

**Mortal Knowledge, the Orinary Event,  
and the Emergence of the Sacred**



(wall carving, Litchfield Cathedral, England)

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## **Mortal Knowledge, the Originary Event, and the Emergence of the Sacred**

### **Introduction: Origins**

The question of origins continues to captivate human thought and sentiment, despite the postmodern insistence that *knowledge of origins* is impossible since it must lie beyond the boundaries of the *origin of knowledge*. Knowledge cannot seek causes that precede its own existence, it is said. Still, theoretical narratives continue to arise accounting for such things as the origin of the universe, of our star and solar system, of Earth, of life on the planet, of the human species, of self-aware human cultures, and so on down into the origins of the local and particular. This should not be surprising; we sense that knowing our origins will tell us who we are.

Postmodern prohibitions certainly have had no effect on the empirical findings in such *objective* fields as paleoanthropology or paleoarcheology. The trouble here is that, though such objective fieldwork provides significant data, it is only in the interpretation of such data that an idea of early human experience can emerge. Interpretation inevitably brings in subjective factors and we necessarily find ourselves creating scenarios and looking inward into the contexts of the human heart to speculate on the prehistoric moment when imagination, conceptual thought, and abstract knowledge became possible. In other words, using the tools of our objective sciences, we create narratives of origin that attempt to exceed their own limitations by blending the objective with the subjective. Generative anthropology embraces such subjectivity and tends not to avail itself of such empirical data. It is instead an outstanding example of what might be seen as a more literary or even intuitional approach.

The originary thinking demanded by generative anthropology is to some degree anathema to the harder sciences that ignore the human experience to seek progress in verifiable knowledge, centrifugally flying from origins even while explaining them away. The point of origin, however, remains the centripetal center of the present for the mythic mind, akin to the inspirations of poetry and the arts for us. However, when the mythic mind becomes the theoretic mind, according to the stages explained by Donald (1991), sacred awareness becomes self-isolated objectivity, much more efficient but entirely without a sense of revelation.

Originary thinking draws the mind inexorably back toward its origin. It is memory as epistrophe<sup>1</sup> (Hillman, 1979; Nixon, 1995). Individual minds originate within specific cultural contexts, but whence such symbolic cultural contexts in the first place? This is the heart of the matter. To fully experience our own conscious existence, both psychic and physical, we must have a context, a sense of the circumstances and powers that birthed it. As GA founder Eric Gans (1993) pointed out: “We can construct no theory of the human that is not grounded on the human necessity that motivates our construction” (p. 1). In other words, thinking *from* or toward our origin is to legitimate our existence as thinking beings, as well as perhaps to guide us into the future.

With this in mind, this particular originary analysis will critically compare some of the foundational tenets of generative anthropology with the objective findings of paleoanthropology and linguistics. Furthermore, an originary proposal of my own will be tendered. It is hoped my suggestions will serve more to augment than oppose those already made by Professor Gans (e.g., 1981, 1990, 1993, 2006).

In the following sections Gans’s hints at the *speciation* of “modern” humanity and the *timeframe* of the originary event will be compared. Next, brief considerations on a minimal definition of *language* will be followed by a look at the *suddenness* and *revelatory* aspects of its (and our) emergence. But the last section will focus on what I see as the true catalyst of the originary event — *mortal knowledge*, and will require a change in tone from the literal-empirical to the literary-theoretical.

My own proposals certainly meet Gans’s minimal requirements: “An originary hypothesis must construct a plausible account of the origin of all that is essentially human — including the sacred, the esthetic, desire, and resentment” (1993, p. 3), a concise list to which I add the sine qua non of *conscious experience*, i.e., experience that has become conscious to itself, loosely known as self-consciousness, a topic Gans (2006) has touched upon. Conscious experience as coetaneous with awakening to the sacred has been more fully explored by me elsewhere (Nixon, 2006<sup>2</sup>).

It should be noted that Gans makes it quite clear that his mentioning of possible timelines or places and even his reconstruction of the originary event are secondary to

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<sup>1</sup> an experiential reversion or return to the source via present likeness or replication

<sup>2</sup> At approximately 62 pages this piece — too large for a journal, too small for a book — is only available online.

his insistence that there *was* an originary event, in one time and one place: “The originary hypothesis per se — that human language, and with it, humanity itself, came into being in an event — has a higher logical status than this or any other particular version of the originary scene” (1993, p. 9). Humanity at some point *conceived* and birthed itself from the womb of nature, though it could never become entirely distinct. With this I profoundly agree, but there are still devils to be found in the details.

