

2. Symbols and Minds

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Many thinkers who are influenced by evolutionary theory emphasize similarities between humans and other species. Yet anyone who seriously compares humans to other species cannot help but conclude that we are unique within the animal kingdom. For good or ill, we have brought heat to frigid climates, illuminated the darkness, erected magnificent buildings, and invented terrifying devices with which to destroy them. The accomplishments of other animals do not even compare. In adapting to the environments that we inhabit, we humans have adapted those environments to our needs, desires, and dreams to an extent unparalleled by any other species. There is clearly something different about us.

In this selection, the psychologist Ernest Becker argues that what makes us different from other species is our creation and use of symbols. He reminds us that evolution resulted not in differences of degree, but in the kind of relations between organisms and their environment. With each evolutionary leap in what he calls "levels of reactivity," the organism gains greater freedom—first from its own nature, then from the dominance of the natural environment. Only humans have achieved the fourth level of reactivity, which involves the use of one thing—an object, gesture, sound, or mark—to represent something else. These symbols allow humans to represent to themselves and to others things that are not otherwise available to the senses, such as feelings, ideas, and products of the imagination. Unlike other species, humans are not confined to a world of perceptions and perceptual images. They also reside in a world of symbols, meanings, and values that they impose upon their perceptual world.

As Becker argues, it is not the individual human being who creates these uniquely human environments. Symbols and their meanings must have a separate existence in order to have the same power over the individual's experience as her or his perceptions. The only possible source of that separate existence is other humans. Symbols are necessarily shared. And, if what is uniquely human is uniquely social, then understanding human experience necessarily requires an understanding of human social life.

Surely the development of the brain to its present size and complexity in man is one of the astonishing, science-fiction aspects of evolution. . . . It is fairly simple to understand how an ape who abandons the trees and no longer needs his arms to swing with gradually becomes a man-ape who walks upright and uses his arms to hunt and carry. It is fairly easy, too—using the wealth of factual material in almost a half-century of Africa diggings—to conjecture the long, slow development from grunting man-apes to true men who talk and dream. But in all of this there remains a mystery that has fascinated man since ancient times—I mean, of course, the gift of symbolic language. . . . As we would have every right to expect, some of the groundwork for the birth of the symbol in man was laid down at much earlier levels of evolution.

The great Charles Sherrington once observed that if the amoeba were the size of a dog, we should have to grant it a mind: it does act purposively in relation to various stimuli. After all, from a behavioral point of view, what we call "mind" is merely the style of reaction of an organism to its environment. The simplest organism takes note of its world, steers a course through it, and gets what it needs from it; it is "minding" its world, as Leslie White put it, and deriving "reactivity meaning" from it. In other words, the world of meaning of any animal is created for it out of the range and subtlety of its reactivity. On the simplest level we have the direct reflex: the organism responds to the intrinsic properties of the thing it encounters in its field—it

In Spencer & Cahill (ed.) 1995. Inside Social Life: Meanings in Sociobiological Psychology and Microsociology. Los Angeles: Roxbury. Pp. 6-8.

either ingests it or recoils from it if it is not edible or is threatening.

On the next higher level we have the conditioned reflex. Remember Pavlov's famous experiments with the salivating dog. At first, the dog salivates in response to food. Then, food and another stimulus, a bell, are presented simultaneously, and the dog grows accustomed to associating one with the other. Finally, the food is omitted and only the bell is presented, but the animal, having associated his gratification with the bell, salivates when it is rung. This represents a real liberation from the environment, in a way: the dog is not interested in the intrinsic properties of the bell, but since it has now become a sign of something else, he can enrich his world by responding to it, and not only the food. Animals probably make their own chance associations and become conditioned to them; say, an animal which associates the sound of a gun, or a train, with the disappearance of its mate.

On still a higher level, we have a kind of association in which the animal himself sees a relationship between two things in his visual field and decides to act on it himself. The best example of this is the chimp who uses a stick to knock down a banana, suspended out of reach. We already have here a degree of autonomy unusual in the animal kingdom, because it is not an experimenter who is establishing the relationship between the stick and the banana, but the chimp himself who figures out a problem situation.

Finally, we have the highest level of reactivity-meaning that animals on this planet have been able to achieve: what we call symbolic behavior. Man himself coins a designation for an object and then responds to that arbitrary designation. The word "house," for example, has no intrinsic qualities within itself that would connect it with an object—we could just as well use the words "casa," or "maison," or "dom." So, unlike Pavlov's dog, man creates the relationship between stimuli. And unlike the chimp reaching with a firm pole for a banana, the airy symbol "house" has

nothing intrinsic in it that would connect it with the object it stands for.

The development of mind, then, is a progressive freedom of reactivity. The reactive process which is inherent in the organism not only gradually arrives at freedom from the intrinsic properties of things, but also proceeds from there to assign its own stimulus meanings. Mind culminates in the organism's ability to choose what it will react to. White calls this a "traffic in non-sensory meanings." Nature provided all of life with water, but only man could create the symbol H_2O , which gave him some command over water, and the word "holy," which gave water special powers that even nature could not give. . . .

[T]here is good evidence for . . . "intrinsic symbolization processes" on the subhuman level. An animal may privately produce memory representations of objects that are not present in the immediate visual field. After all, an ape's, dog's, or cat's senses are highly developed, and there is no reason to assume that images of remembered striking events do not pop into consciousness. An ape's 450-cubic-centimeter brain is of considerable size and could conceivably permit imaginary picturing of past or even of potential events. Meredith Crawford observed that chimps were able to learn a gestural form of communication, gentle taps on the shoulder by means of which they could summon one another. Viki the chimpanzee seems to have played sometimes with an imaginary toy on an imaginary string, which she pulled around behind her.

But intrinsic symbolization is not enough. In order to become a social act, the symbol must be joined to some extrinsic mode; there must exist an external graphic mode to convey what the individual has to express. The chimp's gentle taps on the shoulder were already a cue which anticipated a social response. If the response did not come, he would pull forcibly to involve the other chimp in his laboratory task or continue at it alone. This is a striking example of the developed mammalian intersensitivity. . . . But it also shows how separate are the worlds we live

in, unless we join our inner apprehensions to those of others by means of socially agreed symbols. . . . As the noted sociologist Franklin Giddings once put it: it is not that two heads are better than one, but that two heads *are needed* for one.

Consciousness, then, is fundamentally a social experience: the infant must take the position of another object in order to gain a perception of the full dimensions of himself and his world. The child assumes the attitude of the succoring adult, and must then respond to meet that attitude. We can see clearly how this works in the child's use of language. As he imitates the language of the adult, this becomes a signal to *him*. The imitated words guide his conduct, as the child stimulates himself and responds to himself. The parents' pervasive symbolic sound floods into his organism through his ear. As he repeats it with his own vocal ap-

paratus, the sound becomes a signal for animating his conduct. In other words, his symbolic action world is built from the *outside in*. A self-reflexive animal, after all, can only get the full meaning of its acts by observing them *after* they have happened. This is what led William James to remark that we are sad *because* we cry; in other words, we give the full meaning to our crying by dwelling on it after it happens. We learn the full significance of our acts from those around us; and, as we build up this knowledge, we acquire a "mind."

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