

Response to Commentary

Response to the Commentary of Marc Hersch

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This is a tough commentary to which to respond for Hersch (2010) has written an important full-length essay of his own. I relish reading his list of primary theses with which Hersch and I are in agreement, for they are the foundation of everything else in my articles and the essence of that which is most important to me. It's good to know I am not alone in the perspective that culture creates mind and language creates culture. In a world in which scientific findings usually hold the trump card, our perspective has had to reach deep in order to finesse the bio-materialists.

Hersch (2010), however, doubts the notion that mortal knowledge brought about an existential crisis that led to a realization of the sacred. He sometimes seems to assume that I mean to imply that the sacred realm is merely a fabrication to cover over our unbearable knowledge of life's inevitable end. However, I refer to the "*discovery-creation* of the larger realm ... we call the sacred" (my italics). By this I mean to indicate that the perceivable reality of both space and time has always been around us – we did not create it – but that it was neither previously "out there" nor were we previously "in here" observing it. Our lives were lived, like that of other animals, as a part of our natural environment, just a particular niche in an ecosystem. However, this environment that could be perceived by the bodily senses existed only in an eternal present and it was as limited as were the senses with which it was perceived. My thesis is that with the life-threatening crisis of mortal knowledge the human awoke to his own existence and the mind itself now found a place between the environmental stimulus and the instinctual response system. In that place – or, better, that time, – the mind found a way to open the syntax of the protolanguage of gestures and nominatives and conceive of abstract concepts, concepts without immediately perceived referents. Imagination was born and finally we could speak together of the long ago, the far away, the yet-to-come, and even of invisible powers or the presence of ancestors that were not in the strict sense perceivable. This sudden expansion of reality is the mythic realm of the sacred, or it was to our ancestors. Today we have gained much knowledge and accept reality as extending well beyond what our senses can immediately perceive, but in our secular time the sacred realm is known simply as *the world*. It is still a vastly expanded reality from that of environmental participation. Its reality meant it was discovered, but our awakened imagination and intersubjective narratives also mean it was created. In my view, we now live in a reality that was once experienced as sacred, and hidden in the corners of its repressed imagination knowledge of our certain death continues to haunt us. That the self today still has "death at its core" is a thesis widely propounded in psychoanalytic circles (see, e.g., Becker, 1973; Brown, 1959).

Beyond this, Hersch is quite right that, in my statement of the genetic imperative to survive and reproduce, I ignore cooperative communities, which are central evolutionary features, as well. I

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did so to make my point and not entirely out of ignorance. The fact that cooperative communities often seem to go to war with other cooperative communities, however, underscores this genetic imperative. I do not, however, much subscribe to any form of social Darwinism, though the rule of genes and the reality of demographics cannot be denied. My point was merely that before somatic experience became fully conscious, we were more likely to act as our biology dictates, though clearly there had been strong social and even cultural groups going as far back in time as *H. erectus*, which may have mediated biology with rudimentary cultural forms.

I certainly agree with Hersch that new categories of thought involved the prediction of future events. That is even clear from the archeological record. I'm not sure where he thinks I deny this. I base thought on emotions because I asked myself, *why were predictions made? To what end was foreknowledge needed?* And the answer was always to fulfill needs that emotions indicated needed to be fulfilled. We certainly did use our new conceptual categories to predict and to build a new cultural world, but we did so for two reasons: We were biologically and psychologically compelled to do so. The former involves the natural emotions (or, as Hersch would have it, *feelings*) that arise from our embodiment and the latter involves the emotions that arose in response to the existential crisis of mortal knowledge. We began to build, to expand, to fortify, to fight wars, and to create impenetrable ego-structures to avoid the unthinkable thought of our own death. And in my view we continue to do so.

Hersch seems most strongly to resist the notion of the symbolic. We certainly share many behaviours with our animal brethren (including prediction), though their capacities for environmental interaction so often exceed our own. However, we are the only species that we know that symbolizes those behaviours and constructs reasons for them or tells tales about them. I can't agree that (symbolic) culture is a "product" of conscious action; it is, instead, a simultaneous appearance. We cannot become conscious of our selves without intersubjectivity, and intersubjectivity is a cultural phenomenon. Certainly, as indicated in "Myth and Mind" there must have been a very long period of protolanguage and thus protoculture (cultural practices without obvious symbolic forms) before crossing the symbolic threshold. *H. erectus* certainly had to at least pass on the templates for basic stone toolmaking, fire-management, and an array of primitive cultural behaviours. When the human mind appears, it is already the primary aspect of symbolic culture, and such a culture could not exist without the symbolic mind. They are twin creatures.

