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# Planetary Hermeneutics in a Time of Crisis

*by Oliver Davies*

Der Klimawandel stellt die Menschheit vor weitreichende Herausforderungen. Wir sind im Allgemeinen nicht mit den Denk- und Handlungs-Erfordernissen auf planetarischer Ebene vertraut. Und doch müssen wir in philosophischer, sozialer und politischer Hinsicht global denken, wenn wir bestehende Spaltungen überwinden wollen. Wir argumentieren hier dafür, dass ein Teil der Antwort sich im kulturellen Gedächtnis von vor etwa 12.000 Jahren abgelagert haben könnte. Gemeint ist jener Zeitpunkt in der Jungsteinzeit, als das Sehen des Gesichts des anderen durch die intensive manuelle Gestaltung von Totenmasken die zwischenmenschliche Kommunikation vor allem auch taktil beförderte. Der Einblick in eine so wichtige Periode unserer Vergangenheit kann durch den Rückgang auf eine solche Innovation neue Quellen für das Verständnis der menschlichen Beziehungen in der Neuzeit bieten. Beginnend mit einer Analyse des Aufstiegs von Wissenschaft und Technik Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts, verweist die Darstellung auf die Entwicklung von Derridas Denken im Lichte seiner späten Priorisierung von Ritual, Kultur und gemeinsamer religiöser Traditionen. Schließlich stellen wir die Frage, ob die „taktile“ Revolution der neolithischen Zeit noch in unsere eigene Geschichte einbezogen werden kann – und wenn ja, was wir angesichts heutiger Herausforderungen von früheren Menschen lernen können.

## 1. By Way of Introduction

In these days we are all inevitably daunted by the challenges posed by climate change. But where do we begin? We can be forgiven for thinking that someone else must have the answer. But what is it? And how can we move forward unless we have a real sense of where we are going and what we shall need to do in order to resolve or indeed just to manage the profound challenges posed by climate change?

We need a new beginning. We need numerous new beginnings. And indeed, we should recall that the first principle of discernment and decision-making is simplicity. As human beings we are immensely complex creatures. The more intelligent we are, it seems, the more complex our understanding of the world becomes. But in fact, when we succeed in making decisions, as we need to do, this generally means that we have learnt to simplify the issues. The closer we come to understanding the issues, the more we can simplify. The question of simplicity will return in various forms throughout this paper. In many ways we could say that coming to terms with the world – understanding the world – is itself the performance of a simplicity which has become so natural to us, and so beautiful in its own way, that we will wonder how we ever thought to learn differently.

But simplicity is not generally something we can learn to do on our own. It is rather a social form of dealing with our problems. With respect to simplicity, we learn from others. In a time of climate change then there is naturally the hope that we will be able to develop new resources which can give us greater opportunities to bring both ourselves and the climate under control. We will need to build simplicity across many different boundaries. In the flow of life, it is simplicity that builds understanding.

But the first and immediate boundaries are those which occur across disciplines. We can begin with the division between arts and sciences, for instance. Each tends to constitute its own world. The sciences like exactness, mathematically expressed, while the arts disciplines are much less exact. In the former we seek to pin down knowledge, while in the latter we generate meaning in more fluid ways. It is of course possible for the scientific mind to restrict itself specifically to the resources of science but the kind of world-view which emerges may then seem to be limited. There are in effect enormous differences between those of us who think 'mathematically' and those who think 'humanistically', in shapes, contours, narratives and memories. Human life calls for both. We are deeply challenged however today by the struggle to integrate a scientific and a humanistic world-view. Both are part of us, but how can we ever truly integrate them in a positive and thoroughgoing way?

The challenge of interdisciplinarity will be a constant theme in this journal issue. But we need to be clear about what interdisciplinarity really means. In the first place there can be something profoundly random at play here. We may have read one book in the area and not another. We may have read both books or none at all. This does not seem to be an appropriate way to deliver what we might term fundamental knowledge about ourselves. But the greatest difficulties concern building bridges between scientific and humanistic approaches to these challenges. One or other of these disciplines is always likely to end up just reflecting the resources which happen to be available. This may not be ideal. But in reality, the challenge of an interdisciplinary approach is always likely to depend upon factors beyond our control. The prioritization of one field or another may well show unhelpful implications of bias. A social scientist, Harvey Whitehouse, has recently published an important book on 'ritual', in which he refers to this as the 'silo' problem. Whitehouse points out "that different academic disciplines are often relatively isolated and inward looking, making it difficult to see how their methods, specialized concepts, and datasets could be relevant to researchers working in other fields."[1] Whitehouse wisely notes the frustrations associated with current funding procedures and the fact, inevitably, that real and sustained interdisciplinarity can be painfully elusive.