### **Our Emergent Species**

To begin this abbreviated quest, we must first identify that for which we seek origins. The origin of the human body has been traced largely through paleo-forensics and evolutionary science. *Homo sapiens*, our *biological* species, is generally thought to have emerged in its “early-modern” form some 100 to 200 kya (thousand years ago) in Africa.<sup>3</sup> We are the only extant hominid species and all humans existing are part of it. There are competing theories for such origins, the most well known being multiregionalism, but they need not concern us here. The question here is focused on a later product of the activities of *H. sapiens*, to wit, complex culture and reflective consciousness — knowledge creating humanity, the being who lives to learn and learns so it may live.<sup>4</sup>

At the point when cultural evolution comes largely to replace biological evolution, we may find our quarry. “Man must be defined by his *mind*” (Gans, 1990, p. 2). What we seek here is the origin of the human mind, that is, the abstract *space* of subjectivity that creates knowledge and divides self from world through the binary structures of symbolic communication. What is learned is knowledge, and knowledge is always and only a symbolic construction (however successful its practical application may be). It is only

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<sup>3</sup> The earliest known bones at this time seem to be those of the subspecies *Homo sapiens idaltu*, named by paleoanthropologist Tim White (White et al., 2003) and dated to approximately 160 kya. Recently, however, McDougall, Brown, and Fleagle (2005) redated fossil skullcaps from Ethiopia originally found by Richard Leakey to 195 kya, though this remains controversial. “Mitochondrial Eve” is in this range, now generally thought to have lived ca. 150 kya (Wikipedia, 2006). A forerunner species, *archaic H. sapiens*, originating as early as 500 kya is now widely identified as *H. heidelbergensis* (Klein, 2004; Tattersall, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Famed anthropologist Richard Leakey (1994): “Humans became human through intense learning not just of survival skills but of customs and social mores, kinship and social laws — that is, culture. ... Culture can be said to be *the* human adaptation” (p. 45).

with self-reflective subjectivity that *conscious learning* (as opposed to unconsciously reactive behavioral modification) begins.

There is little indication in the prehistoric archeological record that this crisis of cultural transformation is identical to the original speciation of *H. sapiens*. Though skulls discovered from this period appear to have inner indentations where speech areas like Broca's and Wernicke's are found in modern brains, and though the pharynx is lengthened and the larynx fallen allowing for the greater breath control necessary for speech, there is simply no certain evidence of any cultural activities that could be unequivocally called symbolically abstract in the first 100,000 years or so of *H. sapiens*. It may well be that the brain had other uses for those areas and that the fallen larynx served other purposes than speech, for example, the breath control required of rhythmic sound-making or even the increasing demands of non-syntactic protolanguage.<sup>5</sup> Later when the *symbolic threshold* (Percy, 1975; Deacon, 1997) is crossed, the first function of these and other biological adaptations or mutations could have been *exapted*<sup>6</sup> to meet the demands of newly discovered formal language. Did the advent of formal language result from a later cerebral mutation, continued gradual evolution of the brain, *or* from cultural invention?

Despite the fact that such an awakening to the symbolic potential of vocalizing would necessarily have had significant accompanying neural activity, it is unlikely that the symbolic crossing was made possible by a genetic mutation (macro or micro), the theory favored by Klein (2004) and others who seem unable to accept that cultural breakthroughs could precede biological change. There is no evidence of such a mutation ca. 50 kya when Klein posits the symbolic revolution; however, at the earlier time of biological speciation physical features appear that were previously unknown. Such fortuitous mutations, according to the evidence, are likely to have happened a great

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<sup>5</sup> Bickerton (1995, 2000) has claimed protolanguage compares with nonsyntactic pidgen; he also sees it as symbolic in the sense of using signs or icons to indicate concrete actualities, what I would call representational. In this sense, symbolic interaction has been shown to be possible even in trained nonhuman species (e.g., Benson, Greaves, O'Donnell, & Taglialatela, 2002). Such indicative protolanguage has certainly worked with mimesis to pass on and preserve the templates for stone tool manufacture & fire preservation; however, language as symbolic narrative or with symbolic self-reference (cf., Cassirer, 1946; Deacon, 1997) is no longer *proto*.

<sup>6</sup> Exaptation: "Features that arose in one context but were later co-opted for use in another" (Tattersall, 1998, p. 108).

many millennia before the breakthrough to formal human language<sup>7</sup> and the recognition of the sacred.

Certainly an improved ability to communicate in “prehistoric pidgin” (protolanguage<sup>8</sup>) would have proved evolutionarily advantageous. It seems quite sensible to speculate that early-modern *H. sapiens* began to expand his repertoire of mimicry and gesture with a greatly improved ability to make a wider range of oral sounds. But whether cerebral capacity increased first or evolved from cultural practices passed on through education must remain unknown. Here Gans (1990) is for cultural change first: “The hypothetical event involves no immediate biological modification, but it promotes such modification by revising the selection criteria within the proto-human species to include the supplementary aptitude for survival bestowed by the discovery/invention of language” (p. 7). This approach is eminently reasonable, though they may have co-evolved, as Deacon (1997) would have it.

In any case, this evolutionary change in the physiology of communication would likely allow for some degree of increased cultural complexity over tens of thousands of years (specifics varying from tribe to tribe), but at this point such communication would have remained but a tool to serve instrumental ends in the here and now. The displacement from the here and now, the abstraction of self from world, the power to create-discover images and give them form, the sense of a sacred reality — these were yet waiting in the wings.

