

MYTHSTAKES BOOK EIGHT: THE SIREN CALL OF EDEN

CHAPTER ONE

The previous book made references to what you might call 'Historical' origin myths, namely the stories told of where the Israelites came from and who they thought their founding fathers were. I call these 'historical origin myths', because they are legends about the earliest history of a people. They are not, however, origin myths concerned with the creation of the world itself. Call these 'world-building' origin myths.

But the Priestly tradition did not just include reinterpretations of 'J' and 'E' historical origin myths. The most famous contribution 'P' made to the Torah/Pentateuch was to include a world-building creation myth in the first chapter of Genesis. We saw in Book Seven how 'J' had such a myth, too, remember, but rushed through this prehistory, probably because, in this tradition, the really interesting stories were those of the Israelite people. 'P' took much more time in detailing how the world itself was brought into being, before any people were created and hence, before any history could begin, and in so doing created what could well be THE creation myth of Western culture, rivalled only by the Big Bang theory in terms of popular recognition.

Prior Creation Myths

As stated before, the Priestly tradition was thought to have been written down after the Babylonian exile. Perhaps it was contact with the Babylonians that sparked the first real interest in world-building origin myths among the Jews. Something that lends credence to this supposition is that the creation myth in Genesis clearly has elements of the Babylonian creation myth, the 'Enuma Elish', while at the same time it includes elements more befitting of that exulted view of Yahweh the P tradition had developed.

In the final version of the Torah/Pentateuch, the 'First Book of Moses' begins like this:

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And earth was without form and void: and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters".

Now consider this passage from an earlier creation myth. In the beginning, only the ocean existed, upon which there appeared an egg. Out of the egg came the sun-god and from himself he begat four children: Shu and Tefnut, Keb and Nut. All these, with their father, lay upon the ocean of chaos. Then Shu and Tefnut thrust themselves between Keb and Nut. They planted their feet upon Keb and raised Nut on high so that Keb became the Earth and Nut the heavens".

So begins one of the earliest creation myths in recorded history, written in Egypt 2500 years before the birth of Christ. Note how this myth speaks of an "ocean" once being the only thing to exist. So, too, does the Priestly origin myth speak of "waters" existing prior to God beginning the act of creation.

If one was to look for a mundane explanation as to why “waters” always feature in such myths, one approach might be to point out that the territory between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and in the Nile rivers had once been swampland whose inhabitants depended on the fickle (or ‘chaotic’) nature of sparse rains to water their crops. They literally separated the earth from the waters by channelling the swamps into canals.

Speaking of the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers, it's noteworthy that we find a similar creation myth in the writings left by another ancient civilisation. This was the Sumerian civilisation, whose people built Mesopotamian cities along the Tigris-Euphrates valley in what is now Iraq.

This was the Enuma Elish which we have previously talked about in Book Seven. Here, though, I wish to bring attention to an earlier part of this myth, detailing events that preceded the crowning of Marduk as king of the gods. In this earlier part we find the following.

‘When sweet and bitter,
Mingled together, no reed was plaited,
No rushes,
Muddled the water,
The gods were nameless, natureless,
Futureless’.

This, then, is a story that begins much as the Egyptian myth began. Not with nothing, but rather with some kind of divine material, one likened to a formless, watery waste. For the Sumerians, the closest thing to this divine formlessness was Mesopotamia's swampy wastelands, a place where they were constantly fighting against Nature, all too aware that floods could wash away all their efforts.

Anyway, just as was the case with the Egyptian myth, ‘the world’ does not remain without boundary, definition or identity forever, because after a timeless period gods emerge from that pre-existing chaos. According to the ‘Enuma Elish’, the first of these gods were Mummu, the womb of chaos, Apsu, who the Sumerians identified with the sweet waters of the rivers, and Tiamat, who was Apsu's wife, and identified with the the salty sea.

By the way, these names suggest that the Sumerians did not think the emergence of these first gods marked much difference from what had come before. You see, the names ‘Apsu’ and ‘Tiamat’ mean ‘abyss’, ‘void’ or ‘bottomless gulf’. In other words, they are gods who “share the shapeless inertia of the original formlessness and had not yet achieved a clear identity”, as Karen Armstrong put it in ‘The History Of God’.

New gods were to emerge subsequent to the appearance of these first three, the names of which suggest a kind of evolution, each new generation of gods achieving a greater definition than their forebears. These later gods always came in pairs, and the next to emerge were Lahmu and Lahman. Their names meant ‘silt’ and so these gods are reminders of a mythological time when Water and Earth were still mixed together. The next pair to emerge were Anshu and Kisha, gods whom the Sumerians identified with the horizons of Sky and Sea. After them came Anu (identified with the heavens) and Ea (the earth). So now, where there was once a formless chaos there was now a place more like we would

recognise, a place with land, seas, rivers and skies that were distinct and separate from one another.

But chaos and disintegration were still existent forces that could send everything back into the formlessness from whence all came, and the newer gods had to battle with their older generations in an ongoing struggle to prevent that from happening. Ea was successful in overpowering Mummu and Apsu, but Tiamat had created an army of misshapen monsters and could not be defeated.

Or, at least, she could not be defeated by Ea. But Ea had given birth to a child of his own, and the offspring of Ea was the most perfect specimen of the divine line. He was Marduk, the Sun God. A great assembly of the gods was called, and at this meeting Marduk promised to fight Tiamat, but only if he could become ruler of the gods if he should win the battle.

This condition was agreed upon, and so Marduk and Tiamat engaged in combat. It was a long and arduous conflict, but finally Tiamat lay dead at Marduk's feet. But what to do with the gigantic corpse of this slain god? Marduk's solution was to create a new world out of it. Her body was split in two, one half of which became the arch of the sky, while the other half became the world of men.

The long struggle against Tiamat had taught Marduk a lesson, which was that creativity was a struggle, one that involves putting those who would achieve it against what can seem like overwhelming odds. Order had to be achieved, and chaos kept at bay, and in order to ensure that this was how things continued to play out, the world needed rules. And so, along with creating the world, the Sun god Marduk also devised laws, the purpose of which was to keep everything in its appointed place.

According to this myth, the victory of Marduk was not complete and absolute, but rather one that had to be re-established every year by means of a special religious ceremony. And, indeed, around the world people still see in the new year by singing, clapping and releasing fireworks, perhaps unconsciously recalling a time when our ancestors re-enacted that mythological time when the gods did battle to secure victory over the forces of chaos.

"Fiat Lux"

Let's remind ourselves of how 'Enuma Elish' began:

"When sweet and bitter,
Mingled together, no reed was plaited,
No rushes,
Muddled the water,
The gods were nameless, natureless,
Futureless".

Today, God is usually thought to have created the world from nothing, which is odd because the opening passage of Genesis implies no such thing. Notice how both Genesis and Enuma Elish make reference to 'waters'. In the Babylonian myth, these 'waters' represented a divine

substance that everything- the world, living things, even the gods themselves, were ultimately made from. Since Genesis tells us that “the earth was without form and void” we may suppose that ‘waters’ likewise refers to some pre-existing substance God used to create our world.

We can also pick out some clear differences. The most obvious one is that the Enuma Elish references many gods, whereas Genesis only mentions “the spirit of God”. This is not surprising, because by the time Second Temple Judaism was being developed, God was conceived of in strictly monotheist terms.

Another difference is that, in the Enuma Elish, ‘the gods’ begin as so indistinguishable from ‘the waters’ as to be inseparable from it, to the extent that it’s hard to say they even exist at this early stage. Certainly, they have no separate identity from ‘the waters’. In contrast, in the Genesis account, God already has an identity that is distinct from the ‘waters’ he is about to use to create the world.

How long did Yahweh wait until he created the world? That is a nonsensical question because this myth, just like the Enuma Elish, is not really about the creation of something from nothing, but rather about the creation of Time through order imposed on chaos. Now, when we hear the word ‘chaos’ we tend to think of violent anarchy. The word invokes images of riots, brawls and destruction. But this is far from what these ancients had in mind when they spoke of chaos. A better image to hold in mind would be of an omnipresent fog. Nothing else exists but this fog, eternally swirling without any discernible pattern. It’s everywhere you look, which means there is no ‘where’ because you have no means to distinguish one direction from another. Similarly, there is no ‘When’ because there is nothing that can be used to mark the passage of time. This is a time before time began, an endless ‘now’. So, it makes just as much (non)sense to say an eternity passed before order was imposed as it does to say only an instant passed before order was imposed.

Emanation and Separation

Now, in the Babylonian myth, the main theme of that imposed order was one of gradual emanation. To say something ‘emanates’ is to say it originates or issues from some prior source. In the Enuma Elish, it is the gods who first emanate from that divine substance that is symbolised as ‘waters’. This is a gradual emanation, because the gods only assume definite identity after several generations. The first gods to form were given names like ‘Apu’ and ‘Tiamat’, meaning ‘Void’ or ‘Bottomless Gulf’, implying they barely had an identity separate from the formless ‘waters’ they issued from. The next gods to emanate were Lahmu and Lahmen, whose names meant ‘Silt’. So, at this stage, there was no distinguishing water from earth. That distinction only came later, when gods like Anshu and Kisha (Sky and Sea) and Anu and Ea (Heaven and Earth) came into being.

One more thing to bear in mind, because it marks another crucial difference with the Genesis creation myth, is that this gradual emanation did not proceed in a peaceful, orderly fashion. Instead, this myth imagined each new generation of gods doing battle with the older generation of deities in order to prevent chaos from undoing whatever order had been imposed so far.

If gradual emanation was the theme of the Enuma Elish, in 'P's creation myth, the recurring theme is 'Separation'. After a timeless period we get God's first command:

"And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God called the light Day and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day".

It was the first day because, prior to this act, there was no way to mark the passing of time. Day, after all, cannot exist unless there is a Night to contrast it with. But now, thanks to God separating night from day, there was some order and regularity that could be used to measure the passage of time.

Also, note how bringing about this first regularity and order entails no effort on God's part. He simply wants light to be, and so light is, brought into existence by an effortless act of will. Subsequent acts of separation are likewise effortlessly achieved. God separates the waters from the firmament to create the heavens; separates water from dry land, and populates the land and the sea with life, all through a similarly effortless act of will. There is never any struggle, and certainly no suggestion that God ever battles with any other deity. In fact, no other deity ever gets mentioned in the Genesis creation myth. Yahweh is the one and only God.

It's also worth noting that, when written in Latin, God's first command is "Fiat Lux". In previous books in this series we have talked about certain kinds of money- national currencies defined by state or federal governments- that are brought into existence simply by the issuing state authorising the addition of more of that currency. This sort of money is known as fiat currency and yes, that comes straight from the Genesis account of God creating the world by nothing more than the power of His word.

The Creation of Man

On the sixth and final Day of active Creation, God creates Man. In the Biblical account, "the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life". This account bears some similarity to the creation myth of Man in the Enuma Elish, where the god Marduk also formed humans out of dust.

However, in the Babylonian myth, Man was not only formed out of dust, but instead was formed by mixing dust with the divine blood of a slain god. This meant that gods and Man shared the same divine nature in the Babylonian myth. Indeed, everything did because, after all, everything emanated from those divine 'waters'.

In keeping with the theme of separation, no divine blood was used in the making of Man in 'P's account, nor is there any suggestion that the material Yahweh used to form our world was of a divine nature. While this may seem to demote us (since in the Enuma Elish we are partly divine whereas according to Genesis we are 'just dust') in another sense Man is elevated in the Biblical account compared to the Enuma Elish. In that story, it was the god Kingu whose blood was used to make Man, and Kingu was a very lowly god. Indeed, so lowly, in fact, that Man's creation from his blood can only be understood as a comic afterthought. There is certainly no suggestion of Man representing some grand climax of creation. That is, however, how Man is represented in Genesis:

“And God said, Let us make Man in our image, after our likeness: And let him have dominion...over all the earth”.

How is Man the Image of God?

By the way, the idea that Man was created in the image of God seems hard to reconcile with the conception of God as an omnipresent being. Recall here the image of God that writers of the ‘P’ tradition were trying to get across, that of a deity so separate from the material world as to be all but impossible to frame in human terms. That hardly describes a god who looks just like us. How could such a deity be ‘all seeing’ as implied by the term ‘omnipresent’? Actually, the Book of Genesis is rather contradictory with regards to the omnipresence of God. In chapter three, verse eight, we’re told that, having just eaten forbidden fruit, “Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God amongst the trees of the garden. And the Lord God called unto Adam and said unto him, Where art thou?”.

This clearly contradicts the conception of God as present in all places and as knowing all things. There would be no hiding from such a maximally powerful deity. Of course, one can easily make up explanations for such contradictions. One might, for example, point out that it was only the ‘presence’ of God that Adam and Eve saw, not Yahweh himself who is maximally unknowable. As for his asking them where they were, you could put that down to feigned ignorance. Of course God really knew where they were, just as a parent really knows what has been going on when he discovers his toddler sat by an open jar of chocolate biscuits, with chocolate all over his face and hands, and asks “what have you been doing?”. Ignorance is being feigned because to do so serves some other purpose.

Karen Armstrong dealt with the contradiction between Man being created in the image of God, and God being omnipresent, by suggesting we weren’t made to look like God but to possess certain godlike abilities. As she put it, “men and women may not share the divine nature but they had been created in the image of God: they must carry on His creative tasks”. In other words, it’s a mythological tale that, like the story of Prometheus in Greek mythology, attempts to explain how come humans have such immense creative abilities compared to any other animal. We were given the divine spark of imagination, creativity and invention, and it is this aspect of our minds that are in the image of God. We have also seen in Books Two and Three how both the myth of Prometheus and of Adam and Eve’s banishment from the Garden of Eden can be read as allegories of the conflicting nature of paid employment, whereby it simultaneously feels like a punishment to have to submit to labour but it is also a way for us to (crudely) reenact God’s creative work.

While one can make up all kinds of interpretations about what ancient people really meant when they wrote this or that, we have to bear in mind that the Torah/Pentateuch was pieced together from many fragments, some of which had been floating around for some considerable time. In the long history of the Jewish people, from their origins in Canaan some time around the Late Bronze Age to the destruction of the Temple of Solomon in 587 BCE, Yahweh evolved, from a partial god of armies who was clearly conceptualised as one deity amongst many, and in no way all powerful, to the ‘God of all history’, a deity so alien that only his ‘glory’ could be glimpsed, and then only by special individuals called to Prophecy on His behalf. We should not be surprised if piecing fragments of texts together

would result in a few contradictions here and there, especially given that, at this stage, there probably wasn't much in the way of philosophical analysis. Recall here how the purpose of myth is not to explain things in the way science sometimes does, or to bring clarity to those questions that remain once all the facts have been presented, which is how philosophy is sometimes presented.

Rather than looking at life as a problem to solve, the mythological mindset sees life as a mystery to be experienced in a meaningful way. Mythological tales persist not because they answer questions but because they are successful in helping people find meaning, hope, and other non-tangibles that make a positive qualitative difference to their lives.

CHAPTER TWO

One Special Day

In both the Enuma Elish and the account of creation in Genesis, one day is distinguished from the rest by being deemed of particular importance. In the Babylonian myth, that special day was when the gods held their great assembly, conferring the divine titles on Marduk, who ascended to the throne situated at the top of the great temple the gods had built to be a focal point for this most sacred of days, when the laws that kept chaos at bay and order in place, had first been established. In 'Genesis', the special day was the seventh, the day of Sabbatical rest:

"And God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it: because that in it he had rested from all his work which God had created and made".