For whatever reasons, from the earliest stages, radical forms of interdisciplinarity began to shape my thinking. I worked through the medium of English, Welsh, Russian and German, in the UK and abroad, each of which seemed to pose its own limits and opportunities and each felt that it was its own world. My first book publication was a translation of a selection of texts from the work of Meister Eckhart, the medieval 'mystic' whose

[1] *Harvey Whitehouse*, The Ritual Animal. Imitation and Cohesion in the Evolution of Social Complexity, Oxford, 2021, 23.

understanding of the nature of language is so innovative and productive.[2] In addition to these medieval concerns, I later taught and researched for extended periods in China.

From 2004 I held the Chair of Christian Doctrine at King's College London and, from 2018–21, a Senior International Research Chair in Science, Ethics and Philosophy at Renmin University of China, Beijing. In the interests of clarity, I must record a particular debt to the help of a number of leading scholars who have very generously fostered the opportunity for learning and discussion with respect to language and what language is. I include here: Agustín Fuentes (Prof. of Evolutionary Science at Princeton University); Kai Vogelei (Neuroscience, University of Cologne); Shihui Han (Neuroscience and Evolutionary Theory, Peking University); and Prof. Yao Xinzhong (Renmin University of China), as well as Celia Deane-Drummond and Gavin Flood (Campion Hall, University of Oxford). This is a vital shared project if we are to be able to foster the kind of relations which are imperative for a large scale, or planetary, harmony of life.

The role of Joachim Klose of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung has been of particular significance however. I am deeply indebted to Joachim for showing me the value of political approaches to texts. I have learnt a great deal from his understanding of dynamic and practical action, and for the contribution of acts to the fulness of human life.

This present paper then seeks to draw together some of the threads of what might be called a 'spontaneous and international interdisciplinarity'. The breadth and depth of the phenomenon of 'climate change' and its underlying causes calls for a very different style of learning if we are seriously to engage with it. The predominant challenge is the fact that it is the human person who is at the very centre of our situation. As we know, human beings are complex and can be highly diverse. The task presented here then is in effect one which understands the human person to be in essence simple, though also exposed to complexities. We can argue too that the greater the degree of interdisciplinary integration within the human person, the *simpler* our understanding of the human person can become. 'Complexity' is itself the sign of something that has not yet been fully worked out or understood. Meanwhile the need to embrace and to build upon genuine procedural simplicity, in the interests of our broader global community, grows ever larger.

## 2. Planetary Hermeneutics in a Time of Crisis

A paramount feature of our changing times is the new relationship which is emerging between the hard sciences, on the one hand, and highly diverse global religions on the other. This poses questions about how we understand the term 'revelation'. Revelation for instance can be viewed as a product of experience, or it can be seen as belonging intrinsically to culture or, indeed, as deriving from independent philosophical truth. Inevitably however it is the case that we do not, in general, draw upon proven scientific positions. These may

[2] *Meister Eckhart: Selected Writings* was published in 1994 in the Penguin Classics series. My BA at Merton College Oxford (1975–79) focused on Russian and German language and literature, while my DPhil (1979–86) at Wolfson College Oxford studied the theme of the Holocaust and the poetry of the German Jewish poet Paul Celan ('Paul Celan: Innovator and Traditionalist', 1986).

work very well for resolving problems which are open to mathematical judgment, and so for beliefs which are founded within relatively narrow parameters. We may have a personal belief in God, but proving this belief – to oneself or to others – will be a challenge. It is all the more intriguing therefore that something is presently stirring in the scientific firmament which is provoking thought in those for whom religion has long seemed to be obscure.

This needs to be explained. We shall need to recall firstly that the strictly scientific scientist and the strongly pious religious sister (for example) inhabit the same universe. But both belong in very different ways. It is in the question of how we belong that progress can be made. The religious sister inhabits the world as someone who is part of a self-sustaining and intimate community of faith. It is likely that close relationships will play a very positive role in her life. The scientist, on the other hand, is more likely to live and work in a highly competitive environment. Most scientists are men, constantly reaffirming the link between masculinity and the mathematical world.