On this matter, Professor Gans is ambivalent. On several occasions, he seems to equate the emergence of modern humanity with the *H. sapiens* speciation. While making another point, he states, “But the human ethic was more powerful than the pre-human, and by the time *homo sapiens* [sic] appeared we must assume that it had driven it out” (1990, p. 29). In another work, Gans is even more firm: “The originary hypothesis implies that the genetic differentiation of *Homo sapiens* should result from the new selection criteria inaugurated by the use of language; whatever evolutionary pattern,

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<sup>7</sup> Hauser, Chomsky, and Fitch (2002) refer to FLB, the faculty of language in the broad sense, that many animals have, and to FLN, the faculty of language in the narrow sense, that only humans have. When I speak of formal language or human language throughout, I refer to the latter.

<sup>8</sup> I speculate that protolanguage received major impetus with the early control of fire, an event that provided a more compelling center for attraction *and* repulsion than any game animal.

genetic changes must follow rather than lead the emergence of cultural phenomena” (1993, *note* p. 4). Elsewhere he speaks of “cultural speciation” (1993, p. 7), seemingly accepting the emergence of our self-referential subspecies, yet still equating it with our biological parent species.

Agreed that the subspecies we are seems to be the result of cultural invention; it is not functionally or phenomenologically the same species as the early pre-symbolic (what Gans might call pre-*representational*<sup>9</sup>) early or premodern *H. sapiens*. We are apparently much the same biologically, though detailed brain scans would likely reveal great changes in neuronal assemblies. We have become what was once redundantly called *Homo sapiens sapiens*, humanity that knows that it knows (used in the past, however, to refer to the original biological species). The new species or subspecies that we are is differentiated by its symbolic communication and culture. Philosopher Cassirer (1944) nominated the sobriquet *animal symbolicum* (p. 26), while novelist Percy (1975) called us like he saw us, *Homo symbolificus*, “humanity the symbol-monger” (p. 16). Deacon titled us *The Symbolic Species* (1997), still *H. sapiens* however. No doubt there has been great gain and great loss in becoming the new species that Morris (1993) designated as *Homo symbolicus* in his 1925 dissertation, the Latin term probably most appropriate for the species we have become.

### **The Timeline of Emergence**

Gans shows bold insight in noting that this change could not have resulted from gradual changes, evolutionary or otherwise. It was a sudden and one-time event, though anomalies of symbolic engagement are indicated in the archeological record. Just as the symbolic-linguistic abilities of Kanzi the bonobo (Savage-Rumbaugh & Lewin, 1994) and Alex the grey parrot (Pepperberg, 2000) are anomalies that seem to resist that desired clean line between our language abilities and those of our confreres in the rest of the animal kingdom,<sup>10</sup> so prehistoric archeological discoveries prevent us from drawing an absolute line between a time of no symbolism and that of symbol use.

Anomalous *islands* of apparent symbol use have appeared in a number of places, but — to judge from the lack of similar evidence in nearby times or places — such

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<sup>9</sup> though language as representation is problematic, as will be seen below

<sup>10</sup> It must be noted that the such abilities are not innate but have resulted from extensive training by humans, another indication that language was a cultural creation not a biological accident.

symbol use did not survive or spread to other human groups so cannot be said to be the beginning of the symbolic species. An anomaly is just that, an unclassifiable irregularity, but it might be noted that though the symbol-use in these islands is unexplained we have no reason to think it implies *complex culture and reflective consciousness*.

Henshilwood *et al.* (2001) found rock incision patterns and the ubiquitous red ochre (rust) dating from more than 70 kya at Blombos Cave in South Africa, though their symbolic meaning remains mysterious leaving this find as anomalous indeed. The Smithsonian states that the “petroglyphs (rock engravings) found at Panaramitee [Australia], around 45,000 years old, are the earliest known examples of rock art in the world” (Scarre, 1993, p. 45). Stanford anthropologist Klein (2004) names the finding of “beads” made from ostrich egg shell fragments in Africa’s Great Rift Valley ca. 50 kya as the first indisputable indication of symbolic representation.<sup>11</sup> The move toward a more recent origin by identifying formal language forms with visual images was given a boost by Noble and Davidson (1991, 1996) who made a study of cave art and prehistoric sculpture and concluded that languages can be traced back with certainty only about 32,000 years. The discovery of the Chauvet Cave in France, claiming the oldest known paintings in the world at over 30 kya (Chauvet, Deschamps, and Hillaire, 1996), supports this and is the first indisputable sign of Pfeiffer’s (1982) *creative explosion* of the Cro-Magnon in what is now Spain and France. At this point, reflective consciousness is on full display in its engagement with sacred reality.