Now, this raises a question, namely, "what is so special about a day of rest?". Well, within that quote we can discern a couple of ways in which people might overcome the problem inherent in making God a maximal deity. If a god is conceived as being completely alien to the human condition, it becomes a deity that is very hard to relate to. For example, Aristotle conceived of a god that was so indifferent to the world whose existence it caused, it's debatable whether it even knows the world exists, and which had no interest at all in anything other than to contemplate the one perfect thing in existence. Why should people care about such a lofty deity, one not interested in anything other than an eternal contemplation of itself?

Yahweh was in danger of becoming just as separated from the human condition as he evolved from a partial god of history to the strictly monotheist, all-powerful God of later Jewish and Christian traditions. A way had to be found to connect people to a god who was becoming more like a metaphysical abstraction.

In that quote, we find a reference to work and the creative act. If, as Armstrong suggested, Man was made in the image of God not because we look like God but rather because we have the capacity to imagine and create, then by engaging in work we become like God. We are brought closer to Him.

In the Second Book of Moses (more popularly known as 'Exodus') we find a story that has interesting parallels with the creation myth of the previous chapter. It also has echoes of Near Eastern myths, where temple building was often seen as a replica of the creation of the cosmos. This story, which brought a lot of consolation to Jews during their time of Exile in Babylon, concerns the building of the Ark of the Covenant and the Tent of Meeting.

The planning and construction of this sanctuary and its various contents spans several chapters. It goes into considerable detail concerning exactly how everything should look. For example, here are some of the instructions for the Ark of the Covenant:

"Two cubits and a half shall be the length thereof, and a cubit and a half the breadth thereof, and a cubit and a half the height thereof. And thou shalt overlay it with pure gold, within and without shalt thou overlay it, and shalt make upon it a crown of gold round about".

The account goes on to detail plans for a mercy seat, to be made of pure gold (“two cubits and a half shall be the length thereof, and a cubit and half the width thereof”) which is to be finished off with two cherubims, also to be fashioned from gold.

After that come the instructions for the tabernacle (“make the tabernacle with ten curtains of fine twined linen, and blue, and purple, and scarlet”) and even details of the table, candlesticks, spoons and plates (“of pure gold shalt thou make them”).

All this elaborate construction supposedly happened long, long ago. I say “supposedly” because this is one of those stories that is obviously more legend or myth than an historical account. It stretches incredulity to breaking point to suppose any such construction took place. The plans call for so much gold it would have been a challenge for a Pharaoh, let alone an exiled people wandering in the wilderness.

The story, then, is a symbolic one. It represents the finest creative abilities of a people, and as such it provides one way in which we might draw closer to God. Indeed, the account draws parallels with the Six Days of Creation, because Moses oversees the work and, at every stage, “Moses did look upon all the work...and Moses blessed them”, which is reminiscent of God reviewing each day of creation and declaring the work-in-progress “good”.

Returning to the quote regarding the blessed seventh day, it also states that God rested. This can be seen as continuing the theme of separation. In this case, separating one day from the rest by giving it some special significance. This was something else people could do in order to feel closer to God. Indeed, one of the Ten Commandments explicitly said we should:

“Six days thou shalt labour, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the Sabbath day of the Lord thy God: In it thou shalt not do any work”.

According to Armstrong, the Priestly tradition “[gave] the Sabbath a new significance: it becomes an act of the imitation of God and commemoration of his creation of the world. When they observed the sabbath rest, Jews were participating in a ritual that God had originally observed alone. It was a symbolic attempt to live the divine life”.

Game Theory and the 613 Commandments

The ‘Ten Commandments’ is one of the most famous parts of the Torah/Pentateuch, something people who have never read any of the Bible are likely to at least be aware of. I suspect that, for such people, ‘ten commandments’ is the number of laws that God imposed on his people. But, actually, the Torah/Pentateuch lists six hundred and thirteen commandments. Needless to say, this long list, which includes strict instructions on what is and what is not permissible to eat, makes for some pretty complex legislation.

Moreover, whereas one can easily see the reason for a commandment such as “thou shalt not kill” (since murder is taboo in all societies, at least of in-group members who have not been found guilty of a capital crime) it’s hard to see the justification behind many of the 613

commandments. Why, for instance, is it permissible to eat the meat of animals “that partake the hoof, and cleaveth the cleft into claws”, but eating the meat “of them that chew the cud, or of them that divide the cloven hoof” is strictly forbidden?

Many attempts have been made to explain the reasoning behind these strange legislations. A book on Game Theory, for example, put this and other strange and awkward religious practices as means of dealing with freeloaders. After all, there may well be people attracted only by things like feast days and other celebrations who are not really committed to the religion itself. A complex set of dress codes or dietary laws which require considerable personal commitment can be a way to distinguish the free rider from the true believer.

If we return to the theme of separation that ran through the Genesis account of creation, perhaps this provides a further explanation. Because, in most of these cases we do indeed find acts of separation, be it separating the Sabbath from the rest of the week, separating milk from meat or separating “unclean” meat from “clean” meat. As Armstrong said, “in Deuteronomy, the dietary laws had been a sign of Israel’s special status. P also saw them as a ritualised attempt to share the holy separateness of God”.

So, again, we can see these as rituals that helped close the gap between an increasingly abstract and distant God, and His people. For some Jews, this notion of separation extended to the Israelites themselves, because, as they saw it, God had chosen them to be aggressively separate from the ‘Goyim’ (in other words, anyone who is not Jewish). Messianic myths evolved from such separatist beliefs, in which, at the end of time, Yahweh would come to exult Israel and humiliate all other nations. In the meantime, such accounts insisted, God would be a remote and distant being, at least compared to the interactions Yahweh had been imagined to have with His people in the past. According to Armstrong, such myths “tacitly agreed that, after the exile, the era of prophecy had ceased. There was to be no more direct contact with God: This was only achieved in the symbolic visions attributed to the great figures of the remote past”.

Religion Becomes Philosophical

The evolution of Yahweh from a tribal polytheistic deity to an abstract monotheist God, was not the only transformation to occur as Second Temple Judaism matured. Abrahamic religion evolved too, becoming more like a philosophical worldview. The more observant reader may have noticed that many of the more abstract beliefs now commonly associated with Western religion have barely featured in our discussion. In particular, questions concerning the soul, such as whether there is such a thing and, if so, what is its nature, don’t seem to have been topics that prophets like Elijah were interested in, at least not beyond a superficial level. Instead, their focus was on worldly events such as the politics of war, the Israelite’s place in such struggles, and how that might tie in with the overall plan that Yahweh was bringing to fruition.

But, just as post-exile Jews became more interested in topics outside of history (such as the creation of the world and the extent to which the human mind could understand a god that transcends time and space) they also turned to other questions such as the question of what might come after death, why there is evil in the world, and they began to apply philosophical reasoning to such concerns, rather than rely only on mythology.

Why should this have happened? We may suppose that it was partly due to Abrahamic religion expanding its geographical boundaries, and that expansion inevitably bringing the faithful into contact with cultures that had already developed sophisticated philosophical schools of thought. Probably the most important culture in terms of influencing the development of Christianity was Rome. Roman philosophy, in turn, was heavily influenced by Greek philosophy. Hundreds of years before there was a Roman Empire or any such thing as 'Christianity', Greek philosophy was also becoming incorporated into Jewish teachings.

Greek Influences On the Torah

Take the alternative name for the Torah, for example. 'Torah' is Hebrew for 'Law', but the five books that make up the Torah are also known as the 'Pentateuch', which isn't Hebrew at all but Greek. The Jews had been using a partly developed Torah by 600 BCE and it's thought that the whole was established by 400 BCE, which puts its development well within the rise of Greek philosophy.

Now, the Torah is only one of the books that comprise the Hebrew Bible (which is known as the 'Tanakh'). It also includes 'The Prophets' and the 'Hagiographa'. That's another Greek word. It means 'Sacred Writings'.

As well as writing the Tanakh, Jewish scholars also wrote the 'Talmud', which is Hebrew for 'Teachings'. As the name suggests, the Talmud consists of commentaries on the Torah. More than one version of the Talmud exists, but it was the one that was completed in Babylon some time around the end of the 5th century CE, that became the definitive document fixing Jewish ritual and law. While topics such as the existence of the soul and resurrection receive scant treatment in the Tanakh, they definitely feature in the Talmud. Consider, for example, these words from the 'Birkhot Hashhahar' ('Early Morning Benediction').

"My God, the soul that you have given me is pure. You created it. You fashioned it. You breathed it in me. You safeguarded it within me, and you will eventually take it from me and return it to me in time to come...Praised are you Lord who restores souls to dead bodies".

As stated before, the Talmud consists of commentaries on the Torah. There is also a set of commentaries for the Talmud, and these are known as the 'Mishna'. The Mishna includes Biblical interpretations of Scripture and practical ways to apply such texts. The Mishna also contains parables and stories that present Jewish ethics in a humanistic way (whereas the Talmud casts a more legalistic eye over ethics).

The Origins Of Evil

The fact that both the Torah and the Talmud are very much concerned with 'Law' may provide another reason why Jewish thinkers became concerned with philosophical inquiry. Think of how the concept of Yahweh had developed. He had gone from being the partial deity of a particular group of people, to being the impartial God of history. He had gone from being a polytheist deity whose abilities were restricted to some particular aspect of nature or

human psychology (like a 'goddess of Spring' or a 'god of War') to an omnipotent deity who single-handedly created the World. Moreover, earlier religions had tended to believe there was something prior to the gods that even mighty deities like Zeus or Jupiter (kings amongst the gods, let alone mere mortals) could not control. They were subordinate to a higher power which, while omnipotent and all-encompassing, was too abstract and impersonal to be thought of as a god. It was given various names, including 'Moirai' and 'Anankai', but the most appropriate interpretation for all these terms is probably 'Fate'. Fate was like a single power or Law, not controlled by any of the polytheist Gods. Instead, they were subject to its mysterious plans, if 'plans' is not too purposeful a word for such an impersonal concept.

The point, though, is that earlier beliefs had not centred on a god who was all-powerful. Since their deities were all limited in what they could do, and were flawed themselves, it might well have been easier for Polytheist followers to accept the existence of evil. Not that they liked that bad things happened to good people, but there was nothing that could be done about it. The World was the World, emanating from mysterious chaotic beginnings and ultimately governed by Fate that no god could fully control. Law and order had imposed some structure and stability, and with sufficient observance to Ritual the gods would hopefully remain empowered enough to prevent a slide back into total chaos, but the World was not perfect. These people may well have agreed with that bumper sticker that tells us: 'Shit Happens'.

But, if you believe in an all-powerful, Law-giving God who is maximally good, it's inevitable that this belief will clash with the existence of evil in the world. Because, if a perfectly just God had complete control when creating our world, why would there be any evil at all? An all-powerful God that's good could make a world without pain, injustice and other negative things that make life more miserable than it ought to be, right?

Actually, the first chapter of Genesis tells us that God did create a world that was good. That, after all, is how God appraised each day of Creation. He never says, "well, I did my best on this day, but things went a bit wrong". The implication is that, once upon a time, the world was good. Many cultures have believed that the past might have been a better, more harmonious place. In Book Nine we shall see how pretty much all ancient civilisations believed in a prior Saturnian Golden Age and that the current age is a corruption of that exalted kingdom that once was. And It's not only traditional religious beliefs that look back to some lost 'golden age'. Some Communists believe our distant ancestors lived in a state of primitive communistic brotherhood, but then came the Fall (or, more precisely, private property) and paradise was lost, replaced with the world we know today.

'The Fall' is, of course, a Biblical reference. It comes from the second chapter of Genesis, which tells the story of Adam and Eve. It might be the second chapter, but it's actually an older creation myth than the 'six days' account that the Bible now begins with. The 'Six Days' account was written by the Priestly tradition, whereas the story of Adam and Eve comes from the Jahwist/Elohist tradition.

One of the clearest signs that these are two different creation myths cobbled together to make one narrative is the existence of obvious doublets. We're told that, by the morning of the sixth day, God had created all living things. "And God said, Let us make man...Male and female created He them. And God blessed them". Notice the reference to 'them', implying

the world was populated with people by the sixth day. Or, at the very least, more than one person.

But then, at the start of chapter two, we're first told that God rested from all His work, and then we're told that "every plant of the field...was in the earth and every herb before it grew. For the Lord had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was not a man to till the ground. But there went up a mist upon the earth and watered the whole face of the ground".

Notice how the quote claims no people exist yet, even though the chapter preceding this told us God created the human race on the sixth day. It's also worth noting that the earth sounds like a green and pleasant land, where plants and herbs abundantly grow, watered by an ever-present mist, almost as if earth were once a greenhouse providing ideal conditions for succulent vegetation.

Right after this passage we get another story about the creation of man, and this time it really is just one man: Adam. "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life". We know Adam is a solitary being, because, in verse eighteen, God, for the first time, declares something to be not good. "It is not good that man should be alone".

In the Jahwist/ Elohist creation story, Adam is truly alone at this point, unlike the Priestly creation myth (where God first creates all other animals and then creates people). He lives in a very pleasant place, the garden of Eden. "The Lord God planted a garden eastward of Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil".

In other words, Adam knows no hunger, no thirst, no pain, no material want of any kind. He is in perfect health and, because he can eat fruit from the tree of life, he will never grow old. He will live in ignorant bliss for ever and ever and ever.

Why ignorant bliss? Because something is being kept from him. In this story, God's first command to Adam is to order him never to eat the fruit of one particular tree. This seems like a strange command. If God did not want Adam to ever eat the fruit of this tree, why plant it in the garden of Eden? The best way to make sense of all this is to view this part of the story as a symbolic representation of free will. Let us suppose Adam does not pick a fruit from the 'forbidden' tree and eat it. What is he choosing? He is choosing to live his life under God's law and forsake any ability to live according to his own rules. On the other hand, if he plucks one of those fruits, he is taking knowledge of good and evil into his own hands, and by ingesting it, he is incorporating such knowledge into his very being. He is choosing not to live exclusively under God's law, but instead to live under whatever rules Man deems best.

At this stage, the forbidden fruit has not been eaten. So, no harm has ever come to Adam and he has absolutely no knowledge of evil. He is like a child, living in the protective environment parents would provide if they were perfect.

But, as we have seen, God recognises that there is one aspect of Adam's situation that is not good. He is an isolated being. And so, in this creation story, God sets about creating other creatures in order for that solitary man to have some company.

"And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every fowl of the air; and he brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them; and whatever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof".

So, here we have 'man' performing a crude version of the creation act found in the later Priestly tradition that got put at the beginning of the final Torah/Pentateuch. In Genesis chapter one, God creates through an act of effortless will, but he also names things. "God called the light Day and the darkness he called Night; God called the firmament Heaven; God called the dry land earth".

Maybe, light is the first thing to be created because this is a mythological representation of human's primary way of interacting with the world. Unlike most animals (whose most highly developed sense is smell) humans rely most on sight. We are therefore 'diurnal' animals, active during the day when there's plenty of light we can use to guide our activities, and asleep during the night. 'Light' features in our psychological makeup, too. What do we call somebody who has achieved a high level of knowledge or wisdom? We describe them as 'enlightened'. So, if our ancient ancestors were telling stories in an attempt to dig down through the human condition to get at the basic archetypes of our existence, it makes sense that they would eventually agree that, when the world was created, light was the very first thing to be brought into being and named.

