the Wasteland Ends*:

Prejudice and ethnocentrism aside, what we know for a fact is that, outside our narrow cultural experience, in religious rites both sophisticated and primitive, human beings have been able to achieve a sacramental vision of being, and this may well be the wellspring of human spiritual consciousness.¹⁰

From this wellspring flow religious and philosophical traditions that are characterized by a magical worldview. Roszak calls these traditions the “Old Gnosis”—“the old way of knowing”—that “delighted in finding the sacred in the profane.” In this old way of knowing, through sacramental perception, any portion of nature “can quite suddenly assume the radiance of a magical object.”¹¹

ORIGINAL PARTICIPATION

Suppose the whole of creation began to speak to us in the silent language of a deeply submerged kinship...Suppose...we even felt urged to reply courteously to this address of the environment and to join in open conversation.

—Theodore Roszak¹²

The capacity of material objects to “announce themselves” and also to mediate ritualistically states of mind beyond ordinary everyday consciousness could have been integral to the more mythical Pleistocene mind at home in an animated universe. In fact, it is conceivable that what was normal for the early Pleistocene mind was a more diffuse, holistic awareness beyond what for us today is ordinary everyday consciousness. It may have been a *participation mystique* with the world around them, with “identity” for our early to middle Pleistocene ancestors being a more open sense of self that was intimately embedded and extended within Earth’s “aura” or consciousness and that, for us, has been superseded by the modern mind. The great mythologist Joseph Campbell writes: “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.”¹³

Deep within the layers of the human psyche there exists a more primal mind, a mind open to, and participating in, the world around it. Campbell has written of this early form of cognition, how “there became established between the earliest human communities and their landscapes a profound *participation mystique*.” Wherever people went, they encountered plants, animals, hills, all of which “became their neighbors and instructors, recognized as already there from of old: mysterious presences which in some sacred way were to be known as messengers and friends.”¹⁴

British thinker and scholar Owen Barfield also believed that the kind of world our ancient ancestors saw—and that humans have continued to see until recently—was one in which human consciousness actively participated. He describes this early state of innocence as *original participation*—“a primal unity of mind and nature with no separation between inner and outer worlds.”

At that stage of the evolution of consciousness, the distinction between “self” and “the world” was not as rigid as today.... Accounts of nature spirits; folktales and myths about fairies, nymphs, and sylphs; legends of gods walking the earth, are all rooted in this “participatory consciousness.” This was the kind of world (and consciousness) that poets like Blake, Coleridge, and Goethe believed in and at times felt.¹⁵

For Barfield, in his landmark book, *Saving the Appearances*, the human mind is not an onlooker only, but a participant in the “so-called outside world.” In perceiving the world, “we do not passively observe what is already there, but participate actively in its process,” and “this includes the practice of science.” This would have been true throughout history and pre-history to different degrees, until the recent eclipse of our participatory awareness. He writes:

These books of mine... all... seem to draw attention to the fact that there was awareness of participation between man and nature, down to about the sixteenth or seventeenth century—or let us say, to the Scientific Revolution—since when it has been more and more rapidly disappearing; that is to say, the *awareness* of it has been disappearing, not the participation itself, which is built in to the structure of the universe.¹⁶

For Barfield this eclipse of our fundamental nature is not the same as its destruction. The primal mind has simply been squeezed out or repressed through modernity’s overemphasis upon rationality.

The “Scientific Revolution” did not, because it could not, destroy participation; it did evidence a change in the center of gravity, or in the predominant *direction*, of participation between man and nature. And since then it has been increasingly the case that, although participation is still a fact, we are no longer aware of it; not only so, but this nonawareness culminated in a positive, but quite erroneous, *denial of the very fact of participation itself*.¹⁷

Most researchers on hominid evolution, looking back into deep time, ask what function or use an object would have served archaic communities in their struggle to survive. However, as previously noted, this utilitarian assumption is questionable. An alternative assumption is that the deep past may not have been like the present, dominated by the overtly utilitarian values that have always existed but have become dominant in modern Western civilization. I suggest that early humans possessed a sense of the sacred; that they were soulful people with hearts and minds who loved—and also presumably feared—the Earth on which their lives depended, and within which their lives were deeply embedded. These are essential attributes and qualities *that make us human* yet remain beyond the grasp of science where the question of “soul” and “the sacred” was driven out of the scientific arena by the very denial of participation that Barfield and others describe.