The time that formal language (FLN) emerged remains a subject of volatile dispute with some insisting that nonhuman animals have languages of their own, others following a gradualist evolutionary scenario (e.g., Greenspan & Shanker, 2004; Pinker, 1994), but with the major debate between those of the early and late schools of suddenly appearing formal language. There is not the space to consider the arguments here, but suffice to say that amongst the objective data-based community (e.g., Bickerton, 2000; Deacon, 1997), the early origins (100+ kya, sometimes including Neanderthal or even *H. erectus*) holds ascendancy, with the more artistically-attuned group (e.g., Klein, 2004;

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<sup>11</sup> Since Klein wrote, Nassarius snail shell beads found at the Blombos Cave site in South Africa have been dated at 75 kya, & recently three even older possible shell beads, two found in the Skhul Cave site in Israel & one in Algeria, are claimed to originate 90–100 kya (Rincon, 2006). There is always a danger to naming an “earliest” date or time period in archeology. This applies here, as well.

Noble & Davidson, 1991, 1996; Pfeiffer, 1982; Tattersall, 1998, 2002) seeing late origins, 30-50 kya.

Earlier burials of early *H. sapiens* have been found in Israel ca. 100 kya but the “ritual remains” (boar jawbone and deer antlers) are scant and open to interpretation, according to Ian Tattersall (1998), Curator in the Department of Anthropology of the American Museum of Natural History — not to mention the fact that they are alone in that time period, that is, anomalous. No *unequivocal* evidence of symbolic grave remains appears in the record until the extravagant Cro-Magnon burial found in what is now European Russia 28 kya.<sup>12</sup> By this period, the mythic mind of modern humans<sup>13</sup> clearly makes itself evident, as Tattersall proclaims: “Nothing like this appears in the record left by any earlier humans. Truly, a new kind of being was on Earth” (p. 10).

Though Professor Gans (1999) has stated his preference for an early origin of language, he is referring to what he calls the “little bang” of the first representational gesture, symbolic in that it indicates a state of mind. Such singular gestures without a syntactical system are conceivable within what has been called protolanguage, but such singular representations would still be restricted to the here and now and thus not able to open the communal mind to the *beyondness* of the sacred. I would think the centrality of aesthetics alone would lead GA to identifying the originary event with the late appearance of this *new kind of being on Earth*.

### **Language and Representation**

Tattersall is also in agreement with Professor Gans that this change was not gradual. However, there is no reason it could not be piecemeal and gradual if Gans’s version of the originary event were accepted. Gans suggests a “thought experiment” in

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<sup>12</sup> Some few Neanderthal burials have indeed taken place but none have yet been located that contain the sorts of weapons, tools, food items, or ornamentation that might be thought to be useful to the deceased in the afterlife. The famous Neanderthal “flower burial” of Shanidar IV has been convincingly repudiated in the *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* (Sommer, 1999) as the result of natural causes. The shallowness of other burials and the space-saving postures could reasonably be interpreted as the simplest means of disposing of corpses that soon become unpleasant company. Tattersall (1998) concludes that “it is difficult to sustain the notion that Neanderthal burial represented symbolic activity, as opposed to the simple expression of grief and loss” (p. 161).

<sup>13</sup> Donald (1991) differentiates the *episodic* cognition of infrahumans from the *mimetic* cognition of hominid prehumans, and the *mythic* mind of the first true humans who were yet premodern. The modern mind he calls *theoretic*, i.e., analytic and objective, built *around* the mythic mind.

which a tribe surrounds an object of appetite, like a game animal. But when the members of the group approach the object simultaneously, they become aware of the conflict about to ensue over possession of the game. One of them gestures or vocally expostulates indicating the refusal to continue the approach and, for Gans, this is the first meaningful sign to see the light of day:

The aborted gesture of the individuals on the periphery, which is prolonged in the kinetic imagination of each toward the object, becomes the *sign* of the object. The reproduction of this sign not only evokes the object but *designates* it to the other participants of the scene. This gesture is thus the first act of representation.<sup>14</sup>  
(1990, p. 3)

In this scenario, there's no reason such a singular "sign" could not appear spontaneously in other places then gradually evolve among many groups into the greater complexity of full-blown language. The problem with this approach is that individual signs that *re-present* an external object are not widely accepted as the basis for formal language. Such signs — verbal or gestural "symbolic" indicators — are instead the fundamental components of protolanguage (Bickerton, 2000) that, once established, are passed on and changed through mimesis.<sup>15</sup> However, Gans has also claimed that the sign is experienced as emerging from the center, implying that it is a sort of global representation within the complete context of a language that is present as potential but yet unformed.

The semantic keys to human speech (and intersubjective human being) are image reception, *symbolic self-reference*, and narrative wherein symbols of language and other creative systems expand the system by going forth as *imaginal realities*, i.e., experienced images. Symbolic self-reference — symbols deriving meaning from a symbolic matrix (and, later, speech with a subjective referent) — is not necessarily enclosed within the garrote of the hermeneutic circle, but instead with image-receptivity

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<sup>14</sup> My difference from Gans here may be terminological, depending on what he intends by *representation*. Ambiguously, he also states that language need *not* re-present external reality: "Since language makes things appear, there is no need for the appearance it evokes to correspond with reality" (1990 p. 22).