You cannot name things unless you have language. Language is, of course, something else that separates humans from all other animals. That's not to say that no other animal has any language capacity. With heroic efforts, linguists have trained grey parrots to have some vocabulary. Chimps have been taught some sign language. But only some. We know of no animal that comes anywhere close to the linguistic capabilities of an adult human. We have a deeply ingrained need to apply names to things. No other animal does this. A cow does not know that it's a cow and has no capacity to care whether or not this ignorance matters. But, for humans, naming things makes them real. Well, not quite. It's not like we believe nameless things have no existence. We're well aware that most of the universe consists of nameless, mysterious whatever. But all that 'exists' for us in a very vague and insubstantial sense. By naming things, attaching labels to them, we separate aspects of reality out of the ill-defined mystery that is the universe, and make it solid and real. This applies not least to ourselves. In all human societies, the act of naming somebody carries a deep significance. It's a crucial step in the transformation from a mere human being to a social person.

Law Breakers Get Punished

While the second chapter of the Torah/Pentateuch is clearly another creation story, it's nowhere near as interested in how God went about creating the world as Genesis chapter one. There's something else it seeks to explain, and so the real purpose of this story begins around chapter three.

By the end of chapter two, Adam has given names to every living thing, but none of these creatures strike him as being suitable for companions. This inspires God's final act of creation in this story. He causes Adam to fall into a deep sleep, and then he removes one of his ribs and creates Adam's ideal companion out of it. When Adam awakes, he says "this is now bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she is taken out of Man". We know her name to be 'Eve', but at this stage in the story, Adam has no name for her other than 'Woman'.

Now that he has woman, Adam is no longer alone. Both he and his woman exist in a state of perpetual innocence. As the story tells us, "they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed".

But then it all goes wrong. We come to the main point of this story, which is "man's fall into sin". A serpent lurks in the garden (and such creatures have a dragon-like quality to them, so this could be another reference to the forces of chaos). It talks the woman into doing the one thing God has ordered them not to do: Eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge. How does the serpent tempt Eve? It promises something of great importance: The gift of sight.

"God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil". Eve very much wants enlightenment. "And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant for the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her, and he did eat".

Just as the serpent promised, eating fruit from the tree of knowledge enlightens Adam and Eve. "The eyes of them were both opened, and they knew that they were naked". Now, the popular interpretation of this is that Adam and Eve were awakened to sexuality. But, an earlier passage suggests Adam already knew about sex. Upon meeting 'woman' for the first time, he says, "a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: And they shall be one flesh". Even though Adam never had any parents and knew of no other person prior to the creation of Eve, he knows that men and women can form the union of mother/father. It's safe to assume then, that Adam was created with knowledge of sex pre-installed, so to speak.

So, the idea that Adam and Eve clothed themselves and hid from God because they were like embarrassed kids hiding porn from their parents is just wrong. But, clearly, something felt wrong that had not bothered them before, because Adam pretty much admits this when he says to God, "I was afraid, because I was naked: and I hid myself".

We might inquire into what knowledge Adam and Eve acquired, having eaten the fruit. Since it was fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, we can imagine them looking at each other and seeing a potential friend, lover, and other ways people relate to one another that are 'Good', but at the same time, seeing a potential enemy, villain, and all the ways in which people can do Evil. With their eyes opened, they now realise how vulnerable they are in their nakedness, and do what they can to cover themselves.

And this is just how vulnerable they feel in the presence of one naked person. Imagine how they feel standing naked in front of God! If anything, this part of the story is best compared to

that bad dream where you find yourself naked in front of a crowd of people, say, at a lecture theatre. Dreams like this are no sexual fantasy but rather anxiety-driven. It's the fear of having the full focus of attention aimed directly at you when you are fully exposed as the vulnerable being you are, with all your inadequacies out in the open for all to see.

In the case of Adam and Eve, their eyes were opened and they became godlike, just as the serpent promised. But, only in the most infinitesimal sense. Equipped with this newly acquired knowledge, Adam and Eve saw what utterly pathetic, weak, inadequate creatures they were and were compelled to run off the stage and hide from the judgemental eye of an all-seeing audience, so to speak.

As soon as Adam confesses that he and Eve hid because they were ashamed to stand naked before God, Yahweh knows they have sinned, breaking his one law. "Who told thee that thou wast naked? hast thou eaten of the tree whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldst not eat?". Adam wastes no time in basically blaming the woman ("She gave me the fruit and I did eat"). Eve, in turn, blames the serpent, and then God sets about punishing their sins because, after all, those 'charged' and found guilty must 'pay'. Of the serpent, God says, "because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and every other beast". The idea that serpents are cursed has the ring of truth to it, if you think about it. After all, snakes top most people's list of "most repulsive animal" and fear of snakes is pretty much universal. After studying foraging people, Irvn DeVore (1934-2014) concluded, "Hunter-gatherers will not suffer a snake to live".

As for the man and the woman, their punishment is banishment from the Garden of Eden. Henceforth, they and all generations to come must live in a tougher environment. Whereas before the earth grew plants and herbs, now it brings forth "thorns and thistles". Man's greatest gift (his productive capacity) becomes simultaneously his curse. He is condemned to labour for his sustenance. "In the sweat of thy face shall thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground". The gift of women (their reproductive ability) is likewise accursed. "I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception: in sorrow shalt thou bring forth children". Henceforth, labour for women will be more painful than birthing is for any other animal.

Prior to the Fall, humans knew only the contentment and innocence that comes when you live entirely under God's law. But the possibility of taking the law into their own hands and living under our own rules instead of or as well as those imposed by our maker, was too great a temptation to resist. We chose banishment from the Garden, because it not only seemed like a punishment but also a liberation. We were free to live under our own laws, to try and work towards a better future. But we had to take the good with the bad. We had to know pain, struggle, conflict, and death. We had to negotiate an astonishingly complex maze of good and bad choices and, as the rest of the Book of Genesis makes clear, we routinely made imperfect choices that lead to God's good world being corrupted.

In a nutshell, then, the story of Adam and Eve begins an overall narrative that seeks to explain why we don't live in a perfectly good world. Once upon a time, Man did live in something like a utopia. But then somebody broke some law and, as a result, we were either punished or that good world was corrupted. That is why there is evil in the world.

Other cultures made up their own versions of this theme. In Greek mythology, the gods sealed up all bad things in a box. But Pandora was tempted to know what was in that box, and when she opened the lid to take a peek, all the evil of the world was let loose.

You might call this the 'finger pointing' explanation. Evil exists in the world because somebody or some people did something to anger the gods or mess up the world. This is more or less the explanation that the prophets, from Elijah to Ezekiel, had for the calamities of their day. Such bad things were God's punishment for some wrong doing that some people had committed. It's not God's fault that the world can sometimes be a bad and dangerous place. It's the fault of some of us.

Modern Versions of Finger-Pointing

If you think about it, the 'finger-pointing' excuse continues to be a favoured get-out clause, used to explain away the faults in a system held by its true believers to be theoretically perfect. Commercial free markets are an excellent case in point. As we have seen throughout this series, any and all attempts to move society closer to laissez faire Capitalism has never resulted in a freer, fairer society overall, but rather in a dystopia of catastrophic social inequality, environmental damage and rampant fraud. Usually, this outcome is described as a corruption of the free-market dream, but what if it is actually the system heading in its natural direction, the outcome of what its concepts of 'freedom' and 'fairness' actually result in? That being the case, this sort of outcome is no corruption at all, but rather a sign of the system working properly.

Whether it be a corruption or the natural outcome of the system, few people appreciate an economy that leaves the majority worse off, absent of anti-system impositions constantly forcing it to steer towards a wider distribution of benefits. When the cry goes up that the system just isn't working for the majority, that cheats prosper and strivers get cheated (remember from Book Three the inverse correlation between the social value of a job and rates of pay?) the standard response to this is to blame the victim. They wouldn't be so poor if only they weren't so lazy; wouldn't have been caught by scammers if they weren't so stupid.

Of course, such reasoning is only valid if hard work invariably leads to greater rewards and if only stupid people get ensnared by scammers. But there is ample evidence of many people working very hard throughout their lives and yet they remain in poverty or dangerously close to it, and very clever people (sometimes actually working in a professional capacity to combat fraud) who get conned into financing some fraudster's dishonest scheme.

Since we have generations of theoretical, experimental and historical proof that free markets tend toward catastrophic inequality and fraud, that the 'invisible hand' just doesn't result in overall improvement without the guiding hand of state bureaucracy to force such outcomes, we should conclude that the 'corruption' that victims are blamed for is really the systemic outcome of free market Capitalism itself.

CHAPTER THREE

Some readers may well question why we should spend so much time, or perhaps even any time, discussing Biblical and mythological accounts of the creation of the world or why evil exists. Shouldn't we just concentrate on the secular accounts of those mysteries and problems that are contradicted by evidence? Why should a series on Mythstakes devote so much space to the not even wrong stories of theology and mythology?

The reason why it's worth spending some time on Biblical 'explanations' is because Western culture is steeped in such tales, to the extent that even when we do devise secular creation accounts, those earlier religious myths tend to influence such thinking. We can see this is so if we return to a secular theory of human prehistory and early history, first mentioned in Book Five.

Turgot's Myth

The model I have in mind is the one that was first dreamed up by A.R.J Turgot. Since he came up with the idea that human society develops through various stages, this has since become secular society's dominant theory of how the modern world "must have" evolved. Whenever those who are not inclined to take ancient myths literally attempt to translate those tales into actual cultural developments, it is invariably a version of Turgot's model that they turn to.

In chapters three to six I am going to take us through this tale as though it were true. But be warned! After having done this we will see how parts of this tale is seriously undermined by evidence.

The Dawn of Man

Until about 40,000 years ago all humans lived in bands or tribes, the former consisting of only dozens of members and the latter's group membership measured in the hundreds. Due to the small size of such groups, many of the institutions taken for granted in modern societies could not exist. There was no bureaucracy, no monopoly of force or information, no hierarchy of settlement, no division of labour, no social stratification and no luxury goods reserved for an elite.

Of all the reasons why those things could not exist, the most important one is economical. These earliest of human societies were hunter-gatherers whose focus was on securing the bare necessities of life- food, water and shelter. One's survival was wholly dependent on cooperating and sharing with other members of your tribe. Since those other members were your extended family, the basis of relationships in such societies was kin-based. Government was conducted in an informal, egalitarian fashion.

At this point, we need to acknowledge something about these ancient ancestors. Biologically-speaking, these were modern humans. If one of them was to stand naked alongside equally clothless 21st century people, it would not be possible to tell which of these people was the distant ancestor.

Actually, there would be ways to tell. You would no doubt notice that our ancient ancestor's hair was not styled by a professional hairdresser or barber, but was instead crudely cropped, or left long and untidy. But hairstyles have more to do with culture than biology, and that brings me to the important point we need to recognise, which is that, culturally-speaking, our ancestors were very different people.

The Impossibility of Individuality

The difference between us and them is most pronounced when it comes to the concept of individualism. We moderns have a very strongly developed sense of individuality, and there are good reasons to suppose that our ancestors' sense of being unique selves cannot have been anything like as strong.

For one thing, it takes a very well-developed technological infrastructure to be able to maintain the illusion that we can get by in this world relying only on ourselves. Next time somebody claims to be a 'self-made millionaire', just stop to consider how ludicrous it is to suppose anyone can really achieve so much all on their own, with no help whatsoever from other people.

There's a classic essay that hammers this point home. I think it's called 'I, Pencil', and it describes just how challenging it would be for one person to make a pencil from scratch. A pencil seems like a humble enough writing instrument. It's just a thin hexagonal tube with a hollow space, into which is inserted a length of graphite, and possibly the other end has a little rubber attached via a metal strip. Simple enough.

But, imagine making one entirely from scratch. You would not be able to take a pre-existing pencil and copy its design, since that would be relying on the work of others. You would somehow have to conceive of the whole design yourself.

Still, it is only a pencil, so perhaps it's not entirely unreasonable to suppose somebody could design it from scratch. So let's imagine you have just dreamed up the pencil, and now you only have to make one.

In order to do that, you would have to gather the necessary materials, such as wood and graphite. The graphite would have to be mined, and you would need to have some way of cutting, carving and shaping wood in order to get that classic pencil shape.

But what are you going to use in order to carry out your mining and your shaping of wood? You would not be able to rely on any pre-existing mining techniques or tools, since once again this would be relying on the help of others. You would have to invent mining, and all of the tools the job requires, all by yourself.

In fact, if you follow this chain of thought back to its roots, it becomes clear that if you were to attempt to make a pencil entirely from scratch, you would have to rediscover just about every technological advance from the simplest stone-age tool right up to modern mining machinery.

Look again at a pencil. Although it may appear to be just a humble writing instrument, it actually contains within its design hundreds of thousands of years of cultural development that millions of people struggled to establish. The same is obviously true of any invention. None stand in isolation but are instead part of a vast web of technologies, tools, and techniques reaching back to the dawn of humanity. Whenever somebody claims to have built a business from scratch, remember the pencil and understand that the most any one person can do is to contribute an infinitesimal step in the ongoing story of cultural evolution.

We moderns can sit in our homes with central heating, and labour-saving electronic appliances, and pretend like we can be self-sufficient beings as we manage our lives via push-button convenience. But our ancient ancestors had no such technological conveniences to make an illusion of self-sufficiency possible. They were only too aware of just how reliant on co-dependency they were.

One's Third-person Perspective

Along with labour-saving appliances, we have access to technologies that confer upon us a remarkable ability, which is to be able to see ourselves as others see us. These days, by the time a person is of school age, they will have been photographed and filmed hundreds of thousands of times as family and friends capture moments like birthdays or baby's first steps. These recorded moments allow us to view ourselves from a third-person perspective. They show us how we move; they reveal in minute detail what our face looks like and how we express our emotions. All these details help us to build up a very strong sense of being unique individuals.

But our ancient ancestors lived at a time when nobody had cameras or, for that matter, mirrors. They never got a clear look at what they themselves looked like. The only way our ancestors could get a glimpse of what they looked like was if they saw themselves reflected in a pool of water. But this would only have been a glimpse, and nowhere near as vivid as one's reflection in a glass mirror.

The historian, Ian Mortimer (b 1967), described how this inability to look at themselves affected our ancestors, psychologically:

"The parameters of individual identity [were] limited to an individual's interaction with the people around him and the religious insights he had over the course of his life. Thus individuality as we understand it today did not exist: People only understood their identity in relation to groups...and in relation to God...the average person saw himself only as part of a community".

Primitive Money

Another difference between them and us involves money, which did exist in such societies but in quite a different fashion to what we think of as money.

In our societies, money comes in the form of cash, credit cards and mobile payments, the primary purpose of which is to swap stuff back and forth between people. Most of us take it for granted that all human interactions are, and have always been, commercial exchanges.

But in actual fact the most primitive forms of money were not crude versions of the kind of currencies we have today. Most importantly, the money that existed in bands or tribes was almost never used to buy and sell goods, but instead consisted of networks of credit whose primary purpose was to maintain and rearrange relations between tribal members.

