

Response to Commentary

Response to the Commentary of Timo Järvillehto (The Organism-Environment System)

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Finnish research psychologist Timo Järvillehto has developed what he calls the organism-environment theory, which, in its overall shape, appears very similar to my distinguishing between experience in itself and experience that, through the crossing of the symbolic threshold into formal language, has become conscious of itself. In my view, the organism-environment theory is probably too subtle to have caught on, but it is a very coherent and bold insight into the human condition in any case. As Järvillehto wrote in TA-77 on the Karl Jaspers Forum (2004): “Thus, according to the organism-environment theory the world that may be described appeared with the appearance of human consciousness. Consciousness was created in a system of several individuals when their actions were joined in the achievement of common results. This joining was possible through communication which later developed to language. As communication was needed primarily for the production of common results, language developed primarily for the description of the common results that were intended or achieved” (sec. 10). Before consciousness of selves united by culture in a world, there were only organisms experiencing interaction in particular environments. I could not agree more.

I take seriously Järvillehto’s different notion that consciousness arose from “a new kind of organization of organism-environment systems, as an aspect of the social organization based on cooperation of individual systems for shared or common results,” but because of his emphasis on conscious experience emerging from intersubjectivity (rather than isolated in the individual), I feel a kinship here. It is with his instrumentalist notion of “common results” as the prime motivator of language development that we may have some difference.

It seems to me non-formal linguistic structures, sometimes called *protolanguage*, would have been all that’s needed for such common results. Based on naming words and gestures, practical or common results could be achieved. Formal language – or the FLN, “faculty of language in the narrow sense” that only humans have, as opposed to the more global signal communications of the FLB, “faculty of language in broad sense” (Hauser, Chomsky, & Fitch, 2002) – on the other hand consists of abstractions made possible through rearranging the syntax of speech primarily via recursion, displacement, and open-endedness. Contrary to Järvillehto, I believe humans needed the ability to create abstract concepts for events and entities not present because of their need for semantics, that is, their need for meaning. Formal language arose as communal mythmaking to deal with the crisis of mortal knowledge, knowledge that death was inevitable for everyone. By using the abstract imagination to create images or tell stories of invisible

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gods and unseen realms, we were able to identify our existence with the cycles of Nature, in which winter was followed by a new spring and from death grew life. Formal language, unlike the more practical protolanguage (to which I believe Järvillehto mostly refers), arose because of the need to deny or surpass death and discover the enlarged world of the sacred (the long ago, the far away, the yet to come, and the invisible yet present) in which death was but a passing phase. Today, the sacred realm has been explained by science, and we consider such things as the origins of life and time, the possible end of the universe, or the birth of galaxies so far away they no longer exist by the time we see them to be almost commonplace or, if not commonplace, at least secular. We can even trace our ancestry without feeling the need to give a burnt offering to their memory. The sacred realm has become *the world* we live in, even though most of it exists in the symbolic imagination and is not immediately visible to the senses.

I realize Järvillehto is much more down to earth in his theorizing as to the origin and nature of speech (and thus of conscious experience), and I admit I probably have much to learn from him. But it is clear we both agree that most cognitive processing and emotional experience take place non-consciously, and that conscious experience is a group attainment made possible through language.

References

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