<sup>15</sup> Donald (1991) notes that "mimesis is fundamentally different from imitation and mimicry in that it involves the invention of intentional representations. When there is an audience to interpret the action, mimesis also serves the purpose of social communication" (p. 169).

(imagination) is concentrically open. The image, always one step ahead, keeps the concept open and *intentional*. The inherent syntactic creativity of most human sentences and the symbolic reference to images or ideas (not *representations*) are enough to set human language apart from all other modes of communication.

Linguist Trask (1995) offers four further closely related “design features” of the FLN, modified from Hockett’s (1960) famous list, and demonstrates that only human language has them: duality, “the use of a small number of meaningless elements in combination to produce a large number of meaningful elements” (p. 3); displacement and open-endedness (too closely related to separate), the former the ability “to talk about things other than the here and now” (p. 5), and the latter the fact that nearly anything can be said.<sup>16</sup> A corequisite of these two is another kind of displacement, that of the speaker from the spoken, though for the first speakers such displacement would have been subliminal at best. The last is stimulus-freedom, the power to choose how or if one should respond to a received stimulus. Trask concludes: “Lacking duality, lacking displacement, lacking open-endedness, lacking stimulus-freedom, animal signalling systems are almost unfathomably different from human languages” (p. 11).

The meaningful aspect of language is semantics, and the study of attributing meaning to signs within a cultural context is semiotics. But without the spur of the semantic imagination as seen in mythic images and narratives — the symbol’s compelling *just out of reach* aspect of felt meaning — language would have no semiotic context; it would be just uninspired technology.

Hermeneutic philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1967) has emphasized the centripetal power of the symbol to focus inchoate experience into *that which can spoken* — that is, the first words *without* concrete referents, the step out of protolanguage into the real thing. Referring to the sense of unseen, felt presences, Ricoeur declares that “for these realities to be a symbol is to gather together at one point a mass of significations which, before giving rise to thought, give [sic] rise to speech” (p. 11). Speech together precedes speech alone (monologues), which in turn precedes silent inner speech (thought), often considered necessary for selfhood. It appears that intersubjective symbolic exchange

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<sup>16</sup> Benson *et al.* (2002) claim Kanzi demonstrates these; perhaps, albeit in a highly restricted manner. Semantic creativity requires that the whole constructive system be active: a change in quality or *kind*, not degree.

precedes the individual sense of self. It is the communally accepted meaning of symbols that gives language wings, that is, its imaginal potential to expand into the unknown, to build palaces of imagination where before had been nothing — yet these palaces are of uncontested reality since their existence is experienced by all members of the dialogic group, often no doubt as revelations, a perspective generative anthropology should find amenable.

Language — in the Saussurean sense of the play of signs and, beyond that, since almost anything can be said or thought — cannot begin its ventures into the abstract *until a complete network of syntactic structures is in place*. Without such foundational structures, ideas or concepts cannot be combined or spliced (Chomsky's *merge* and *displace*) to create new ideas or concepts that make no direct reference to the concrete world of the embodied senses or the environment. This explains why there are no partial languages (*proto* does not mean *partial*) since for abstract concepts to have meaning, they must already be embedded within a larger meaningful system. How else could ideas or words employ other ideas and words to build new ideas and words?

Pointer names or signs that only indicate concrete objects or actions in the here and now can never *get off the ground*, so to speak, that is, they cannot create new sentences from the organs of previous sentences to expand on a theme or tell a story. If partial FLNs are not possible, then a self-referential language code or system cannot be built bit-by-bit. It must begin as an emergent system already functional with the potential for expansion. Such emergence can only take place *all at once*, in a momentous efflorescence, as the next section elaborates.

### **The Originary Moment**

To discover a mythic cosmos and tell its story meant that the syntactic undercarriage already had to be present as a complete system. You cannot build a cosmology with a partial syntactic structure any more than you could build a bridge without a consistent structural support system. The various properties that in a momentary concrescence created recursive syntax may have been evolving for millions of years each on their own but in the service of other biological functions. Metaphorically, the parts of the bridge may have been made elsewhere then combined to make its structural support system. Until the entire bridge is complete, however, it is useless. Only with a complete bridge can the crossing be made, and that completion

occurs in a single identifiable moment. In the same way, human recursive speech cannot appear until its substructure is in place, and that appearance arrives suddenly. Unlike the bridge, formal language is an emergent, its possibilities not indicated in its substructure. *Language in the human sense is not reducible to its parts.*

This then is a first point that needs emphasis: Even if the journey to this transformation of experience is seen as a slow rising exponential curve, there is still an apex, the point of transition. No matter how slow or long the climb up the hill, no matter how many returns, pauses, dead ends, or turns toward other hills to ascend, this particular hill is only crested once — *in a moment* — for the first time. This has been noted by any number of linguists and theorists of the symbolic but is usually mentioned as an aside, as though the very idea was too bold to bear scrutiny.