Because that was the primary purpose of original credit money, it would be quite inaccurate to say that bands and tribes lived in commercial or 'market' economies. No, these were 'human' economies where money was used first and foremost to arrange marriages. This may make it sound like these were commercial exchanges after all, one in which the thing for sale was women. But actually this 'money' (anthropologists call it 'Bridewealth') was not presented to settle a debt and buy a wife, but rather to acknowledge that female fertility is something so valuable that any sort of commercial exchange would be impossible.

Gifts were given as part of the Bridewealth ceremony, things like precious stones or metals, feathers and beads. Looking at such objects through market-economy-tinted glasses, economists have emphasised their portability and durability as explanations for why they were used as currency. But when correctly viewed as forms of social currency, a more important quality stands out.

As David Graeber explained, "it is surely significant what the objects used as currency actually were...These...were materials used to shape people's physical appearance, to make them appear mature, decent, attractive and dignified...They were what turned a natural body into a proper social being".

A World Without Poverty

This prehistorical stage was a world without poverty, and there are several reasons for this. In our earliest societies there was no private property. Individuals did not own land, it was communally owned by the tribe. Moreover, the money that existed was social currency, networks of mutual obligations that evolved to encourage group solidarity and prevent any individual from rising too far above others. Partly because of this and also because everybody was obliged to help hunt and gather basic necessities, there was no specialised labour and hence no higher or lower classes. As Jared Diamond put it, "not only is status not inherited; no member of a traditional tribe can become disproportionately wealthy by his or her own efforts, because each individual has debts and obligations to many others...Full-time crafts specialists are lacking, and every able-bodied adult participates in growing, gathering or hunting food".

Poverty is largely a perceived difference between what a person has and what they believe they should have. This perception is fuelled by the 'Haves', members of society who possess significantly more than others and therefore provide an unfavourable basis of comparison. Over the past 4000 years we have lived with many such 'Haves', from chiefs, to kings and queens, to media celebrities and business executives. We live with the constant reminder of gross inequality. But in the age of bands and tribes, such entitled authority figures simply didn't exist and so no other member had any means of comparing their life unfavourably with anyone else. So 'poverty' was a meaningless concept for them.

A further reason why poverty was meaningless would be what I will call an absence of 'price imposition'. In our day and age commercial markets are so widespread and deeply interwoven in most aspects of our lives that we would find it almost impossible to live without access to money. When just about everything comes with a price tag, it is obviously of immense significance to be poor. It is a condition that leaves you in a very vulnerable state with vastly reduced life chances. But in a world where there are no commercial markets, where nothing is for sale and you are surrounded by natural resources that require no payment, only you or your tribe's time and effort to turn them into materials with utility, then an absence of means of payment is of no significance whatsoever.

But, surely tribes could fail to procure enough of the basic necessities like food, and therefore experience the misery of absolute poverty? Well, first of all we must avoid the temptation of supposing that the life of a hunter-gatherer was 'nasty, brutish and short', involving lots of hard work just to procure the barest of necessities. In actual fact, time budget studies have shown hunter-gatherers spend less time labouring compared to workers in agrarian societies, and there is archeological evidence to suggest that the first farmers were less well-nourished, more susceptible to disease and more likely to die at a young age, compared to a tribe of hunter-gatherers in an area that provided enough resources to meet their needs. Having said that, of course absolute poverty could befall a hunter-gatherer. But for obvious reasons it's not possible to survive very long without these most basic of necessities, so nobody ever lives (long) in conditions of absolute poverty.

Because there was no social stratification and no specialised labour, bands and tribes had no slaves. This was not because they were 'nice'. These were not 'noble savages' living in peace and harmony with all men. Solidarity existed only within individual bands or tribes, but between different tribes there was usually hostility. If bands or tribes did encounter one another, there would have been nothing to violently appropriate other than the only valuable 'properties' to be had in non-commercial societies, namely fertile land and fertile women. In fact, anthropological studies have shown that existing tribal members find it inconceivable that any man could come to blows over anything other than women.

So, rival tribes might have tried to capture women, since their ability to bare children was a valuable resource. But since there was no specialised menial labour to be done, and since they represented just another mouth to feed, tribes had no use for slaves or slavery.

So, then, 'in the beginning' we lived in societies without private property, without market economies, without social stratification, without centralised decision-making, and without poverty. Given the egalitarian and communal nature of these societies, it would be appropriate to label them forms of primitive communism. If longevity is the mark of success for societies, then the fact that bands and tribes persisted for hundreds of thousands of years makes communism far and away the most successful so far. 'Capitalism', but contrast, has only existed for two or three centuries, which is a negligible amount of time in comparison.

But nothing lasts forever, and other kinds of societies did evolve eventually. How and why did they evolve?

CHAPTER FOUR

In order to set about answering the question raised at the end of the last chapter, the dominant theory of how societies evolved looks to food production. Bands and tribes were nomadic, subsisting off of thousands of different wild food sources, moving to wherever the land's natural regeneration rate could provide sufficient supplies. They were economical in the true sense of the word, not carrying anything other than that which was absolutely necessary (this is another reason why there was scant private property: there was no use hoarding personal possessions that would have just made mobility more difficult).

Where possible, they would have conserved energy. No unnecessary work would have been performed, and if they happened upon particularly fertile lands, they would have stayed put.

Farming and the Origins of Hierarchy

For obvious reasons, then, the transition to the next phase of human society took place in the Fertile Crescent. So long as the land provided for the tribe's needs, they would have had no cause to move on and if the carrying capacity of the land supported it, the population would have grown. With that in mind, it's to be expected that those human groups that expanded into larger societies than bands or tribes all built their settlements nearby rivers. Not only does this supply much-needed water for irrigation, if the river reliably floods it will deposit nutrients into the ground. All early civilisations therefore built what was to become the first cities near rivers like the Nile.

The larger populations would have put more pressure on finding ways to ensure the land kept on providing sufficient supplies. Some tribes were fortunate enough to occupy land with crops that were relatively easy to cultivate and animals that were relatively easy to domesticate, and so a transition to agriculture occurred in such places.

Anthropologist Dr Robert Sapolsky (born. 1957) explained how the transition to farming led to different societies. "Hunter-gatherers had thousands of wild sources of food to subsist on. Agriculture changed all that, generating an overwhelming reliance on a few dozen food sources...Agriculture allowed for the stockpiling of surplus resources and thus, inevitably, the unequal stockpiling of them, stratification of society and the invention of classes. Thus, it allowed for the invention of poverty".

Let's examine the reasons why a stratification of society occurred. As the aforementioned quote suggests, the prime driving force was agriculture's ability to produce a surplus of basic necessities that could be stockpiled for later use. This permitted a more sedentary lifestyle, and settled populations who didn't have to quickly pack up and move had less incentive to be quite so frugal. They could begin acquiring more than the bare essentials.

Those additional wares had to be produced, but once the basic necessities could be stockpiled it was no longer the case that everybody had to work exclusively on the most important tasks. Stored supplies and the seasonal nature of farming meant some labour could be turned to other crafts, gradually leading to a diversity of economic specialisation.

Economic specialisation partly gave rise to social stratification because it led to the existence of menial jobs for slaves to do.

The Origins of Commercial Money

Given what I said earlier about 'human economies' with their 'social currencies' symbolising the unquantifiable and therefore priceless nature of a human life, it might be hard to understand how slavery- a condition in which a human life is completely commodified- could have come about.

The explanation lies in the one form of stratification that existed in our most ancient societies, namely gender-based differences. In such societies, men were simultaneously debtors and creditors, each bound to the other through networks of obligations. Women, though, were the credits and debts. As David Graeber observed, the desire for a human life that could produce new life led to arrangements that "did seem to operate as if it were one gigantic apparatus for asserting male control over women".

Now, this point raises a question: Were our ancestors really fighting and negotiating over fertility rights? Putting it like that suggests that those ancient ancestors knew how and why women became pregnant. But, perhaps they did not. They might have had no idea that sexual intercourse led to pregnancy. They might have copulated only for the pleasure such a coupling brings, and did not understand that this act and the birth of a child many months later were connected.

Still, you only have to look around the animal kingdom to see examples of sexual jealousy everywhere, with males going to great lengths to gain access to females and to thwart the efforts of other males. Even if they did not understand that sex leads to babies and were just driven by the sexual urges like those that lead stags to rut or birds of paradise to build elaborate nests, we can suppose that such mating rituals could have developed into elaborate credit systems.

That's not to say that women were fated to be passed around like pieces of meat. Being the stakes in a game men felt obliged to play provided women with opportunities to game the system to their advantage. Moreover, being pre-literate, non-centralised societies, 'the rules' of the game were not written down anywhere, and no legal system was in place to enforce them. So, in practice, human economies with their social currencies consisting of- primarily- rights over women's fertility led to complex ritualistic games that both canny men and women could bend to their advantage.

But, as Graeber pointed out, "this is already a kind of opening. Once the game exists, once the principle of substitution comes in, there is always the possibility of extending it".

What did he mean by that? Well, recall how gifts were given, 'social currencies' in the form of camwood bars (the source of a red paste used as a cosmetic) raffia cloth (used for clothing) and precious metals and minerals (jewellery) all used for enhancing one's maturity, dignity and attractiveness. In theory these were symbolic gifts that were an acknowledgement of an unpayable debt, recognition that a life could not be substituted for anything other than another human life. In practice these were elaborate exchanges where the thing being

purchased was fertility rights. Yes, they could game the system to a certain extent, but it was still the case that women given in marriage was the first instance of humans becoming objects of exchange.

Furthermore, there was a way to avoid the complex business of negotiating the maze of rituals, expectations and responsibilities that marked arranging relationships within tribes, and that was to steal a woman from a rival tribe. As Graeber explained, "it is only by the threat of spears and guns that one can tear people out of those endlessly complicated webs of relationships with others...that render them unique, and thus reduce them to something that could be traded".

As we have seen, for tribes with their limited ability or desire to produce enough surplus of basic necessities, the only human value worth commodifying was women's fertility. But after societies grew into chiefdoms with populations counted in the thousands and supported by agriculture capable of producing a surplus that could fuel a variety of work, this opened up the opportunity to forcibly take both men and women and reduce them to commodities.

Actually, with the rise of chiefdoms and, later, states, two possible courses of action came into being. Since the conquered states themselves had systems of production yielding a surplus, the defeated people could be deprived of political autonomy and made to pay tribute, an early form of taxation.

As obligations transformed into debts (and a debt is basically an obligation that has been quantified so that both parties to a transaction know precisely what is owed), tributes offered another way of procuring labour to perform menial jobs. Legal coercion (backed up, ultimately, by force) could be put on people who owed money, obliging them to work to pay off their debts.

The symbolic payment of 'Bridewealth' was never prevalent in all tribes, but instead tended to arise where land was plentiful and the population relatively sparse, thereby putting a premium on labour and the political power to control it. But in areas where the ratios were reversed (plenty of people but not much land) we instead find dowry, where fathers of brides have to contribute something rather than expect to be paid off.

While this practice remained largely symbolic for women of very wealthy and powerful families, for everyone else the combination of Bridewealth or dowry along with the rise of debts had the effect of turning marriage into something more like a business contract. It's surely significant that in many places the 'brideprice' ended up being equivalent to the price one would pay for a slave. This transition, from Bridewealth used as a symbol of absolute value ($A=A$) to a human life being equivalent to some other object ($A=B$) was brought about first of all through violence, forcibly ripping people from their relationships. And, later, once $A=B$ was established, by luring them into debt.

Once debts arose and the legal precedent that one could put family members up as security for a loan was established, that changed everything. For the creditor was now quite entitled to take away family members as debt peons, just as he was entitled to any of the debtor's other possessions.

So, the emergence of debts from obligations transformed human economies and social currencies into ways of calculating honour and degradation. Honour, in the sense of being able to protect one's own family from being reduced to the status of a complete commodity while also possessing the power to inflict such an outcome on others. And degradation in suffering such a fate and seeing one's own family dragged off as security for a debt.

What is most eye-opening about these historical and anthropological accounts of the emergence of markets is just how much they contrast with how economists imagine money to have originated. In their belief it all begins with villagers engaging in friendly swaps, bartering eggs for rolls of cloth and numerous other such exchanges, and gradually adopting cash (and, much later, credit) as units of exchange whose primary purpose is to simplify the complications that inevitably arise from barter. All of this is supposed to have taken place under conditions of voluntarism.

And yet, look at what money really meant to most ancient peoples. As Graeber put it, "for most...what was likely to come to mind was the selling of slaves and ransoming of prisoners...theft and extortion, revenge and punishment, and, above all, the need for money to create families...and use that same money to destroy families- to create debts that lead to the same wife and children being taken away".

In other words, all evidence shows that commercial markets were never founded on principles of voluntarism at all, but were instead brought about by violence and theft.

But we still have gaps in our understanding. We have learned how agriculture provided menial work for lower classes, and how human economies and social currencies were transformed to supply that labour. But we haven't explained how upper classes came to be.

CHAPTER FIVE

Origin Of the Elites

You will recall how, in bands and tribes, societies operated in such a communal way it was impossible to tell, from appearances, who was in charge. Everyone in a tribal village was expected to share in the work of hunter-gathering, and networks of obligations ensured nobody could appropriate disproportionate wealth. As a result, whereas in modern societies those in charge are easily distinguishable from the sheer amount of personal wealth and prestige they feel entitled to, a 'big-man' of a tribal village appears to be no wealthier or powerful than other community members.

So how did we transition from a situation like that, to the one that existed in later societies where some manoeuvre themselves into a position where they can tell others what to do and reward themselves disproportionately in the process?

The Size Problem

What happened was, first and foremost, that subsequent societies with their populations numbering in the thousands for chiefdoms and millions for states, grew beyond the point where communal decision making was practical or safe. When groups are small, there's enough time to listen and respond to everyone's opinion and reach consensus. It takes time, but it can be done. But to get a committee of thousands to reach consensus would take a ludicrous amount of time. In such a situation it's often better to have some authority figure who can take charge and say "this is what we are going to do".

Communal decision-making became less safe because, while in bands and tribes all members are closely related and nobody had cause to pick sides during arguments, in later societies people lived in close proximity with others they felt no familial ties towards. Arguments between what were basically strangers could deteriorate into brawls as people sided with their own kin. Hence, those societies that did not manage to evolve methods of conflict resolution beyond the communal were more than likely to just blow up and disintegrate, while those that did evolve centralised structures of authority were better equipped to survive.

Bureaucracy and Power

Also, the transition to a more sedentary life and greater variety of jobs provided more opportunity for those who sought power to obtain it. Take bureaucracy and monopoly of information. Due to the open, communal nature of their societies, nobody in a tribe was privy to information that could be turned to their own advantage. But that certainly was the case once bureaucracies arose and started gathering information not everyone was privileged to know.

The evidence tells us that bureaucracy was not invented in order to handle the complexities of large societies. Instead, it was what made large societies possible in the first place. We know this is true because archeological evidence shows bureaucratic techniques emerged not just before sovereign states, but even before the first cities. Practices like the

standardisation of products, certification, record-keeping and accounting all arose around 5000 BC in small towns along the Tigris and Euphrates. What the evidence cannot tell us, is whether this was the emergence simply of bureaucratic techniques, or whether such towns also had a distinct class of trained officials otherwise known as bureaucrats. But, by the time we get to Mesopotamia and Egyptian states, there can be no doubt that the vast temple complexes that existed in those societies were populated by a hierarchy of trained scribes allocating resources both natural and human.