But if we return to the life and values of our religious sister, we can see the possibility of a quite different opening or receptivity. Now it is likely to be relationship and the dedicated life together which are paramountly real. This points to a deeply social form of community in which the social is fostered in ways that reflect radical openness to and with others. 'Revelation' should remind us that this is a term which conventionally sits more securely in relation to community than it does to any kind of purely intellectual performance.

For us today then the concept of 'revelation' now comes into view in a different way. The recent publication by Robert Temple offers us a fundamentally new approach. Temple is a respected author, philosopher, and science writer who summarizes his insights in the following way:

> "In fact, I will be arguing that life in its basic state is inorganic, and is not made out of atomic matter. I suggest that it is made out of pre-atomic matter, namely the atomic particles, electrons and protons, and ions – plasma. Thus I am suggesting that we and all living things in the Universe, whether organic or inorganic, arise from this plasma, and that the organic state is secondary to our fundamental nature as plasma beings. I believe that we can now start to articulate 'a new science of heaven'."[3]

What then is the relation of this influential new 'science' to 'revelation'? Is it possible that a new understanding of revelation is coming into view on a planetary level? If revelation is at every point a comprehensively generative openness, then it may follow that we can have a reasonable expectation that something of 'revelation' will persist everywhere. Christian revelation may then turn out to be at the centre of human 'revelation'. But it may also turn out to be the case that this becomes a form of 'cosmic openness', which marks the fulfilment of all human life and society, and of cosmic fulness in all its variety. One of the key limits in today's world is found in the tensions that exist between different religious traditions. However, as we progress scientifically, with an openness to understanding our deep and shared embodied belonging in this world, it may be the case that the 'radical' or 'cosmic openness' which is apophatically present in Christian tradition begins to fuse with

[3] *Robert Temple*, A New Science of Heaven. How the New Science of Plasma Physics is Shedding Light on Spiritual Experience, London 2022, 5.

the 'cosmic openness' of other religious traditions. This may in turn allow the actualization of the deepest symmetry of all. We can begin to reflect on the possibility that 'cosmic openness' is a deeply transformational state. We should also consider whether 'revelation' now becomes an inclusive term which can be linked to the life of human bodies as such, manifesting as a universal form of transformation based, as the mystics assert, on love.

No one can predict how long the climate crisis will last nor, indeed, whether the disorder in our societies will become a permanent feature of life on earth, with unpredictable final outcomes. We do not yet know what the consequences of a 'delayed start' might be, in varying stages. But one thing is clear: this is a situation in which, potentially, we all have a role to play. Each of us will need to be involved in one way or another, given the planetary nature of the current challenge. But what does this mean in practice?

In the first place it means that we have to seek to understand, in depth, what has happened to us. We are accustomed to thinking of the global South as being very different from the Western world, not least in its furthering of social values and customs. But if we go back several centuries, we begin to see the remains of a cultural landscape in both East and West which reflects a strongly social understanding of human beings and our relationships. This found its primary expression in religion and religious beliefs, but also in the rituals which were associated with those beliefs. Anything which moves harmonically or harmoniously can be described as pointing to 'ritual' and to a 'ritualized reality'. The human body itself is a primary site of such ritualized communications.

But in fact we can be more precise. Recent neuroscience shows us that an immense harmonization takes place in the human face when it encounters another human face. A neurological text published by Ivana Konvalinka and Andreas Roepstorff in 2012 states:

> "When we interact with another person, our brains and bodies are no longer isolated, but immersed in an environment with the other person, in which we become a coupled unit through a continuous moment-to-moment mutual adaptation of our own actions and the actions of the other."[4]

For Linda Tickle-Degnen and Robert Rosenthal, "multiple reflex interactions occur at speeds well below the threshold of conscious perception, but communicate as a sense of 'rapport'"[5] while, for Ezekiel di Paulo and Hanne de Jaegher, these face-to-face interactions are "complex, multi-layered, self-organizing". They sit within the early motor system, involving sets of mutual responses ranging from eye movement, facial expression, posture and gesture to the synchrony of brain waves, breathing and pulse: a subtle and pervasive "alignment of behaviour" which includes "synergies, co-ordination and phase attraction"[6]. What we might call the *meaning* of the human body then is *communicative*. It is open and other-orientated. More profoundly, since the 'human inter-face' reflects an unfathomable

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[4] *Ivana Konvalinka*; *Andreas Roepstorff*, 'The two-brain approach: how can mutually interacting brains teach us something about social interaction?', in: Frontiers in Human Neuroscience 6 (2012) Article 215, 2 [https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2012.00215].