Structuralists begin with the assumption that language creates a parallel reality of its own. Anthropologist Lévi Strauss has stressed that “language could only have been born in a single stroke. Objects couldn’t just start to signify progressively. After a transformation ... a passage was effected from a stage where nothing made sense to another where everything did” (in Kristeva, 1989, p. 46).

Chomsky has avoided questions to do with the evolution of language but has recently (2002) intimated that the innate universal grammar that enables all formal languages could not have gradually evolved but might have resulted from a sudden neural mutation. Linguistics scholar Bickerton (1995) agrees with the mutational theory and further declares that “a wide range of evidence ... has suggested that the evolution of syntax was ... likely a single catastrophic event” (p. 82).<sup>17</sup> What other source could there be for humanity’s discovery of open-ended syntax?

Like Tattersall, the Johansons (1994) see that symbolic art, language, and conceptual cognition are evolutionarily simultaneous. The Johansons quote the Australian archeologist and aboriginal cave explorer Rhys Jones as agreeing with the suddenness of the awakening of our species: “My guess is that we will very quickly be able to establish that early on, whatever early is, the whole lot was there. Bang. They

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<sup>17</sup> There is certainly disagreement with this among linguists. Pinker (1994) stays with incremental evolution; Kristeva (1989) agrees with the timeline here but suggests that the graphic image preceded the vocal; Hagège (1990) postulates a multiregional language origin in which speech was discovered in various times and places by humans — thus no *first language*.

were us. And before that they weren't us; they were something different. Then something decisive happened" (p. 306).

So the saltational explanation has wide if low-key support. Aside from it being a statistical long-shot, none of the above sources offer much against the lucky mutation theory. Gans, as noted, sees language as a cultural invention and others agree, though their explanations range variously through the need to maintain monogamous bonds, the territorial imperative, the gossip imperative, the diplomatic imperative, the demands of climate change, the rise of shamanism, or the campfire braggadocio of successful hunters. For Gans, the immediate cause seems to have been breakthrough foresight and a crisis of conscience with no precursor or accompanying biological change. It was all in the mind, it seems, or mind was then immaculately conceived.

We argue today over the relative influences of mind and body or nature and culture; however, I would suggest that at the time of the originary event no such distinction was yet possible. The world experienced as *out there* and mind *in here* could only have come after the awakening of conscious experience, though the schism between self and world was probably not complete until the era of analytic objectivity.

There is one suggestion that calls upon both biological (though not necessarily mutational) resources and cultural-psychological necessity. If a prehuman group achieved such development in protolinguistic communication that they enjoyed a kind of emotional bond unknown to earlier tribal units, they would undergo the stress of environmental or other life maintenance challenges as a *simpatico* unit. Such functional/emotional communication as an extension of the mother-infant bond is in fact seen as the precursor and foundation of formal language in an important work by Greenspan and Shanker (2004) who present a strong case against the necessity for any sort of innate Chomskyian language acquisition device (LAD). If a crisis of such magnitude arose in the lives of these emotionally bonded prehumans that their continued existence was thrown into doubt, it is conceivable that the evolutionary imperative of survival at all costs could have called forth whatever fundamental biological resources were available to meet the needs of the situation. Even if the crisis were the result of cultural interaction or fledgling cognition, hopeless paralysis in response would be both a mental (emotional) and physical impairment.

Such an psychological-biological transformation may not be as extraordinary as it sounds. In supporting their fortuitous mutation hypothesis, Hauser, Chomsky, and Fitch (2002) note that “the human faculty of language appears to be organized exactly like the genetic code itself: hierarchical, generative, recursive, and virtually limitless with respect to its scope of expression” (p. 1569). But there’s no need to assume mutation: The originary moment may be the organism’s natural response to humanity’s first cognitive crisis, a crisis so profound that the organism was thrown back upon its elemental *biological* resources. The genetic code could well have been the template for the creation of an entirely new response system; it could have been replicated by bringing *to mind* syntactic structures to meet an overwhelming semantic emergency.

### **The Existential Crisis**<sup>18</sup>

The first speakers, I have suggested, could only have spoken a meaningful word or made a meaningful sign in the context of a larger semiotic, i.e., a meaning-making system. Even if syntactic possibility had been called forth, there could not have yet existed isolated centers of subjectivity, that is, reflective selves, to speechify or more likely tell a story. There was as yet no sense of oneself as a mind that imagines and creates images or asserts words and tells a story. The images to provide a semiotic context would have been experienced as arriving from parts unknown, as communal revelation, even as the words to conjure them were laboriously brought forth.