As Gary Lachman points out from his interview with Barfield, “The fact that we are unaware of our ‘participation’ in the world accounts for our alienation from nature, as well as our mastery of it.”¹⁸ And this alienation projects an alienated vision onto our deep past:

It is on that denial of participation that the whole methodology of natural science is based. That is why the denial of participation has become implicit in the whole elaborate structure of hypotheses which constitutes the current world-picture, including of course, our mental image of our own past. The denial was not only positive but also very sweeping, inasmuch as it affirmed, not only that there is no participation now, but also that there never was, or could never have been any such thing.¹⁹

The subtitle of Barfield’s *Saving the Appearances* is *A Study in Idolatry*. The denial of participation is an illusion; but for Barfield “the fact remains that on that illusion, or idolatry, the

whole form and pressure of our age and its culture—the textbooks available to our students, the way we educate our children... have become inveterately and fixedly based.”²⁰ The consequences of questioning this illusion are not to be taken lightly, for it is “subversive in the most literal sense, and for that reason it has become more than an illusion, it has become a taboo.”²¹

THE RE-ENCHANTMENT OF CONSCIOUSNESS

*We are called upon... to change the myths
that are leading us toward extinction.*

—Stanley Krippner²²

In his analysis of the modern Western mind, cultural historian Richard Tarnas also points to this denial of participation:

If we were to isolate the particular characteristic of the modern world view that distinguishes it from virtually all premodern views, what we might call primal world views, I believe we would have to say that the fundamental distinction is this: The modern mind experiences the world in such a way as to draw a radical boundary between the human self as subject and the world as object. The subject-object divide, the sense of radical distinction between self and world, which we could call Cartesian for shorthand, is fundamental to the modern mind. [By contrast, in the primal world view] meaning and purpose are seen as permeating the entire world within which the self is embedded. The primal human walks through a world that is experienced as completely continuous between inner and outer.²³

In many ways, modernity was very much about banishing the deities of past civilizations in order to emancipate the modern mind from irrational superstition. Spiritual experience was denigrated as mystical and repressed in mainstream Western society. However, as psychiatrist Carl Jung once pointed out, “the gods have become diseases; Zeus no longer rules Olympus but rather the solar plexus.”²⁴

Similarly, psychologist James Hillman sees an imaginative awareness of “the great God Pan” in our culture as vital to the future health of Earth’s planetary ecology: “Is not a basic cause of contemporary environmental devastation ‘out there’ a continuation of Western history’s determination to keep control ‘in here’ over the most potent and enduring of the ancients Gods, to ensure that the Great God Pan stays dead?”²⁵ The re-enchantment of consciousness evokes a cosmos of self-presenting, expressive forms that speak to us from a “world ensouled,” where we imbibe and re-dignify the soul and spirit of our early ancestors across time and place, whose communion

with us asserts the fundamental continuity of our primal consciousness.

The traditional sense of the modern subjective mind, “in here” and the world as external, objective and “out there” is dissolved; the whole world comes alive, animated by natural forces that at the same time are imbued with the mythic. Hillman argues that this re-mythologizing of consciousness is not “a regressive plunge into the premodern world.”²⁶ Rather, it is the recognition of the “fundamental continuity of psyche and cosmos” that overcomes the basic split in the modern mind between “in here” and “out there,” and also “then” and “now.”²⁷