[5] *Linda Tickle-Degnen*; *Robert Rosenthal*, 'The nature of rapport and its non-verbal correlates', in: Psychological Inquiry 1/4 (1990) 285–293 [doi:10.1207/s15327965pli0104_1].

[6] *Ezekiel Di Paulo*; *Hanne de Jaegher*, The interactive brain hypothesis, in: Frontiers in Human Neuroscience 6 (2012) Article 163, 1 [https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2012.00163].

depth of harmony, which we might even call 'cosmic' symmetry, we can propose that this can effectively be a state or condition which is open-ended and free-flowing. This is something that we experience as being seemingly without limit.[7]

But in case this appears too abstract, it is sensible to give emphasis to two forms of human foundation in particular which come into view here. The first concerns 'time' and the second 'history'. Naturally we find ourselves in time and are constantly subject to change. We grow older. But the concept of 'history' carries with it further, quite different connotations. We know that we can learn from 'history', for instance. It gives us an identity and teaches us something. And so the question for us today perhaps is this: What exactly is our – Western – history? How have the events of this history changed us? And what is it that we have to learn about ourselves if we are to become truly responsible and open to the demands of the times, thereby including both East and West? Or is one version of history always likely to suppress the others? Is it the case in fact that we should understand ourselves to be most fundamentally historical where we are most in conflict with one another? We have made the assumption in the past that, as Westerners, we are leaders of the world. We are learning today however that our history is precisely not a 'history for all'; it is rather the history of what is only a limited number of people. If we accept the fundamental unity of all matter and therefore of all human beings, the notion of exclusive histories becomes untenable. We are 'revealed' as single people linked through space and time.

### *2.1 History and Freedom*

The problem that arose in the West was a quite simple one. This was the age of science and therefore also of the laws of nature. The laws of nature, of course, were experienced as being fundamentally authoritative. And so, in effect, the laws of science in this period, and of nature, were inevitably experienced as totalitarian.[8] In short, there was no place for freedom. This was a very profound challenge. How can we human beings *not* be free?

In 1839 the German philosopher Karl Hermann Scheidler (1795–1866) presented a new account of what freedom is. He considered "the concept of the immanent together with its opposite, the transcendent", to be at "the very core or centre of [Kant's] critical philosophy"[9]. For Scheidler, it is in 'transcendence' that our freedom lies. But what does 'transcendence' really mean? There have been long debates about this potent word. In view of recent neurological findings, however, 'transcendence' has become a questionable philosophical term for us today. There is strong evidence for the view that it is actually the *simultaneity* of mind and matter that counts as given in this world; rather than the transcendence of the mind over materiality. Scheidler's insights then, for all their subtlety, were received at a

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[7] It is interesting that Jacques Derrida embraced those forms of religion which were centered in the original geographic expression of his own cultural identity, in the Levant. Towards the end of his life, Derrida understood the voices of the different religions to transcend division through a transformation, and joint celebration, of the material foundation of religion. See *Mustapha Chérif*, Islam and the West. A Conversation with Jacques Derrida, Chicago 2008.

[8] For recent anthropological explorations of these themes see *Fréderique Apffel-Marglin*; *Stefano Varese* (eds.) Contemporary Voices from Anima Mundi. A Reappraisal, New York 2020.

[9] See *Johannes Zachhuber*, "Transcendence and Immanence", in: Daniel Whistler (ed.), The Edinburgh Critical History of 19th Century Theology, Edinburgh 2017, 164–181.

time when the new body of science was still unfolding. Science works on both the large scale and the small scale. But the scientific world had to wait until neurology irreversibly announced its presence, with considerable authority, at the micro-level of humanity and of the world. Much of contemporary neuroscience points to a non-dualistic relationship between mind and matter, undermining the notion that freedom can be materially constrained or constituted.[10]

It may be helpful for our self-understanding if we contrast Scheidler's work with the philosophy of Jacques Derrida which now potentially takes on a new importance. In the subtle kenoticism of *Sauf le Nom*, for instance, Derrida probes the possibilities of language. Despite the élan of Derrida's 'writing on the edge', as he grapples with problematics of naming and alterity, it is the figure of the dying Derrida which is so compelling. In conversation with Mustapha Chérif towards the end of his life, Derrida said with conviction, "Always choose life and endlessly assert survival". Chérif sees this inspirational statement as an example of Derrida's audacity and openness, pointing to a way of escaping from despair and defeatism.[11]