By the time you get top-down layers of bureaucracy recording data in written languages, while most of the population remains illiterate, you obviously have a situation where a few are privy to diplomatic secrets and other forms of political information that can turn to their advantage.

What really secures that advantage, though, is a monopoly on violence. Tribes had great difficulty monopolising violence because they had access only to weapons that could be made from readily-available materials. But once division of labour got underway it eventually became possible for the elites to arm themselves or their private security forces with potent weapons others had little or no access to. In the process, they changed the nature of debt.

You see, how real a debt is depends on how likely you are to encounter more powerful forces who can call it in. For most ordinary people, who will certainly encounter much more powerful authority figures backed up by means of legal coercion and, ultimately, disproportionate physical force, debt is very real indeed. That thousand pound loan you took out is no mere abstraction but rather a concrete reality affecting your life.

But if you are a pharaoh, or a king, or the United States, occupying the very apex of power and there's nobody more powerful, debt is meaningless. It is a mere abstraction. The reason why is, if there's nobody more powerful who can make you pay back a debt, there's nothing to stop you from rolling credit forward into the indefinite future. Hence, for the past 5000 years, states have been able to create money by making marks in tablets, printing notes, adding digits to figures in a computer database, thereby conjuring the stuff out of thin air while simultaneously telling one's subjects who actually have to worry about debt that "money has to come from somewhere" as though it were a commodity you had to mine.

We are now in a position to assemble all the component pieces of the true picture of how Civilisation arose. We had the discovery of farming techniques leading to a surplus of food, a more sedentary life and larger populations. That permitted greater division of labour, creating menial jobs to be done by labourers reduced to commodities through violence and debt. Meanwhile, problems of conflict resolution led to the need to centralise power, and as bureaucracies emerged and disproportionate access to information and the ability to inflict violence became increasingly concentrated, a hierarchical elite who could command the actions of thousands came into being.

The pharaohs, for example, had access to a machine capable of performing incredible tasks if properly directed. Only, this machine's components were not metal and cogs, or plastic and wires. It was made out of people. Thanks to their mastery of administrative procedures, the pharaoh were able to come up with production-line methods that divided complex tasks up into myriad simple operations that could be performed by a workforce that had access to

nothing more complex than the lever and the inclined plane. Oh, and a hell of a lot of people to sweat and toil in order to achieve mighty feats like building pyramids or large-scale irrigation systems.

Religion

But, if that was the truth then why not attribute the rise of Egyptian society to all that organised effort, rather than claim creation was an act of magic once performed by gods, the direct ancestors of Pharaoh?

The answer lies in the ways of addressing the question that arises in any society like this, ones with an elite appropriating large amounts of wealth. Why do the commoners tolerate it?

We have seen one tactic of dealing with common unrest already, which is to gain a monopoly on violence. But given that the ruling classes have always sought popular support, solely relying on such oppressive means of control are clearly not sufficient. Thus, the monopoly on violence is rarely used just to protect the elite's loot; it is also used to maintain public order and curb violence, offering citizens protection under the rule of law.

Another course of action is to provide services impossible to contract for on an individual basis, ones generally viewed as providing tangible benefits. If the elite can take tribute and organise hierarchies of labour to produce things like large-scale irrigation systems that benefit everyone, they will be more likely to be perceived as wise benefactors. On the other hand, those elites who use tribute and labour to pursue selfish projects run the risk of being perceived as kleptocrats liable to be torn down by popular resentment and rebellion.

Given the existence of lavish tombs, grand palaces and luxury private jets, it's obvious that some elites do take the opportunity to flaunt one's ability to appropriate the fruits of collective effort. Whenever this slide toward kleptocracy occurs, we tend to find ideologies and religions that serve to justify centralised authority and large transfers of wealth.

Actually, from a societal perspective, religions serve two practical purposes. We saw earlier how bands and tribes were held together through familial ties but societies like states were so large they were populated by people who regularly encountered strangers, leading to the problem of disagreements turning into brawls. Those larger societies that took superstitious beliefs (which have always been something humans are inclined to hold) and developed them into religions provided bonds beyond kinship with which to unite its citizens. It also provided a motive beyond genetic self-interest to sacrifice oneself. As can be imagined, a communal tribe armed with sticks and stones was no match at all for a disciplined army of fanatics armed with swords or guns.

So, that's one useful purpose religion serves. The other is to create ideologies that buttress the elite's authority and privileges. That's why temples and other works that are both blatant signs of the leaders' power and which also serve as the centre of the official religion, tend to be built in any society with a strong kleptocratic tendency. It's also the reason why bureaucracies tend to grow to include subordinate kleptocrats whose function is to provide ideological justification for the elite's wealth appropriation. Think priests interpreting holy

scripture or Neo-liberal economists producing graphs, statistics and mathematical equations 'proving' corporate executives deserve to be so richly rewarded.

So the tendency to construct an ideology justifying substantial transfers of wealth helps explain why Egypt dreamed up the Creation myth that it did. But there's a further reason why it was believed.

In establishing their civilisation, Bronze-age societies had to innovate, and in fact came up with some of the most important inventions ever discovered, such as writing, geometry and metallurgy. But once the agricultural basis and hierarchical power structure was established, these societies were sufficiently equipped to perpetuate themselves for well over a millennia. There was no longer any need to seek out radical new ways of acting in the world and the idea that things had ever been different faded from living memory. There were no forensic sciences that could have reconstructed an ancient past. All the people knew of history was what the ruling elites and the priesthood who served them told them, and it served the interests of the ruling elite to turn the idea that real change was something that could occur only in the mythical past into popular dogma. All we could do now was maintain the society we had or anger the gods with foolish attempts to change the status quo. As Eric Lerner said, "the myths of the priests gave divine sanction to the workings of society".

So what can we learn from this deconstruction of Egyptian mythology? It teaches us that when a society lacks innovation and the present seems no different from the past, knowledge becomes predominantly authoritarian, with a ruling elite deducing through pure reason how things must be. Conveniently, those assumptions support the belief that those same elites have a natural right both to rule and to appropriate disproportionate levels of wealth. Everything society has, everything it is, it's all thanks to the elites and their divine ancestors. Scripture says so.

It also shows us how Creation myths are not really concerned with a magical past at all. They are just fanciful retellings of a present intended to justify certain practices and make them seem beyond question.

CHAPTER SIX

Having completed a quick runthrough of the dominant secular explanation of how human history played out and the role of religion in that evolution, we now turn to the question of how much of that tale is true.

Certainly, some of it can be said to be true or, at least, not in conflict with evidence. But there are some serious discrepancies between some of the claims and what the latest evidence suggests was actually the case.

Eden, Reimagined

One of the biggest problems is that this narrative is really just a variation on the Eden myth, one that replaces Adam and Eve with some long-distant ancestors stripped of the trappings of modern society, and the serpent with wheat or some other farmable crop, that promises liberation from a meagre hunter-gatherer life but ends up luring humans into becoming trapped within systems of control our ancestors could not have foreseen.

Maybe one of the reasons why we keep returning to the Eden myth is because it makes some kind of intuitive sense? Take the concept of the grand ancestor, the mother and father of all humanity. It is well known that, today, there are some seven billion or so people in the world. It is also well known that, in the past, there were not so many of us. A thousand years ago, the global population consisted of somewhere between 250 and 390 million people. It would seem, then, that as we trace humanity's family tree further back into the past, we must eventually reach a point where we have just two ancient ancestors, the great, great, great.....great grandmother and grandfather of all generations to come.

Something else that seems to reduce as we wind the clock back is the complexity of contemporary life. When run forwards, science and technology advances, opening up more and more opportunities to remake society, but always also presenting new dangers that must be taken into consideration. It stands to reason, then, that as we look further back into the past, we should see ancestors who (for better or worse) lived simpler lives.

True, not all of us conclude that, by winding the clock back to time zero, we must find the human story began with an 'Adam' and 'Eve' living in peaceful innocence, like Rousseau doves. Some suppose that, at the dawn of humanity, 'Adam' and 'Eve' were Hobbesian hawks, uncivilised savages at war with each other. But we agree that the past was a simpler time, because back then our technological capabilities were so primitive, and you just cannot have complex societies built from such limited means.

When Creation was Possible

One more thing that would appear to be true, and in fact has to be true if one is thinking in sufficiently long timeframes, is the mythic age of creation, that time when things that were entirely new could come into being.

In Books One and Three we saw how strange it is that we should think of work as 'productive' when, really, the vast majority of work we do does not 'produce' anything. A

physical object like clothes, or a car, is manufactured once but thereafter it will be cleaned and repaired a great many times in order to ensure it can keep on fulfilling its purpose, rather than just becoming broken and ruined. So 'Caring', not 'Productive', labour is what the bulk of work really consists of.

Even in the case of that initial manufacturing, that's usually transformative work- turning pre-existing raw materials and products into different products, rather than production, strictly speaking. Nobody ever really builds a business or invents something from scratch, but instead just builds on what has come before.

Still, one has to suppose that, although today we no longer see any new film genres or story archetypes, just variations on long-established themes, at some point in the past somebody must have put on the first ever romantic comedy, played the first blues riff, cooked the first hot dinner, laid the foundations for those economic, political and philosophical schools of thought that we now just add footnotes to.

In most cases, it's certainly not true that one person originated these things. Maybe, all variations of bread we have today trace back to some proto-bread that was dreamed up by some woman now long forgotten, but those economic, political and philosophical systems surely evolved through group actions that cannot be fully attributed to one stupendous Plato, Shakespeare or Einstein. But that aside, it has to be the case that these things once came into being and that, therefore, the past really was a time of mythic creation, an age when truly new things could come into being, in a way that's no longer possible.

Of course such things had to have happened. Money, kingship, marriage, writing, music, it all had to have some kind of origin, but how did it all come about? The truth is, we don't really know, and so we make up stories about how such things might have come about, stories that are, almost certainly, saying more about our prejudices and collective fantasies than anything to do with what actually took place.

The False Simplicity of Eden

One major reason why it's actually extremely hard to accurately reconstruct such origins is because so much of that evolution occurred in prehistorical time, and hence there's very little if any tangible evidence we can rely on to inform us of how it all developed. But, by acknowledging this, we are showing how our assumptions can, sometimes, undergo radical changes.

You may recall from Book Five how the colonists and conquerors bringing 'Christianity' to the New World believed there had been hardly any prehistory at all. Such an assumption could be traced back to the 1650s when the archbishop of Armagh, James Usher (1581-1656) used historical records and Christ's family tree to trace His ancestry back through Mary and Joseph, whose father was Jacob, whose father was Matthan, and so on through Eleazor, Elihad, Akim, Zadok, Azor, Elakim, Abihad, Zerubabel, Shealtiel, Jeconiah, Josah, Amon, Manesseh, Hezekia, Ahaz, Jothem, Uzziah, Jehoram, Jehoshaphat, Asa, Abijah, Rehoboam, Solomon, David, Nashon, Aminadab, Ram, Hezion, Perez, Judah, Jacob, Isaac, Abraham, and then on past that patriarch through Naamall, Tubel-cain, Jubel, Jabal, Lamech, Methushael, Mehujael, Irad, Enoch, Cain and, finally, Adam, whose creation,

Archbishop Usher calculated, had occurred in 4004 BC (the six days of creation occurred in late October of that year, according to him).

It was also assumed, if one took the Bible literally that, at least until the fall of the Tower of Babel some sixteen centuries after God rested from His work, that the whole human race all spoke Hebrew, which again ties in with the assumption that the past was a far simpler time.

In modern, evolutionary terms though, human prehistory goes back quite a bit further than 4004 BCE. The revelation that prehistory is considerably older began in 1858, when discoveries were made of Stone Age axes, obviously human tools, deliberately buried alongside the remains of extinct animals such as the woolly rhino. Since then, other archeological discoveries and techniques like carbon dating have determined that human prehistory is more than three million years old.

What were humans doing throughout those three million years of prehistory? We know they used stone tools back then, and that they painted on cave walls some fifty-one thousand years ago, because they left behind evidence to inform us of these habits. But other than that we don't know anything about the way of life these ancestors followed and, in some cases, all we have to go on is a single tooth.

This of course means that there are enormous gaps in our understanding of human prehistory, and wherever such ignorance exists there is always the temptation to imaginatively fill in those gaps, an exercise that is more myth-making than scientific discovery.

It also tends towards similarities with Biblical narratives, or at least it does in Western countries steeped in such traditions. For example, these days we don't just use archeological artefacts and fossilised remains to reconstruct prehistory, but genetic evidence, too. All animals carry mitochondria in their cells, and mitochondrial DNA is something inherited only from mothers. If you were to sequence one person's M-DNA and compare it to that of another person's, it's possible to figure out how far back the family trees of these two people go back before they both converge on the same great, great...grandmother.

And what can be done with any two people can be done with the whole of humanity. Every person alive today can trace their female-line ancestry back to a common ancestor who, according to the techniques outlined above, lived roughly 140,000 years ago. Having estimated that this was more or less the time when the great, great...great grandmother of all people alive today existed, we could then examine human remains dated to around this time and have some idea of what this person might have looked like.

We humans love to apply labels to things and so this common ancestor needed a name. The choice was obvious: She was named 'Eve' or, more precisely, Mitochondrial-Eve. Such a name could not help but conjure up romantic images of a long lost relative, great, great...great grandmother of us all, living in simpler times (for better or worse) in some African garden of Eden.

The Complex Past

It turns out, though, that such romantic imagery bares scant comparison to what life must have been like some 140,000 years ago. Let's return to that Babel myth, the one that said there was really only one People-Hebrews- until the tower fell and the human race then diversified into the many different nations and cultures we have today.

A common mistake is to assume that, today, there are many different races of humans. When one travels to foreign countries, one knows that such a journey will bring one into contact with strange people speaking in strange tongues who practice strange religions and strange cultural practices. Those Others, plainly, are not like us. Some celebrate this diversity, some find it unsettling, but it's generally agreed that humans come in remarkably different varieties.

Only, we don't. Compared to other animals all humans are remarkably similar, biologically speaking. After all, most other animals you can name come in multiple species. We don't just have owls, but snowy owls, barn owls, eagle owls to name a few. There is so much genetic difference between these species of owls that a fertile male from any one species cannot successfully breed with a fertile female from any other species. Indeed, it is the very inability to produce offspring that makes one animal a separate species from another.

But, so long as you have a fertile male and female, any two humans can produce children. It does not matter how dark or light their skin is, how straight or curly their hair, we are all so biologically similar any fertile man could successfully impregnate any fertile woman. This of course means there is only one race of human.

Even culturally speaking we're not nearly so different as such things as racism and xenophobia might lead us to suppose. Foreign languages may sound very different but there's no language that has no nouns, verbs and adjectives. We all adopt the same body language, with facial expressions conveying fear, joy, disgust etc., recognised by all humans, everywhere. We all understand the emotions of other humans, another sign of how similar we are to one another. As Steven Pinker pointed out, no person, having heard the word *schadenfreude* and what it means for the first time, thinks "hmmm...finding humour in the misfortune of others....nope, I have no concept of that, whatsoever". No, they think "oh, there's a word for that? Cool!".

What the latest biological anthropological and genetic research is revealing is that this fact of human life- we're all remarkably similar to one another- has only been true since about 40,000 BCE and that the Tower of Babel idea of humans starting out all the same and then diversifying has it all backwards. Prior to 40,000 BCE, our human ancestors did not all live in Africa's eastern savannahs, as was once supposed, but were distributed over a far greater range of African landscapes. For tens or hundreds of thousands of years, some of these populations were isolated from other populations, and as regional traits developed over these long periods without cultural cross-contamination, they became so incredibly different to how humans were adapting to other environments, they would have seemed so much more alien than the people of different nations today.