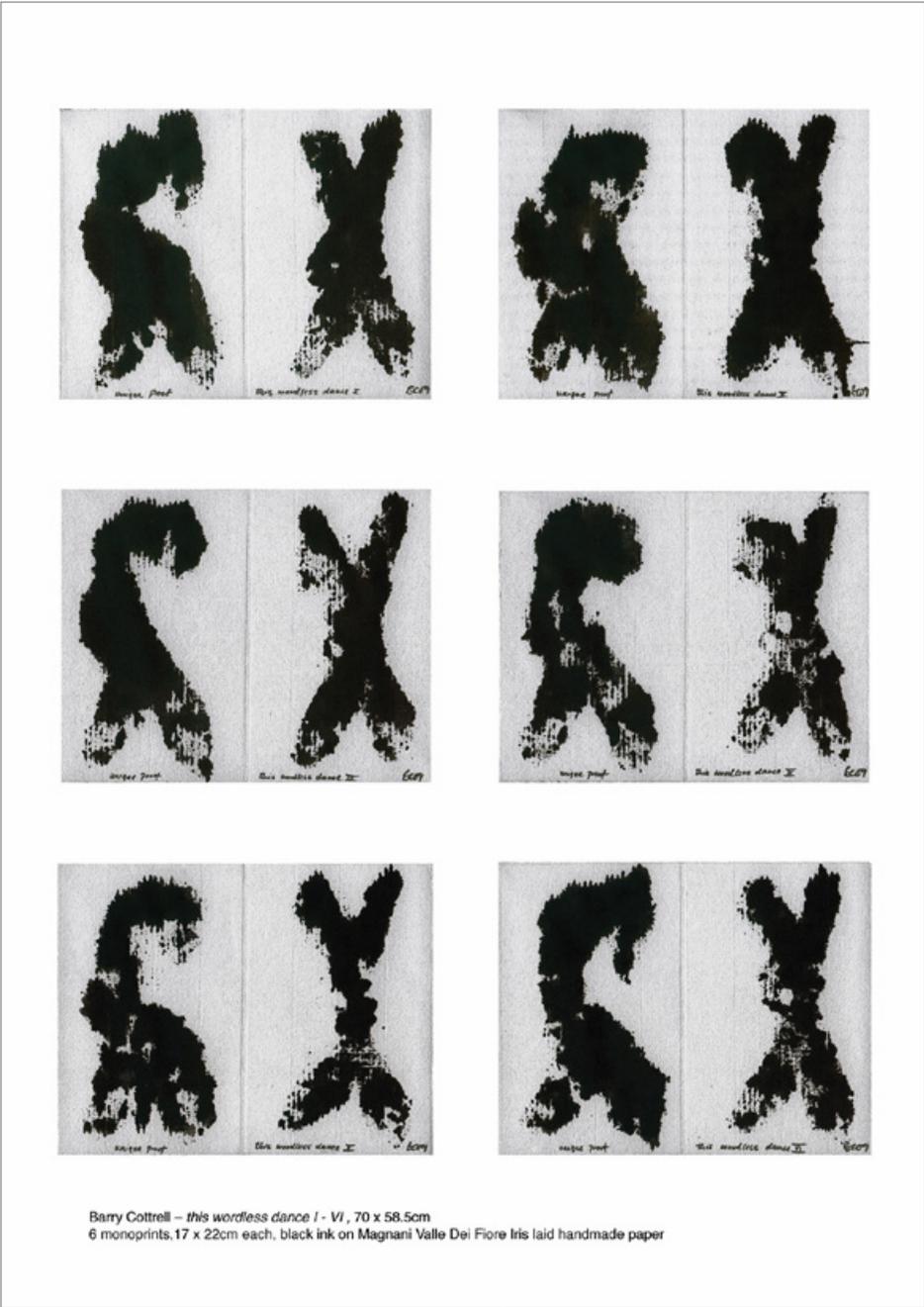
Remembering our participation in the natural world entails the re-mythologizing of our culture and a special, “faithful attention” to the transformative potential of the inner life, our own direct line to the stirrings of Earth’s organic imagination. As Hillman puts it:

This faithful attention to the imaginal world, this love which transforms mere images into presences, gives them living being, or rather reveals the living being which they do naturally contain, is none other than re-mythologizing. Psychic contents become powers, spirits, gods. One senses their presence as did all earlier people who still had soul.²⁸

Faithful attention to the stirrings of the inner life of the soul may involve solitude and a confrontation with the darker side of the psyche where all the forgotten, the disused, and the neglected residues are fused into emblems of restoration of the repressed. As Hillman says of the therapeutic value of fear: “any complex that brings on panic is the *via regia* for dismantling paranoid defenses.... It leads out of the city walls and into open country, Pan’s country.”²⁹ It is here that we come face to face with “Nature Alive” in its darkly creative, elemental power.

Panic, especially at night when the citadel darkens and the heroic ego sleeps, is a direct *participation mystique* in nature, a fundamental, even ontological, experience of the world as alive and in dread. Objects become subjects; they move with life while one is oneself paralyzed with fear. When existence is experienced through instinctual levels of fear, aggression, hunger, or sexuality, images take on compelling life of their own.³⁰

Here we are approaching the threshold shunned by the modern mind with its fear of insanity and loss of self. It is the liminal zone inhabited by the shaman, but also explored by artists courageous enough—or driven—to move into this psychic region of fertile creativity. In many ways a deep, primal engagement



this wordless dance I-VI

with materials endorses the wisdom of historian Mircea Eliade, who once said: “It is not enough... to discover and admire the art of the primitives; we have to discover the sources of these arts in ourselves, so that we can become aware of what it is, in a modern existence, that is still ‘mythical’ and that survives in us as part of the human condition.”³¹ When it comes to an exploration of our ancestors in deep time and the production of their artefacts, it is perhaps even more important to “discover the sources of these arts in ourselves,” to open up to the mythic and participatory dimension of mind that still survives in us.