He commits neither to deconstruction nor to phenomenology but rather to *civilisation*. For Derrida, this is a reference to the world civilisations of the Levant where the cultures of Christian, Jew and Arab combine and joyfully flow, in celebration.[12] Taken against the background of recent discoveries in the science of language and the linguistic sign, we can perhaps also say that the *celebration* of the sign (i. e. the *sound* of the word or the *shape* of the word, both of which reflect the influence of ritual or ritual-like practices) now becomes a new social 'moment': a potential possibility or force for good.[13]

The step that contemporary neuroscience requires us to take then is not one which contains the assertion of freedom (or freedom as an active power), but rather one that commits to the view that, through embodiment, we are all already 'free'. To be conscious and self-aware also means that we are *responsible*. It may be the case that we often exercise this 'freedom' without really being aware of it. But of course, others will call us to account in the event that we negligently walk across their path, or infringe against them in some way. And indeed, we may even find that we sometimes accept responsibility for something which in fact was unavoidable at the time. We accept responsibility even when it is difficult to see how we could have known what was just round the corner. And the fact that consciousness itself is already linguistic suggests that the physicality of the human body is

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[10] For discussions of recent debates in experimental philosophy on our understanding of free will, see *Alfred R. Mele*, "Free Will and Science", 499–514, and *Henrik Walter*, "Contributions of Neuroscience to the Free Will Debate: From Random Movement to Intelligible Action", 515–529, both in: *Robert Kane* (ed.) The Oxford Handbook of Free Will, Oxford – New York [2]2011.

[11] *Chérif*, Islam and the West (see fn. 7), 11.

[12] Jacques Derrida was one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century. He is strongly identified with France and French culture and with a far-reaching intellectual austerity. But in fact, he was closely identified in his up-bringing with the Levant, with Judaism and North Africa. Towards the end of his life Derrida turned back to North Africa and its ritual, celebrating again these different traditions within himself through the power of culture; cf. ibid., 11–25.

[13] Can we even begin to see in this probing of language by Derrida the beginnings of a new concept of linguistic sociality: one which might, one day, more clearly begin to take on the character of unitive action, not least in European contexts?

itself already structured as freedom. This does not mean, of course, that the freedom which is inherent within the human body, is already an enlightened or even disciplined kind of freedom. On the contrary, as we know from growing children, the power of judgment and so also responsibility, increases with age. Part of growing up is understanding the difference between freedom *from* (of science) and our freedom *to* (of action). Both of these are instrumentalising postures, however, to the extent that they entail the use or application of power. 'Freedom from' is the power that comes from understanding (generally the power of understanding *science* which allows the development of *technologies*). Freedom *to* on the other hand is generally the kind of freedom that allows us to *act*. This freedom to know and this freedom to act together constitute the bedrock of *technological modernity*. But is this the limit of our freedom?

In his own times, Scheidler challenged the Nineteenth Century deterministic stance of humanity's limited capacity for freedom, asserting that human beings are free when they choose to act freely. Scheidler was right to stress the capacities of the human mind and will: our 'transcendence' or 'personal freedom'. And it seems that 'transcendence' has in this way remained a powerful idea in the West: one which contests the fatalistic authority of mechanical science and the reductive scientific laws of the universe. But powerful new advances in the science of neurology, on the one hand, and of physics on the other, point us now in a different direction. We can sum this up not in our freedom *from* or indeed our freedom *to*, but rather what we can now call our freedom *in*. It is our freedom *in* that is truly radical and transformational.

Recent neurological research has very clearly pointed to the possibility that the dualism which has plagued Western approaches to the human self and our embodiment is now being extensively contested. Consistently the findings are that mind and body form a single unity, however challenging or indeed perplexing this may be. Contemporary neuroscience consistently finds analogues between physical features in the brain and the most subtle forms of consciousness that might be found. Indeed, some of the most outspoken advocates of 'transcendence' have recently moved to an immanentist position, according to which a continuity opens up between the human brain in its fine detail and the structural expressions of the cosmos itself.[14] It is important in this discussion then that the weight of the evidence for our freedom *in* is not underestimated.