And that's just ancestral humans we're talking about. Another way in which life was so very different before roughly 40,000 BCE is that humans co-existed among many ape-like species. Some such hominids (the catch-all term for all 'ape-men' as they used to be known) were sometimes genetically similar enough to allow for cross-breeding, while others were too genetically different for that to be possible, but still more like humans in their ability to create culture, tools, art, compared to the primates we have today.

If you want some idea of what it might have been like to exist alongside so many different species and sub-species of humans and apes, the fantasy world of Tolkien, or Greek myth, with their races of elves, orcs, hobbits, gorgons, giants and dwarves are probably the nearest thing you can get to just how varied these species of hominid were.

And that's just physical differences. We don't, for the most part, have any idea concerning what sort of societies those great diversity of primates formed, but it is entirely reasonable to assume the differences would have been even greater than the physical differences.

That huge diversity of primate species and cultures was gradually reduced as the territories of our ancestors began to expand, leaving the birthplace of Africa and moving into Eurasia, on the way encountering other populations such as Neanderthal that they sometimes interbred with. Most of those species and sub-species went extinct, leaving behind one species of human, *Homo sapiens-Sapiens*: Us, a far more similar breed of smart ape compared to the variety of humans and human lifestyles there had once been.

What these facts tell us, is that what we should not expect to find in the deep past is the 'original' form of human society. Our ancestors were not all type-castable as Rousseau doves or Hobbesian Hawks, they much more varied and diverse than that. As Wengrow and Graeber said, "there was no garden of Eden and a single Eve never existed".

CHAPTER SEVEN

Revolutions That Never Were

The conclusion reached in the last chapter serves as a reminder that the story of life on Earth, and human life in particular, is much more complex than we imagine it to be. It's quite understandable that we seek to reduce that complexity and dream up simplified models and stories of what is and what might have been. It is the only way of making sense of the world and our place in it.

So long as one bears in mind that philosophy, science, religion and politics are always based on cartoon realities that do not have a one-to-one correlation with reality itself, but might nevertheless shed useful light on some aspect of the human condition, there's nothing wrong with making up such stories. Where things become problematic is when we forget these are stories we made up and confuse them for reality itself.

One of the ways in which our imagined past is a lot simpler than reality itself is the way we tend to suppose that prehistory and human history developed through certain identifiable stages and revolutions. We speak of certain origins such as the "origin of life" or the "origin of human culture". Such expressions give the impression that inanimate matter changed into life through one momentous event, like the lightning bolt that animated Frankenstein's creature, and that there was a single moment in time when an ape became human, like Kubrick's apes acquiring Invention and Culture after having touched the monolith.

In the case of life's emergence from non-life, we saw in Book One how it's quite wrong to speak of 'the' origin of life, since there is no singular moment one can identify that marks the point at which a system of increasing complexity becomes definitively 'alive'. Similarly, we really should not suppose that all the mental traits and everything else that define the human species and set us apart from other living primates all came into being in one momentous step.

To be fair, no scientist claims that's how human beings and human culture came into being, but you do hear of certain 'revolutions', implying there are moments in our past where changes occurred at a pace too rapid and surprising not to warrant some kind of momentous and sudden break from normality.

One such 'revolution', said to have occurred around 45,000 years ago, is the so-called 'Upper Palaeolithic Revolution' (sometimes called the 'Human Revolution'). According to this way of thinking, which was widely adopted in the 80s and 90s, for millions of years our ancestors had only the limited tool-making abilities of modern chimps. Then, suddenly, as if from nowhere, the archeological record is full of an outpouring of human artistry and inventiveness, with all kinds of sophisticated tools, weapons, musical instruments, sculptures and other art forms turning up.

What was so seemingly weird about such archeological discoveries was that our study of fossilised human remains had determined that anatomically modern humans evolved tens of thousands of years before our ancestors apparently got around to doing humanlike things such as carving rocks and wood into figurines, daubing cave walls with pictorial art,

establishing networks of trade, staging elaborate burials and wielding more sophisticated weapons than hitting enemies with a rock. Why should there be such a large gap between the emergence of humans and human culture? It was believed that some sudden mutation in our brains must have enabled our ancestors to interpret and manipulate the world in ways which had previously been impossible.

More recent discoveries, however, have revealed a rather more mundane reason for why archeological evidence from Europe is so rich. It's simply because these are countries with rich governments, learned societies and university departments that have been funding archeological digs in Europe for much longer than other parts of the world have invested time and money in uncovering their buried past.

But now that such work is being undertaken in Africa, the Arabian peninsula, Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent, the beginnings of human culture are being pushed further and further back into the past. To give one example, recent discoveries on the islands of Borneo have revealed cave art that is tens of thousands of years older than the cave paintings at the Ardeche region of France that this series began with. Such discoveries are showing that our ancestors have been fully anatomically and culturally human for much longer than we once supposed. So much for the 'Human Revolution'.

That's Monumental!

Another kind of archeological discovery that is overturning common assumptions of how people must have lived tens of thousands of years ago are monumental structures from the Pleistocene era. One such example would be what are known as 'Mammoth Houses'. They are found in various places, one of which is Yudinovo, in Russia. This structure consisted of a framework made out of mammoth tusks and bones (hence its name) and the largest known examples are pretty big, calculated to have been some thirty-four feet in diameter. Acquiring the building materials for such a huge structure would have required hunting down a great many mammoths and a great many people would have been needed to build the structure once all that material had been gathered.

It is evident, then, that our ancient ancestors, who we commonly think of as not doing anything much beyond living in caves, gathering nuts and occasionally bringing back an animal carcass or two, were organising themselves into groups of thousands and building monumental structures.

They were devoting huge amounts of time to accomplishing other kinds of works, too. We have previously mentioned prehistoric burials that showed our ancestors must have cared for the sick and disabled and felt the need to honour them in death with a dignified burial. Sometimes, considerable amounts of work was devoted to ensuring the dead were suitably honoured. For example, archeologists have discovered what, at first, might be taken for cemeteries. These burial sites, one of which was found in Sunghir in Northern Russia, are thought to have been built some 26,000 years ago.

Actually, these are not, strictly speaking, cemeteries. They are, instead, isolated burials of individuals or small groups. When these graves were opened, it was found that the

deceased had each, individually, been decorated with thousands and thousands of beads, each one crafted from mammoth ivory and fox teeth.

Graeber and Wengrow listed what would have been required to build burial sites and monuments like these. "Extraordinary outlays of labour involved in making the grave goods (10,000 work hours for the Sunghir beads alone...) highly advanced and standardised means of production, possibly suggesting specialised craftspeople [and] exotic, prestigious materials...transported from very distant locations". That last point refers to the discovery that those mammoth houses we mentioned earlier became bustling centres of trade, places where such items as animal pelts, marine shells, and amber were brought in from great distances for purposes of exchange.

How could it possibly be that people of the Upper Palaeolithic period (which ran from roughly 50,000- 15,000 BCE), commonly thought of as being about as industrious as bands of chimps, managed to do all that? Such a discrepancy between what we assume stone-age savages were capable of, and what people were really accomplishing back then, cries out for explanation.

Or rather, it does if you're an archaeologist who specialises in the Pleistocene era, and thus have to face this evidence. Since most writers of prehistory don't work in this field, they have been able to rely on the standard strategy for perpetuating mythstakes, which is to completely ignore this evidence which refutes the idea that such people were restricted to living in tiny groups and subsistence living. They continue to talk about humans who lived between 50 and 15,000 years ago as they could only have been living in Rousseau's state of primordial innocence, or stuck in a constant fight of all against all, ala Hobbes.

But what about those who are aware of this evidence that shows our ancestors were not stuck with the choice of living as small groups of squabbling thugs, or small groups of folk with a childlike innocence? How do they reconcile this discrepancy?

The 'Early Stratification' Excuse

One attempt to make the latest discoveries fit our assumptions of what early humans must have been like takes the form of an alliance with evolutionary psychologists such as Jordan P. Peterson (b 1962), who insist that humans are genetically predisposed towards dominance behaviour. Those who adopt this strategy simply say that all the evidence mentioned earlier shows that people were organising themselves into 'hierarchical' and 'stratified' societies far sooner than we previously thought.

According to this explanation, then, all that talk of a lost, egalitarian golden age is purely mythological. It never happened at all. Instead, what our ancient ancestors were doing was organising themselves into hierarchies headed by powerful leaders and, perhaps, even dynasties.

The reason why the possibility of Pleistocene dynasties is raised, is because those burial sites mentioned earlier revealed a few cases where considerable wealth was buried with children. What does that imply? The answer, some say, is that wealth could be inherited, along with status. So these were princes, and this adds up to the conclusion that the driving

forces behind social development are, and have always been, coercive power and self-aggrandisement.

But the problem with this explanation is that the evidence just doesn't support it, and here's why. We have found none of the other trappings of centralised power that always comes with the rise of powerful figureheads like princes and kings. Yes, there are monuments and impressive burial sites, but where are the fortifications, the palaces, and the storehouses that also always get built whenever power is centralised? They are nowhere to be found.

As Wengrow and Graeber commented, "over tens of thousands of years, we see...little else to indicate the growth of ranked societies, let alone anything remotely resembling 'states'".

"Stop Beating Your Chest, You Look Silly!"

Perhaps we need to rethink our assumptions of how humans can behave and what sort of societies we can build? One person who seemed to at least begin such a rethink was Christopher Boehm (1931-2021), an evolutionary anthropologist who specialised in primate studies, two areas of expertise that enabled him to identify a certain something that is uniquely human.

Before getting around to discussing what that was, let's first remind ourselves of what humans and their primate cousins have in common. Both are social beings. Both use tools. Both pass down learned skills to younger generations. Humans, of course, have developed much more complex and sophisticated ways of doing all that, but those are quantitative, not qualitative, differences.

Something else all primates do is to put on displays of dominant-submissive behaviour, such as when a silverback gorilla goes all King Kong and struts about beating his mighty chest. We find examples of such power displays throughout the animal kingdom. Any animal you care to name almost certainly has some means of making itself look big and fierce, signalling "don't mess with me, it won't be worth what it will cost you!". The same thing applies to submissive behaviour. All animals (or, at least, all those that prefer to live in groups) have ways of communicating the message "just leave me alone, I am no threat to you".

Obviously, human beings are no exception. We have dreamed up a great many ways for the dominant to signal their strength and status. But there is one kind of strategy for handling dominant behaviour that is uniquely human. Where all other animals are concerned, their options are either to get into displays of posture where each opponent tries to intimidate the other, but no blows are exchanged (the equivalent to a man squaring up against another, putting on a fierce expression and saying "come on then! Let's have it!"), which then either ends with one side conceding they can't win the fight, or it comes to blows which ends with one of them running away or becoming too injured to fight any more. But, there is one more option, never taken by any animal other than humans, which is to mock your opponent, belittling his or her displays of status and strength with contemptuous remarks, body language etc.

One of those universally-recognised human gestures we mentioned earlier is eye-rolling. All people, everywhere, understand that this means "oh, what an idiot!". In Book Five we saw, in

the case of the Wendat, how, if any chief tried to order his people to do anything they did not want to do, they would just laugh at him. By studying the ethnographic accounts of existing foraging bands around the world, Boehm found that we humans have a great many ways to burst the inflated egos of the high and mighty.

This is something no other social animal does. A gorilla can signal that it is more worthy of being alpha by beating its chest and roaring with more vigour than its rival, or it can submit to the rule of its rival or run away; but no gorilla ever mocked its rival.

According to Boehm, the ability to use ridicule, mockery and shunning to cut braggarts and bullies down to size is not something humans do by instinct. Instead, it is a conscious, well thought-out strategy. He called this 'actuarial intelligence', and what he meant by that is that people are able to imagine what their societies could become if people behaved in certain ways and, if they don't like what they foresee, to then go on to adopt ways and means of changing human behaviour so that the unwanted future is avoided.

In short, then, we might say that, while all animals form dominance hierarchies and instinctively engage in posture/submit, or fight/flight, only humans can engage in the essentially political work of reflecting consciously on what direction society is heading in, and adopting preventative measures should it seem to be going in an undesirable direction.

Boehm and Edenist Thinking

Now, you would think that, having found that what it means to be human is to engage in political forms of action in order to bring about alternative social arrangements, Boehm would have concluded that this is precisely what our ancestors had been doing.

But, rather than assume our ancestors experimented with a great many possibilities, Boehm instead insisted that, for some reason, humans were strictly "egalitarian for thousands of generations before hierarchical societies began to appear".

Does that sound familiar? Yes, it's the old Rousseau version of the Fall, in which for hundreds of thousands of years humans all lived in primordial innocence, content not to do anything political, and then something triggered that rush to entrap ourselves in dominance hierarchy and layers of bureaucracy.

If "genetically Hobbesian" and 'Politically Rousseau' is the only way humans can ever be, then it ought to be the case that we either form societies that are about as large and complex as the bands that other primates form, or we go straight to chiefdoms and states. But, as archeological evidence is making clear, our ancestors' options were not limited to this binary choice.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A Lack of Modern Alternatives

Why are we so limited in our thinking of what forms of social organisation are open to us? One reason, I would say, is because, in our modern world, we find, everywhere, just variations of one economic/political system. Since that is the case, we have no real basis of comparison, which is a necessary condition for contemplating alternatives.

True, we do tend to believe there is some political choice, as demonstrated by those endless Left versus Right, Communism versus Capitalism debates. But such a binary choice ignores the fact that neither of those alternatives is really viable. It is incredibly difficult to rid human society of all hierarchy and commercial activity. Some would even say this would be impossible. So if Communism is only made truly, fully possible once private property, commercial markets and dominance hierarchies are abolished, how could we ever, successfully and permanently, bring it about? We have lots of historical examples to show how, if we try to move towards full Communism, the result is a disaster.

As for Capitalism, although we often hear it said that we live under such a system we really don't. Or, at least, not full Capitalism. If full Communism is the complete absence of commercial market and the price imposition, full Capitalism would be ubiquitous markets, the commodification of all aspects of life and society, except of course the selling outright of a labourer's capacity to work (if you agree with Marx that the free labourer is a condition of the existence of Capitalism).

To see how the zone of price exclusion must go further than that, one need only consider what it would mean for justice if we had full Capitalism. Rather than have a prosecution demonstrating beyond reasonable doubt that evidence links a particular crime to a particular suspect, and a Defence picking holes in that narrative if indeed there are any, it would instead be a case of "who pays wins". One could liken this to the Prosecution placing money on the scales of justice, and the Defence doing likewise, and whichever side can make the scales tip in their favour, wins.

Obviously, if this was how justice was determined, the guiltiest rich person could buy themselves a not-guilty verdict, while the most innocent person of limited financial means would end up incarcerated doing slave labour in the prison-industrial complex. Does that sound like 'justice' to you? No? Me neither. Nor is justice the only aspect of life that should not be reduced to a saleable commodity. There are other aspects of society that cannot be moved entirely from the sphere of values to the sphere of value, and history shows that all attempts to move towards full Capitalism results in disaster.