TOWARD WHOLENESS AND HOLINESS

As long as we profess ignorance about our own creature manifestation and do not develop our energetic potentialities, we forget the crux of our astonishing existence.

—Richard Grossinger³²

In this essay I have proposed that the seemingly excessive attention given by our ancient ancestors to the production of beautifully proportioned stone artefacts makes sense if their actions

are understood as sacramental in origin, rather than purely utilitarian, and that they may have originated as a form of elemental prayer—that is, prayer in the widest sense of the word. For example, T.S. Eliot wrote in his poem, “The Dry Salvages,” of “the prayer of the bone on the beach.”³³ By “prayer,” I mean communion between individual and universal consciousness, between the many minds and “The One Mind,”³⁴ using utterances (words, sounds, mantras) or images as the vehicle for the expansion and relocation of consciousness. It is not so much the supplicatory prayer of recent religions, asking an exalted being for something we lack; rather it is a true communion of consciousness with the cosmos, with “the root of the universe,”³⁵ and with other non-human intelligences that orchestrate the miracle of life in the natural world around us.

A human being is by nature a technician of the sacred, hard-wired for beauty, sacrament, and wholeness; the healing of the primal mind is a mode of presence, “present from the beginning.”³⁶ Although briefly forgotten by the modern mind, Earth holds this primal pattern and is now putting forward a very strong voice for that pattern to be recognized anew. Through this recognition we find healing and wholeness. Direct perception of nature’s mythic and spiritual dimension brings about a transformation of awareness. Ecological visionary David Abram invokes this mode of presence:

An eternity we thought was elsewhere now calls out to us from every cleft in every stone, from every cloud and clump of dirt. To lend out ears to the dripping glaciers—to come awake to the voices of silence—is to be turned inside out, discovering to our astonishment that the wholeness and holiness we’d been dreaming our way toward has been holding us all the way along.³⁷

This is the radical transformation of consciousness that the times we now live in call for—nothing less than *metanoia*, a complete change of mind, facilitated by remembrance of original participation as our primary reality.

In this essay, I have explored the human mind in deep time, suggesting that the primal mind is calling for us to re-engage with it in full consciousness, to recover that sense of participation with the world around us that I am convinced was the hallmark of early human life. Our sense of participation has only been briefly eclipsed and is now coming back into consciousness. For David Abram, “Our impulse toward participation, our yearning for engagement with a more-than-human otherness, has never been eradicated... the human craving for relationship with that which exceeds us is as strong as ever.”³⁸

The memory of original participation, stored in the body, remains the basis of our perception throughout our lives, despite pressures to forget. (See *this wordless dance I-VI*, above.) Through our very own “creature manifestation,” our sensuous, animal body is our most immediate and tangible guide to remembering the wholeness and holiness that has been our earthly inheritance since the beginning. For Abram, “Whenever I quiet the persistent chatter of words within my head, I find this silent or wordless dance always already going on—this improvised duet between my animal body and the fluid, breathing landscape that it inhabits.”³⁹

Abram highlights the enormity and familiarity of our deep time experience of being enveloped in Earth’s embrace, pointing out that we all have our indigenous ancestry and that for tens of thousands of years we lived as hunter-gathers with the participatory, animistic frame of mind.

The taboo in the modern Western world against remembering original participation and the primal sanctity that characterised the lives of early humans over vast swaths of time must be lifted if we are to embrace wholeness and holiness. Morris Berman writes: “What the child, the ‘primitive,’ and the madman know, and the average adult fights to keep out of his or her conscious awareness, is that the skin is an artificial boundary; that self and other really do merge in some unspecified way. In the last analysis, we cannot avoid the conviction that everything really is related to everything else.”⁴⁰

Credits:

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Handaxe from Furze Platt, Berkshire (England), three hundred thousand years old. Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike International license.

this wordless dance-I-VI. Permission of Barry Cottrell.

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NOTES

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