Why would a group of emotionally bonded prehumans need to *put their heads together* and literally *come to terms* with their situation? What does narrative provide that was so essential to their continued existence? As the study of very early or rudimentary primitive myth indicates, the first myths are not linear “just so stories”, explaining to a people who they are, the origins for everything from the mundane to the grandiose, and providing ethical guidelines. Mythic narratives at this stage do not have a clear beginning, middle, and end but instead are cyclical (Eliade, 1954). Their purpose, as far as they can be said to have one, is still emotional, not expository, and associated with ritual enough to magically *call forth* hidden powers that will protect the people by

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<sup>18</sup> This section is necessarily a condensation of ideas better developed elsewhere (Nixon, 2006).

confirming the sanctity of their existence.<sup>19</sup> With this, Gans (1993) seems to be in agreement: “The origin of language is the revelation of God” (p. 42). I might add that our term “God” can be traced back to the Indo-European “*gheu(e)-*” meaning *to call or invoke* (Claiborne, 1989).

The images received as revelation, simultaneously conjured by spellbound phrases, awaken a new reality, the dimension of the sacred. The working out of the first syntactically arranged phrases and sentences from the flotsam and jetsam of protolinguistic pidgen<sup>20</sup> would have taken the form of narrative, though the first narrative must have been a painful birth indeed, involving numbers of people struggling together to form concepts.

The purpose of these first rudimentary narratives, employing syntactical formations heretofore unknown, was to create meaning. Syntax emerged to meet the need for semantics. The concepts and the images that accompanied such stories were to make meaningful the people’s lives by opening up vistas beyond the immediacy of senses. Since narrative is meaning-making, the obvious question is, why was meaning-making necessary? And the obvious answer is that these first people were undergoing a crisis of absolute meaninglessness.

Such *existential angst* may seem anachronistic, but despite the cliché I suggest that’s exactly what was occurring. These people’s functional-emotional communications in protolanguage had at last brought them to the brink where the obvious was inescapable: *Everybody dies*. No matter how stable the cultural arrangements, no matter how good the hunting, at some point it must have become overwhelmingly obvious that *life loses*: Decline, death, and decay come to all — even to loved ones, even to Great Leader, even to *me*. This last one would likely be the tipping point since at that point mortal knowledge ceases to be an objective observation but becomes instead a subjective brick wall — the first sense of oneself as a subjective entity yet also an object of limited duration in the world.

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<sup>19</sup> “Myth is a form of poetry which transcends poetry in that it proclaims a truth; a form of reasoning which transcends reasoning in that it wants to bring about the truth it proclaims; a form of action, of ritual behaviour, which does not find its fulfillment in the act but must proclaim and elaborate a poetic form of myth” (Frankfort & Frankfort, 1946, p. 16). Also see Cassirer, 1946.

<sup>20</sup> This is not far-fetched as cases of second generation pidgen speakers suddenly speaking in the formal structures of creole indicate (see Bickerton, 1983).

Personal death, however, cannot be conceived. It is beyond the horizon of experience. The fear that seems to arise over such an absolute unknown may well be more the horror of losing the world and its primary context, the body. “[Can we say that] the terror of death is a substitute for the terror of world-ending?” Crapanzano (2004) asks. “Is it less our own dissolution than that of the world — our intimate and perduring connection with it — that terrifies us? The most frightening of nightmares is to be absolutely alone — deprived of all context, human or material” (p. 202).

Mortal knowledge then is the unbearable negation of all life striving. Since death in itself cannot be conceived it may be understood as the *absent-presence* (to borrow a phrase from the deconstructionists) around which mythic narratives and images circulate. It is the reason for narrative, yet its aporia. Since meaning is only intended but never completely arrived at via narrative or image, death may be understood as the lacuna within it, but it is this lacuna that gives storytelling its impetus. “The storyteller has borrowed his authority from death,” literary theorist Walter Benjamin (1969) declared. Death “imparts to everything that concerned him that authority which even the poorest wretch in dying possesses for the living around him. This authority is at the very source of the story” (p. 94).

If this existential crisis seems strained, one need only consider the sad cases of many wild animals that have been taken from the wild to live out their lives in cages. Often their will to live simply ebbs away and their actual lives soon follow.

In same way, the flow of nonconscious experience hits the brick wall of mortal knowledge. The flow ceases. The life instinct recoils back upon itself in despair.<sup>21</sup> Experience becomes conscious to itself as mourning (a word with the same root as *memory*). The sense of a self-in-time is born under the auspices of dread.

Then at that dark hour a turning point: The innate image-making power behind perception combines with procedural memory to call forth the polar opposite of the end of time — time’s beginning, the epistrophe of re-experienced creation. Through *ananke*, absolute necessity, the group members begin to call forth the verbal concepts and accompanying images of their origin and identity. They haltingly speak of things unseen and concepts proliferate into narratives. The time of origins is re-experienced in this

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<sup>21</sup> The implied meaning of my book title, *The Coil of Time and the Recoil of Memory* (1995).

moment when a leap of imagination calls forth the recursive displacement available in the genetic code and linguistic syntax is employed for the first time. Their hesitant, spellbound narrative takes them beyond concrete immediacy into the realms of the sacred. And the time of beginnings is begun all over again — for the first time, of course.

Or so it seems to me anyway. It may say something about the unspeakable power of the knowledge of personal death that so little has been written about mortal knowledge as a formative concept in the history of philosophy until recently.

Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927) dove into it, along the way fulfilling the cultural need to, if not defeat death, at least obscure or *finesse* it. Later existentialists often seemed to embrace mortal knowledge and accept the absurdity of life-striving as a result, but they were stuck in self-isolation.

Psychoanalysis has likewise either discovered a death wish or seen such a wish as the fear of life. Why the fear of life? N.O. Brown (1959) indicated it was because of sexual repression and the failure to come to terms with death. Becker (1973) agrees: "The irony of man's condition is that the deepest need is to be free of the anxiety of death and annihilation; but it is life itself which awakens it, and so we must shrink from being fully alive" (p. 66). Yet without mortal knowledge, we would never have crossed the symbolic threshold, never have experienced the originary moment, never created language and culture. Becker proclaims that as the result of its need to deny death cultural humanity has benefitted:

Man has a symbolic identity that brings him sharply out of nature. He is a symbolic self, a creature with a name, a life history. He is a creator with a mind that soars out to speculate about atoms and infinity, who can place himself imaginatively at a point in space and contemplate bemusedly his own planet. This immense expansion, this dexterity, this ethereality, this self-consciousness gives to man literally the status of a small god in nature. (p. 26)

That this is an especially fertile area of speculation for understanding ourselves is made clear when we appreciate that this *existential crisis was concomitant upon the also dawning awareness of oneself as a unique experiencing entity*. The thought that death is unavoidable implies a corollary: I have a life that will end: *I ... am!* Indeed, the two must be impossibly entwined in origin: One feels the wonder of becoming conscious of oneself as an existing, experiencing being and of others as similar such beings even as

the wonder of the moment is umbered by its cause. Death makes life real. One realizes that one is a living entity the moment the dark mirror of death forces such a reflection upon us. Self consciousness is the polarity of death consciousness, each inside the other: The self is founded with death at its core.

As the ultimate origin of language, religion, art, ethics, and all higher cognition, it seems to be true after all that, as Wallace Stevens (1923/54) famously wrote in “Sunday Morning”:

*Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,  
Alone, shall come fulfilment to our dreams  
And our desires. (V: 3-5)*

### **In Conclusion**

Again, this is not an attempt to claim that generative anthropology’s originary hypothesis is wrong and mine is right. Indeed, it is conceivable that dawning mortal knowledge was the catalyst that led Gans’s originary troop of hunters to resist the natural instinct to “appropriate” the prey object because at least one suddenly realized such an attempt could lead to his demise. In this case, fear, not morality, is the prime mover. The others would pick up on this abnegation both because they too shared the forbidden, repressed knowledge of inevitable death and because they were mimetically in tune with what was occurring. This implies that fear and the imperative to deny its everpresent cause are at the heart of all social and ethical codes.

Professor Gans has not found establishing a timeline or comparing the objective finds of paleoanthropological excavations to be germane to his purpose, though from my perspective they only strengthen his vision. That there was an originary event that took place only once at a particular place and time has been shown to be generally likely, though prehistoric anomalies do exist. Strong support has been given to the unprecedented suddenness of the originary event (which I have referred as the crossing of the symbolic threshold). After the event, “the word” would likely have spread to other tribal groups like the wildfire of a charismatic religious movement.

At this point, my only hesitation is that a single word or gesture, no matter what its ostensive or spontaneous character may be, is difficult to accept as the origin of language in the formal sense. It may be stretching the dramatic moment of the thought experiment to envision the newly awakened *persons*, following that first verbal

ejaculation of the aborted gesture of appropriation, building the first narrative through merging and displacing protolinguistic signs into sentence-like constructions whose ultimate meaning remained *deferred*, as it were, in the unattainable unified present of the world around them.

Professor Gans might not be disposed to reject such suggestions out of hand since he too agrees that language and symbolic culture could only have arisen as a communal phenomenon. So one person's aborted gesture does not a language make. Furthermore, he understands that language is metaphoric and thus opens the door to imagination, abstract conceptions, liminal presences, or the hidden *beyond* of the sacred: "The process of virtualization, whereby human culture is extended beyond the possibilities of face-to-face contact, is inherent in the very existence of language" (1993, p. 18).

The generative anthropology hypothesis as is provides more positively-founded moral guidelines than *mere* denial of death, though the present thesis has significant moral implications, too, as it indicates fear is at the core of all morality (though not necessarily all moral *acts*), a statement with which psychoanalysis would likely agree. But the aborted gesture of appropriation alone does not seem potent enough to explain the tremendous awakening to the sacred our forbears must have undergone. Only the metaphoric death of the prehuman animal in its instinctual paradise and the fall into the emotional paralysis of despair could account for the (re)birth of the freely thinking *H. symbolicus* in a new world of the sacred, "walking warm onto the fields of praise", to paraphrase poet Dylan Thomas (1946/71). This may be to wax more flowery than is appropriate, considering how the sacred realm has become the scientific vision of Pascal's nightmare: the vast, cold, mainly empty expanse of objective materiality.

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