So, since full Capitalism must result in a travesty of justice and the breakdown of society, and moving fully to the polar opposite extreme is not possible, either, we instead always run a limited market where some goods and services can be commodified, but some things are off limits as far as commercialism is concerned. In other words, the only system we ever have that can endure, is some variation of a commercial market economy regulated by socialist checks and balances.

Another reason might be that we no longer live among many other species of humans and hominids, which again might limit our horizons when it comes to imagining alternative social possibilities. The closest living genetic relatives-chimps and bonobos- are too limited in their ability to form societies, and so they have very little to tell us about what options are open to humans, who, remember, have what they lack: Political consciousness.

Not that this limitation stops some from using these animals as a representation of how our ancestors might have organised themselves. Readers of Book One may recall that there were some examples of the barter myth, including a passage taken from Yuval Noah Harari's book 'Sapiens'. In the same book we find the following speculation regarding "the sociopolitical world of the foragers":

"Some may have been as hierarchical, tense, and violent as the nastiest chimpanzee group, while others were as laid-back, peaceful and lascivious as a bunch of bonobos".

The question is, why did Harari make this particular comparison when so many more suitable alternatives were available? Like what? Like, any comparison of one group of humans with another group of humans. He could, for example, have compared the violent group to a gang of football hooligans, and referred to a hippy commune rather than bonobos.

Unless, that is, there's something about chimp and bonobo society that makes this the more appropriate choice in some people's minds? That 'something' most probably has a lot to do with that attitude that arose out of Turgot's work, namely the assumption that primitives can't have had any understanding of where their societies were going.

You see, when people join clubs, organisations, identity groups and other such gatherings, they do so out of conscious choice. But chimps and bonobos don't make the conscious choice to live as they do because, as Boehm's work showed, they have no actuarial intelligence, or capacity to reflect on alternative ways of living and anticipate probable costs and benefits.

Another way to put this would be to say humans, and no other primate, are capable of being 'self-conscious political actors'. This is a form of consciousness we don't consider much at all, or rather, we no longer do. And that we no longer do may be another reason why we're not asking the right questions that would expose the falsehoods that allow mythstakes to persist.

The Fall Of Political Consciousness and the Rise of Self Awareness

Consider the question, "What is consciousness?". The question refers to something, but what? Most people assume it refers to self-awareness, and if they were interested enough in the question to consult philosophical writings on the subject, they would find most philosophers have tended to define consciousness mostly as self-awareness, too.

But neuroscience has determined that, most of the time, people are not self-aware. They don't need to be, because they can rely on habitual forms of behaviour and other aspects of

acting in the world that rely on autonomous mental routines going on below the level of conscious awareness.

Readers of Book Four may recall Jay Forrester's comment about how, although people like to think conscious choice drives all their intentions and actions, really "they are driven in most of their actions by feedback loops". This would appear to be backed up by neuroscience, which has shown that an individual can typically hold a thought or work out a problem for about seven seconds, and then it's back to working, essentially, on autopilot.

However, all this talk about humans being fully conscious for only brief periods of time, tends to ignore that there are situations in which people can hold onto thoughts, and chew over problems, not for mere seconds but hours on end. They do this whenever they have somebody else to talk to.

Just about everyone understands, on some level, that the way to keep the 'window of consciousness' open for more than a few seconds is to get into dialogue with somebody else. After all, how do people figure out problems when alone? The usual way in which they do this is by imagining they are explaining or arguing about that very thing with somebody else.

These are the occasions, then, when we humans are most fully conscious: When there is a common problem that needs solving, and when we feel a need to sway each other's point of view. In other words, all those times when we are in dialogue with other humans. Or, if no humans are available, imaginary people with whom we can chew the fat in our minds.

Swaying others to one's point of view is the art of politics. So, really, human consciousness should be thought of primarily in terms of political self-consciousness, rather than self-awareness.

It used to be understood that there was something inherently dialogic about human consciousness. Philosophers of the ancient world, from Greece to China, understood this, which is why all their philosophical works came in the form of dialogues. The common assumption back then was that political consciousness was the predominant form of consciousness, while individual self-consciousness or self-awareness had to be acquired through an extensive commitment to training, discipline and meditation that only a handful of sages could hope to fully complete.

But then, over the last few centuries, attitudes changed, with self-awareness or individualism being seen as the normal, default state of all humans everywhere, and political consciousness as something only a few trained experts were able to apply.

You can actually trace the rise in self-awareness in the writing styles of authors through the ages. The earliest forms of writing took the form of dialogues, which one could liken to a group of humans, gathered together, conversing and arguing amongst themselves. It is entirely reasonable to assume that this form of communication had been going on, verbally, long before the ability to translate words into physical markings was discovered.

Then, gradually, writing styles became more autobiographical. Fictional stories involved characters keeping diaries and writing letters, such correspondences giving characters some insight into what was going on in other characters' minds, but other than that the various characters don't know what is going on in the inner lives of other people. This then gave way to the 'omniscient narrator' form of storytelling, in which the plot weaves multiple levels of perspectives, as in "Alice knew that David knew that Alice had made a secret arrangement with Sarah".

The way stories were told changed, too. What began as an oral tradition practiced in groups, became written tales that people read aloud to themselves and, finally, texts that people read silently "in their own minds" so to speak. In other words, our narrative techniques and methods of passing on stories, facts etc, evolved in a way that trained us all to acquire that form of self-consciousness that was once the sole preserve of a few highly disciplined sages.

But, it seems something was lost as we increasingly came to view self-awareness as the default conscious state for human beings. Political self-consciousness became increasingly regarded as the form of thinking that couldn't really exist without lots of formal training. By the 18th and 19th centuries, the general belief was that this was a form of consciousness that only came into being after the Enlightenment.

That meant that any humans living before this time, and certainly those around in prehistoric times, had no capacity to understand or reflect on the society they were a part of, or the directions it could head in. They must have lived in some sort of mythological haze. As Wengrow and Graeber commented, "primitive folk...were not only incapable of political self-consciousness, they were not even fully conscious on the individual level...At best they were mindless conformists, bound in the shackles of tradition; at worst, they were incapable of fully conscious, critical thought of any kind".

Attitudes might seem to have changed since then. We no longer refer to our ancestors or contemporary hunter-gatherers as "savages", for example. But, then again, have things really improved in terms of how we regard our ancestors? Perhaps not. After all, we now imagine that human societies evolved through a sequence of recognisable stages- bands, tribes, chiefdoms and, finally and forever, states with centralised rulers, layers of bureaucracy and networks of trade reduced to exchange and nothing else- and that humans never had much if any say into how these sequence of societal stages played out. Those who lived through the early stages, it is widely assumed, had as much capacity to reflect politically on their situation and the direction society was headed in, as chimps and bonobos do, which is to say, none at all.

A Forgotten Study of People

We have gone from thinking that the default state of human consciousness is political self-consciousness, with self-awareness a condition only achieved through formal training, to the exact opposite. This shows that there has been a profound shift in how we think about people in general, and what people are capable of.

In retracing the developments behind this transformation of assumptions, we encounter a situation that, in at least one respect, is similar to stories concerning the origins of money and markets.

We have previously seen how, since the two most dominant theories of money's and markets' origins ('barter' and 'primordial debt') are not supported by evidence, perhaps we should pay more attention to thoughts on this matter that come from the fringes of accepted theory, little-known experts whose work is rarely, if ever, cited.

In the case of money's origins, that little-known expert was Philippe Rosebape, who thought the most primitive currencies were not mediums of exchange at all, but rather ways of rearranging human relationships around unpayable debts.

If one digs deep into anthropological studies, one finds here, too, thoughts that are so fringe they are almost entirely unknown, let alone part of the accepted debate over what people are like or capable of doing, and yet they might very well be the sort of thoughts we should be having if we are to liberate ourselves from mythstakes.

This mostly forgotten part of anthropology was centred around an assumption that directly challenges the popular belief that primitive people in the early stages of economic development were apelike in their inability to experiment with alternative social possibilities. Instead, it supposes that anatomically-modern human ancestors were also culturally modern, and thus just as able to experiment with alternative ways of living.

Now, one would be forgiven for supposing that a fringe theory must be the brainchild of a little-known expert, for surely any papers published by somebody famous would have much wider recognition? But, in this case, among those making the radical claim that early humans were our intellectual equals was perhaps the most renowned anthropologist in the world and, arguably, France's most famous intellectual- Claude Levis-Strauss (1908-2009).

Actually, not every aspect of his thoughts on this matter could be said to be little-known. In 'The Savage Mind' (published in 1902), a book considered a foundational work in structural anthropology, Levis-Strauss famously argued that the most appropriate way of thinking about mythological thought was not to just dismiss it as some sort of prelogical haze, but instead to recognise it as a sort of "Neolithic science", one built on different principles to our own, modern, scientific methods, but just as sophisticated.

Well, that's certainly one way of elevating early man to an intellectual state higher than that of chimps: view him as a kind of scientist rather than a savage making up nonsense about gods, spirits and magic. But Levis-Strauss went further than that because, in his writings, he published some very interesting thoughts on politics that fell into near-instant obscurity.

This little-known aspect of his work was presented to the world in 1944, when Levis-Strauss published an essay about politics among a certain tribe who lived in a notoriously inhospitable stretch of savannah in Mato Grosso, Brazil.

They were the Nambikwara and, to most people, they had a justifiable reputation as extremely simple folk. Using the language that had become popular with Turgot's

assumption that human societies either progress through stages of hunter-gatherer, farmer, and finally urban dweller, or get stuck at some earlier stage while the rest of the world moves on, the popular belief was that the latter fate must have befallen the Nambikwara. Therefore, their way of life provided a direct window on how Palaeolithic humans must have lived.

Levis-Strauss believed it was a mistake to think of these people as being 'primitive'. They were, after all, known to trade with city people and to occasionally hire themselves out as labourers on farms. It was also likely that some of the Nambikwara traced their ancestors to runaways from plantations or cities. Given those facts and distinct possibilities, Levis-Strauss insisted that the Nambikwara were, in fact, people living in the shadow of the modern state, rather than savages stuck in the land that time forgot.

Still, all that being said, Levis-Strauss also acknowledged that, in some ways, these were a people who lived simpler lives compared to the complexity of life within cities. He observed that the Nambikwara were not at all competitive, which some might say was not surprising, given that the environment in which they lived did not provide much to compete over.

They did, however, have some rudimentary form of hierarchy. Since such arrangements were a good deal simpler compared to developed nations' social and political systems, Levis-Strauss suggested that, through studying Nambikwaran politics, one might learn something of "some basic functions" of political life that "remain hidden in the more sophisticated societies of the developed world".

What resulted from this study was the discovery that there was, in Nambikwaran society, something analogous to the wheeling and dealing that went on in first-world politics. True, Nambikwaran chiefs were not trying to broker alliances or negotiate compromises between different interest groups. There was little call for such politicians, due to there being very little difference in the wealth and status of people in this society. But what the chiefs were doing was brokering between two entirely different social and ethical systems.

What necessitated this form of wheeling and dealing was the fact that, during the rainy season, the Nambikwara effectively lived in a different society. During those times, they occupied hilltop villages of several-hundred people, and the chiefs relied only on gentle persuasion to ensure necessary tasks like constructing houses and doing horticultural work was carried out. Mostly, they cared for the sick and needy and mediated disputes, but other than that did not impose anything on anyone.

These hilltop villages were not exactly permanent. Once the rainy season ended, the inhabitants dispersed into smaller, foraging bands. The dry season was, for the Nambikwara, a time of nomadic adventures, and this was when those who would be (or remain) chiefs acted as heroic leaders, their reputations made or lost depending on how well they took on that role.

During these nomadic adventures, such a role required a good deal more authoritarianism than was ever tolerated during the rainy season, to the extent that the 'heroic leader' could almost be described as a petty tyrant. During the dry season of nomadic adventures, chiefs would give orders, make snap decisions, and basically boss people around in a manner quite unlike the peaceful diplomats they became once the rains came again.

When the wet season inevitably returned, those chiefs who had proven themselves effective leaders by making good snap decisions and directing their small band of foragers effectively, built up reputations that attracted enough followers to settle around them and rebuild the villages.

How, Levis-Strauss wondered, should one classify those chiefs? Certainly not as mystics, since there was no sense in which they were thought to be invested with such powers. Petty tyrants? Well, yes, at certain times of the year they were allowed to behave as such, but Nambikwaran's "two society" lifestyle imposed strict limits on how far such authoritarianism could go, so that label didn't seem quite right, either.

Just about the nearest comparison to those chiefs were politicians and diplomats who had to find a balance between personal ambition and the common good. Since they took on these more diplomatic roles during the wet season, and adopted the role of authoritarian "petty tyrants" during the nomadic adventures of the dry season, the Nambikwara were constantly shifting back and forth between what should, according to beliefs established by Turgot, be two totally different stages of social development.

Levis-Strauss suggested that this sort of shifting between different societies gave the Nambikwara a kind of freedom that is far harder to exercise in societies such as ours. As we have seen, we only have variations of the same system, and hierarchies were even more entrenched when monarchs wielded real power. When one lives under such pervasive, dominant forms of control, it's easy to fall into the belief that such a way of life is in the natural order of things.

The Nambikwara, though, by continually building, abandoning and reconstructing their hierarchical societies, understood that authoritarianism was not just a given, but something that was, at least partly, open to negotiation.

Other Examples Of Seasonal Variability

The Nambikwara were not the only example of people who moved back and forth between two different societies as the seasons cycled. In 1903, Marcel Mauss (1872-1950) and Henri Beauchat (1878-1914) published 'Seasonal Variations of the Eskimo', in which they showed how, during the summer season, the Inuit went around in bands of thirty or so to hunt fish, caribou and reindeer. During this season property rights were strictly enforced, and these bands were led by a male elder who exercised even more tyrannical control than the Nambikwaran chiefs did during the dry season.

But such things as private property and tyrannical leadership only applied during the summer. Once winter returned, the Inuit gathered together to build great houses made out of wood, whale rib and stone. Those who dwelled in these houses during the long winter months abandoned notions of private property and instead shared not only material wealth but partners too. As Wengrow and Graeber put it, "within these houses, virtues of equality, altruism and collective life prevailed".

Now readers may recall an historical anecdote in Book Six about how, during really hard times, people display more altruistic behaviour. One might therefore conclude that the tough, physical conditions of the Arctic winter was the primary reason why selfish behaviour was abandoned by the Inuit during that time. Mauss, though, begged to differ. According to his calculations, the physical conditions of sub-Arctic life- things like how much game there was to hunt, and how much material available for building shelters there was- amounted to no more than forty percent of the reason why the Inuit behaved as they did.

So, something else, other than physical necessity, was required to explain the seasonal variation of Inuit culture. According to Mauss, the main reason was one of choice: Inuits adopted this way of life because, to them, it was how humans ought to live.

That the environmental hardship of eking out a life in sub-arctic conditions does not explain why the Inuit organised themselves around seasonal variation is confirmed by studies that show such societies were also created by people who lived in very different environments.

Buffalo Police

One such study was conducted by Robert Lowie (1883-1957). This Viennese-born ethnographer found, having done fieldwork among the Mandan-Hidatsa and Crow people of what is now Montana and Wyoming, that their society shifted back and forth between two forms, one kind existing during the buffalo hunt, and the other during the rest of the year.