Still, Hersch's thesis that symbolic interaction (i.e., language acquisition) emerged as an advanced form of predictive behaviour has much to recommend it. It certainly accounts for the blind spots of human culture but also provides the hope that we may yet be able to undo some of the destruction that nearly seven billion humans have wrought on this planet. Since we can predict the future, more or less, we can aim to improve our condition. But what if *our condition*, psychologically speaking, is part of the problem? What if our very egocentricity is what drives us to become a danger to ourselves and our world? Then the needed change is radical indeed.

Hersch provides his own history of prehistory and I am much in accord with it. In fact, we each provide a list of important transitions in the human story. I am really drawn to the musical or, rather, rhythmic origin of human interaction that later becomes ritual and call and chat (self and other) primitive dialogue. However, I think it is too early in time, and the behaviours too concrete to call this the "emergence of the intersubjective conscious creature" as Hersch does.

For me this is the pre-subjective, pre-conscious creature that is developing a primitive sort of communion with others that will lead to the foreknowledge of inevitable death before such an event can be precisely grasped as a concept. It is the later moment of conceptually grasping the truth of mortal knowledge that gives rise to the concomitant knowledge of self-existence. Consciousness awakens as the group gropes to come to terms with this startling two-sided coin of comprehension.

As far as dealing with individual development, Hersch schools me (even though I have taught developmental theories for so many years). I too tend to favour the old idea that the development of the individual from the womb onwards loosely tends to recapitulate evolution – including in this case the cultural evolution of the self. Children’s fear of the dark and non-verbalized fear of abandonment speak of an almost innate fear of death. We forget the fears that arose when we were alone and the many magical ways we tried to dispel them. How many kids had trouble going to sleep after intoning the line in the old bedtime prayer, “If I should die before I wake”? It may well be that mortal knowledge is so at the core of mind and at the core of culture that it is passed on to children without any specific reference to it. However, that is but one point. I quite agree that children’s emergence into the freedom and responsibility of mature consciousness mirrors what may have occurred in our species, though this view is spurned as a cultural bias today.

It is likely true that “Consciousness was first realized in relation to the group as a whole, and this marks the transformation of the troop to tribe”; however, I can’t agree that death knowledge plays only a minor role in tribal life. It is absolutely central, to my mind, accounting for the preservation of ancestral remains and their worship (to the point of eating those remains in some cases). Subconscious mortal knowledge also accounts for much of the other tribal behavioural forms in the same way it accounts for behavioural forms in larger civilizations. It is especially noteworthy in what we would call psychological aberrations, such as obsessive-compulsive or fetishistic actions (not even to mention religious and patriotic displays), but these have often been ritualized in archaic tribal cultures too. Of course, it is true that “the symbolic linguistic whole are elaborated and refined over time, but the overall tribal worldview – the narrative relation – can only be overthrown in revolutionary conflict spawned by overwhelming anomaly.” One has only to read Sorenson (1998) to verify this. The mythic bond is culture itself; it is self-identity. It is even the stuff of individual consciousness. Hersch makes this point beautifully. Perhaps Hersch and I agree even more than he realizes. I quite agree that “Non-symbolic creatures do not anticipate death and therefore, cannot fear it. The symbolic concept of death, in the context of theoretic-relational narrative, must become reified before it can be felt as feared. This process of reification is the symbolic aspect that differentiates emotional experience from genetically programmed feeling experience.” In fact, I consider this the heart of my thesis. I also fully agree (and believe I said so) that mythic culture remains at the heart of our so-called theoretic culture. Hersch follows others, however, in distinguishing instinctual *feeling* from culturally constructed *emotion*, and I can accept the distinction.

[Hersch, my suggestion of the *control* of fire as distinguishing humankind from all other animals is focussed on the element of control, not just fire watching. Fire drew people together for all that rhythmic drumming and dancing you conceive. However, my idea is that this was the birth of the tribal communion that led to the protolanguage of gesture and nominative pointing and thus to a

long period of pre-consciousness, going from *H. erectus* right into the early stages of *H. sapiens*.]

I deeply appreciate the effort put forth by Hersch Hersch in writing this essay-length response. I admire his stringent thinking and have learned a few things from reading him, but I have seen nothing that makes me doubt that mortal knowledge is the existential crisis that drove us to become mythmaking humans in a vast sacred cosmos. In fact, sometimes in Hersch's writings I seem to see that same avoidance of the most obvious fact of our lives that I see everyday, everywhere from global wars to the weather report ("We interrupt this program to warn you that a large storm is approaching..."). We have the need to deny death or to squirm away from facing it. I am aware that Hersch is accomplished sailor who has faced seas all over the world, so I am not accusing him of fearing death, as such, but it may well be that his courage and drive do greatly enhance his sense of being alive here and now, and is that not a form of death denial?

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