The Buffalo hunt was a huge logistical operation that required large numbers of people to congregate into large settlements. Those settlements were overseen by a police force vested with the right to exercise full, coercive power. As Lowie explained, "in most tribes they not only confiscated game clandestinely procured, but whipped the offender, destroyed his property and, in case of resistance, killed him. The very same organisation which in a murder case would merely use moral suasion turned into an inexorable state during the buffalo drive".

One can infer, from the closing remarks of that quote, that the "inexorable state agency" was dismantled once the buffalo drive was over. "During a large part of the year", Lowie wrote, "the tribe simply did not exist as such; and the families or minor unions of families that jointly sought a living required no special disciplinary organisation".

How These Studies Slipped Into Obscurity

So, then, there was once anthropological fieldwork that showed human society really doesn't have to follow the strict sequence of development imagined by Turgot, and that among those doing this work there was one of France's greatest intellectuals- Claude Levis-Strauss. You would think, then, that such work would have wide recognition today and that, when we write about ancient peoples, we would suppose their societies were as dynamic as these case studies prove human groupings can be.

But that's not true at all. In the case of Levis-Strauss, few outside of Amazonian studies have even heard of this aspect of his work, and the other studies mentioned have also been all but forgotten.

This forgetfulness came about because, in the post-war decades, anthropology as a whole moved in the opposite direction to Levis Strauss. For, whereas he thought that the similarities between the lives of foragers, farmers and modern industrial democracies should be the focus of attention, for everybody else the emphasis was on confirming the sequence of events as laid down by Turgot.

It was recognised by the mainstream that some aspects of Turgot's work required updating. In particular, the language he used, all that talk of our ancestors as having lived through conditions of 'savagery' and 'barbarianism' on their way to eventual 'civilisation', sounded a bit too condescending to modern ears, and so such labels were exchanged for the now familiar sequence of 'bands', 'tribes', 'chiefdoms' and 'states'. By 1966, a new field had emerged called 'Behavioural Ecology', which backed up the new language with hard scientific data. No longer were anthropologists just living among tribespeople and sharing anecdotes of their way of life; now they were conducting calorie counts, time-allocation studies and other methods of quantifying life among the tribes of the rainforests and savannahs.

Some common assumptions developed out of behavioural ecology. By near-universal agreement it was acknowledged that what foragers represented was a separate stage of social development, recognisable by certain key features. These were a people who, by definition, lived in small groups. Those tiny bands moved around a lot and they recognised no social distinction other than age and gender. As for conflict resolution, these mobile bands of foragers had only one option available to them- 'flight'. In other words, conflicts were resolved through 'fission', as people fled from intolerable situations. As for those other options of 'fight' or arbitration, well, that never happened.

As ever, fully adopting this simplified view of how people in the earlier stages of human development (or contemporary tribes) lived, entailed ignoring certain facts. Few of those developing these theories, for example, thought it at all relevant that, in some cases at least, the African societies being studied were comprised of refugee populations who had settled in land nobody else wanted. Another fact that was ignored was that the ethnographic record of many foraging societies was nothing like these stereotypes.

Admittedly, there was a good reason why such groups were not also subjected to rigorous scientific studies. It was because they were no longer available for quantitative analysis, having been largely wiped out by European settler colonialism. But that alone does not explain why all those exceptions to the rules of how bands and tribes ought to live were ignored.

No, the main reason for this selective editing of our past and present was because those were a people who did not correspond to the popular image of what was, for a mainstream brought up on the legacy of Rousseau, the picture of what tiny egalitarian bands should be like.

Since the Nambikwara that Levis-Strauss studied were part of those exceptional tribes, they too were considered irrelevant. Yes, they were still around to be studied with the new quantitative methods of behavioural ecology, but the vast majority of those doing such work

were only interested in foraging societies. The Nambikwara didn't count, it was believed, because they were only classifiable as foraging bands for a few months of the year and that meant that, in evolutionary terms, they were not really 'foragers' at all. So, as Wengrow and Graeber commented, "the apparent paradox that their larger village settlements were egalitarian while their foraging bands were anything but could be ignored, lest it tarnish this crisp new picture".

But, that "crisp new picture" of people either following the strict evolutionary progression of 'bands' to 'tribes' to 'chiefdoms' and finally 'states' or maybe becoming stuck at an earlier stage, could only be sustained by turning a blind eye to all those cases that could not be pigeonholed into this neat sequence. That, in turn, meant certain important questions went unanswered.

Let's return to those archeological remains with their impressive monuments and princely burials, but with none of the other signs of ranked societies. Just like the temporary police-state villages of the Cheyenne and Lakota people, those 'mammoth houses' were not permanent dwellings. In fact, they were not dwellings at all but rather memorials. These huge structures were built specifically to commemorate completion of a great mammoth hunt and, more importantly, the solidarity of the extended human group responsible for it. Once all the meat and hides of those mammoths had been processed, the skeletal parts and the ivory that had been used to construct the mammoth house was covered in sediment, turning the formerly inhabitable structure into a durable marker on the landscape.

And so these bustling centres of trade only took on that role during certain times of the year. At other times, though, that great gathering of people dispersed into small communities of hunter-gatherers. But how could that be? It is a popular belief today that, once any kind of authority is granted to a group of people, they will surely do all they can to cling onto that power and extend their reach, even if the original problem or whatever that required the granting of those powers no longer has any relevance. Bureaucracies don't get dismantled, ever. They just grow and grow, working their tentacles into ever more aspects of daily life.

But the mammoth houses and the tribes that practiced seasonal variation show how there is no law of human society that means this is how it always must be. Even though they had everything permanent hierarchical states require- the means to marshal labour, the ability to stockpile resources, and the ability to provender year-round retainers, those 'princes' (if that is what those given 'princely' burials were) consciously chose not to construct societies where hierarchy was permanent, and were successful in doing so. One has to wonder: what sort of king consciously builds courts and kingdoms that are intended to be (and actually do function as) mere temporary arrangements and not permanent impositions in the lives of their subjects?

CHAPTER NINE

How Did We Get Stuck?

If we are to find the answer to such a question, we have to first of all stop inquiring into the origin of hierarchy, or at least stop posing such a question in a way that implies society has to follow the strict progression from bands at one end of the spectrum and states at the other. As we have seen, this view of human development only seems valid so long as you ignore all the cases that don't fit this picture. Take them into consideration, though, and it becomes clear that the real story of how human society developed can't have been anywhere near as simple and determined as the Turgot narrative makes out.

After all, what do the Nambikwara show us? Their way of life shows how it's quite possible to jump back and forth between economic categories, and not over long periods of time like several generations, but year round as the seasons change. And the tribes that Lowie studied show us how it's possible to regularly jump back and forth from one end of the political spectrum (egalitarian bands) to the other (authoritarian states), again without any particular sociopolitical system becoming a permanent feature of life.

That flexibility is something we seem to have lost, which is surprising given that our vastly superior technological infrastructure surely provides much greater scope for creating alternative societies. So maybe the more relevant question is: How did we get stuck? What happened to that political consciousness that once enabled society to be so dynamic and flexible, and which prevented access to property and status from being converted into permanent power over others?

Part of the answer seems to be that if the ability to move between social realities is reduced, then so too is political self-consciousness. And the more that is reduced then so too does the ability to create flexible societies diminish. If allowed to continue for too long, this feedback loop of diminishing political consciousness and societal flexibility results in 'hypernormalisation', or the feeling that the current system is broken but the only option is to pretend that is not the case, because you are not able to imagine any alternative.

One of Levis-Strauss's students was Pierre Clastres who, readers may recall, claimed that people who lived in stateless societies had more political consciousness than those that did. This was a controversial claim to say the least, given that most had come to view such people as having no political self-consciousness, let alone superior forms. In particular, those critics couldn't see how those who had never lived in states could organise themselves to prevent the emergence of something they had no experience of.

An obvious counter to that objection is to point out they almost certainly did know something of what it would be like to live in a state if, like those tribes we just looked at, temporary structures of power did manifest at certain times of the year.

If so, then life for any calculating politician in Palaeolithic times would have been much like being a Nambikwaran chief. Such a leader would have been forced to manoeuvre in a political environment that had been designed to ensure possession of property and rights of authority could not be converted into power over others. In the case of the plains Indians, this was achieved by dismantling all means of exercising coercive authority once the ritual season ended, and also by ensuring that, when it came around again, different warrior club

and clans got to wield it. So, as Wengrow and Graeber said, “anyone holding sovereignty one year would be subject to the authority of others in the next”.

In such a society- one where the political spectrum changes and the reins of power change hands- everybody is a mature and insightful political actor and so no particular actor gets to take hold of power permanently. If Palaeolithic chiefs were anything like the tribal chiefs studied by the likes of Lowie, they would have been calculating politicians, for sure, but they would also have had to manoeuvre in a society full of people just as able to think politically and who had consciously built a society in which real political power (the ability to give commands rather than just suggest appropriate courses of action) could not be exercised, at least not permanently by any particular leader.

The result? Societies that, in some ways, resembled modern welfare states, but those that temporarily headed them were under so much pressure to give material wealth away, they were typically the poorest member of the tribe. No wonder, then, that those who temporarily took power were driven by non-material concerns but rather a strong sense of societal responsibility and prestige for its own sake. Moreover, these were real traits, enforced by wider societal pressures, not mere claims made by politicians seeking to get the people on their side so they can better position themselves to achieve greater riches and power at the expense of those very people.

The story of human history, then, is not really that simple narrative in which tribes inevitably become chiefdoms and then, just as inevitably, those simple hierarchical societies grow into states. No: Throughout most of human history there was far more fluid movement between the conditions we identify as belonging to egalitarian societies and authoritarian states. Hierarchies were regularly built and dismantled. Eminence and subservience were also temporary features of life; granted for a while, but then taken away again. Something must have happened to turn such pomp from grand theatre that only existed during certain seasons, to something most now assume always was and always will be an inescapable aspect of the human condition.

Play Kings

“Why do we love Christmas so much?”, a little girl asks. “It’s not all me, me, me, it’s more us”, she answers to her own question. “Time isn’t money anymore. And instead of thinking about what we want, we wonder what someone else might like”.

There is something ironic about this little girl’s insight that Christmas is beloved because it reawakens community spirit and acts of altruism and, if only temporarily, stops us being so selfish. And that is the fact that this is not a real little girl, but a character in a commercial. The irony is that the sector of modern capitalism that most aggressively pushes consumerist individualism, creating that “it’s all me, me, me” attitude becomes, at the season of peak consumerism, a voice championing community, family, and giving one’s time over the endless pursuit of more material wealth.

Now, the reason I brought up advertisement during the season of goodwill is because it shows that the seasonality that was once such an important part of political

self-consciousness has not been entirely lost. Instead, rather like the faint echos of the Saturnian golden age, it persists to this day, albeit in a greatly diluted form.

To see how there is a direct connection of that character's comments to the way of life in those tribes we mentioned, one need only appreciate that the seasons in which great gatherings occurred were also always ritual seasons, a way of creating alternative societies through dances, rites and dramas.

Sometimes, such rituals may create more formality than is typical outside of the season of ritual. In fact, it has been argued by some that it is only during rituals that 'social structure' ever really exists. In our day, we might think of larger family units that only ever really come together as one community during the great family ritual of christenings, weddings and funerals. "During such times", Wengrow and Graeber explained, "questions of rank and priority have to be worked out by who sits at which table...who gets the topmost cut of a hump of sacrificed water buffalo, or the first slice of wedding cake".

We also saw, in the Cheyenne and Lakota tribes how, sometimes, the season of ritual with its greater formality creates ritual officials entitled to exercise real, coercive powers. In that case it was a temporary police force that was ritually created but sometimes even kings were created to rule, at least so long as the ritual season lasted.

The fact that rulers with coercive powers were created during ritual seasons tells us something interesting about power structures. Normally, we tend to believe that the driving force behind this tendency we have to organise into power hierarchies is simply economic efficiency. We need leaders giving orders to be obeyed, it is said, because that is the only way decisions can be effected in a timely manner in any large organisation. Leave egalitarianism and communal decision making to tiny bands, the only kind of human grouping in which such things are remotely plausible.

We have already seen how the latest archeological and anthropological findings question this assertion. Recall how the notion, based on neuroscientific research, that we can only consciously hold a thought for a few seconds, is challenged by the way we can keep a subject in the 'window of consciousness' for much longer, so long as we are in (maybe imaginary) dialogue with others. And the existence of monumental architecture which must have required thousands of people coordinating their actions, but which also exists absent of any other indication of top-down, centralised control, and which can also be dated to a time before farming was discovered and hence must have been created by hunter-gatherers working together in great numbers, shows that we can, in fact, organise ourselves into groups considerably larger than 150 and all without forming permanent hierarchies.

Still, one might reasonably counter by saying some organisations are so big and complex, only power hierarchies could conceivably keep them running rather than collapsing, and that therefore the economic efficiency justification always triumphs in the end.

Perhaps. But in looking only to economic efficiency we are maybe missing something important, and that is that the origins of hierarchy and private property may not lie in economics at all, but in ritual. Wengrow and Graeber raised this possibility by pointing out how those 'princes' found in graves, that we earlier mentioned, "appear to show up, in such

magnificent isolation, like characters in some fairy tale or costume drama". The suggestion is that we should maybe accept that, originally, titles of rule were literally only given to characters in some costume drama that was part of the ritual season.

It would be wrong, though, to see rituals as being only times of greater formality and etiquette. That clearly isn't always the case, given that we do have evidence of rituals that were more like outbursts of chaos and play, where the 'rules' were not enforced but temporarily abandoned.

We see echoes of this in our own culture. Why was May Day chosen to be International Workers' holiday? The reason why was because a great many peasant revolts had begun on that day. And the reason why this day of all days seemed most appropriate, hearkened back to medieval times when May queens, Lords of Misrule, and Abbots of Unreason would, during festival seasons such as Mayday, temporarily take over government and replace normal rule with a bawdy parody of the way things were normally run.

Wengrow and Graeber pointed out that "medieval peasants often found it much easier than medieval intellectuals to imagine a society of equals [because] seasonal festivals may be a pale echo of older patterns of seasonal variation- but, for the last few thousand years of human history at least, they appear to have played much the same role in fostering political self-consciousness, and as laboratories of social possibilities".

Whether the first kings were characters in temporary formal ritual or characters in temporary riotous festival, they were still really play kings who did not wield real power. This meant that there was a time in human history when people had real freedoms and pretend rulers. They had the freedom to disobey any order they did not feel like following, the freedom to travel anywhere natural barriers did not prevent them from accessing, and the freedom to remake society, and if the play king did not approve no matter, for he could do nothing about that. But then, somehow, everything reversed and we ended up with real kings and pretend freedoms. In the case of kings and queens, at least, they have once more gone back to ceremonial figures and don't really rule as they once did, but that does not mean to say we got our freedoms back. No, they are still just pretend for the vast majority.

How did that happen? For thousands of years humankind, the only primate blessed with political self-consciousness, had been constructing and disassembling forms of hierarchy, shifting back and forth between different social arrangements, remaking the world around us while understanding that no particular configuration was forever. How could such a playful, creative, social creature (one who clearly doesn't like being bossed around all that much) bring about a situation in which permanent and intractable systems of inequality took hold?

I'm afraid that the answers to such questions are going to have to wait a while longer. But, at least we know now where to look: not at economics but rather at ritual and the notion of the sacred.

In the next book, we'll follow this insight further and also ponder another question that ties history with cosmology and mythology which is: When ancient people looked up at the heavens, what did they see?

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