### *2.2 Freedom and the Social*

In the light of a variety of new resources, we now have better opportunities to gain an understanding of who we are and the route that we have taken to the present continuity between mind and body. Freedom means different things to different people. Nevertheless, there is a consistency here upon which we can build. Karl Hermann Scheidler offers us a far-reaching analysis of what freedom meant in the nineteenth century. But if we look back to our late medieval past, or indeed to those present-day communities who follow ancient patterns of belief and behaviour, then a different kind of framework will emerge. The theme

[14] See for instance recent developments in the work of Chalmers and the 'hard question'. He addresses these issues in his most recent book: *David J. Chalmers*, Reality+. Virtual Worlds and the Problems of Philosophy, London 2022.

of ritual, for instance, comes to the fore. There can be no doubt that our freedom *from* and our freedom *to* are independent, assertive freedoms. But while we acknowledge the force of these types of freedom, we also need to keep in mind the fact that our freedom *in* is foundational. It springs from the *unity* of mind and body, and it is both ancient and social. Our 'freedom *in*' is always participative and harmonic. It is the free movement within the dance. Above all, this is the kind of freedom which becomes available to us when we choose to *celebrate* together, in a free act of harmonic consent and following.

Ritual can be defined as a set of harmonic practices then: as harmony, rhythm and repetition. But arguably the defining moment comes where the face is in play. A smiling face is itself constituted as having an infectious, ripple effect. Generally, we don't *choose* to smile: rather, I *am* the smile which embraces the other, just as the other's smile embraces me.[15]

### *2.3 China and the West*

For all its diversity, the phenomenon of language still seems to be what we have most extensively in common. Language shapes our nationalities in parallel ways, just as it shapes who we are as individuals. And we may be determined differently of course by the tension that exists between personhood on the one hand and nationality on the other. But if our primary concern rests with 'the mother tongue', since it is this which most shapes our identity, then we will need to cast a glance over the present divide between the Chinese-speaking world-order and the Anglo-American world order, in so far as these are presently highly influential in the formation of our global cultures.[16] Chinese and English speakers can in fact show comparable numbers. There are around 1.5 billion English speakers and 1.4 billion Chinese speakers in the world today.[17] It should be noted however that almost all Chinese speakers speak Chinese as a mother tongue, while native speakers of English number only around 370 million.[18] Here, in a nutshell, we can see the shape of our divided world. Whatever the Chinese or English-speakers may think of each other, the geo-political reality is that the two most populous cultures exhibit 'difference' from each other on an exceptional scale. There are significant differences not only in acquired and native forms of language but also in their longevity. International English is a relatively recent addition, which can be calculated in decades rather than centuries, while Mandarin Chinese can trace a continuous written tradition extending back for at least 3,000 years. English alphabet has twenty six different letters, while speakers of Mandarin Chinese commonly acquire some six thousand characters, many of which are complex. In the face of such stark differences, what chance is there then of ever reaching mutual understanding in our global contexts?

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[15] See *Leonhard Schilbach et al*., Toward a second-person neuroscience, in: Behavioral and brain sciences 36/4 (2018) 393–414. See also *Gary Bente*; *Eric Novotny*, Bodies and minds in sync: forms and functions of interpersonal synchrony in human interaction, in: The handbook of communication science and biology, edited by Kory Floyd and René Weber, New York 2020, 416–428.

[16] The complications and complexities of language acquisition and identity are explored at length by Derrida in his theoretical and personal reflections in id., Monolingualism and the Other or the Prosthesis of Origin, Stanford 1988.

[17] See the numbers in: https://blog.busuu.com/most-spoken-languages-in-the-world/ [accessed at 01.12.2023].

[18] Again see the numbers in: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English-speaking_world [accessed at 01.12.2023].

*2.4 Culture-Behavior-Brain*

Ironically perhaps the best chance for a rapprochement between East and West today may actually lie in recent neurological studies in China, some of which are casting significant new light on questions posed by the Chinese experience of culture, history and environment. Given the political nature of much in Chinese-Western relations today, work in this area has tended to be focused on the *differences* between Chinese and Western culture. But a leading neurologist, Shihui Han, has recently made a very significant contribution to these debates with his ground-breaking book 'The Sociocultural Brain'[19]. Han shows that despite the differences between East and West, the work of culture remains a constant in that both Eastern and Western identities are the product of cultural, behavioral and educational processes. It is these deeper processes which stand out as universally human. Han's ground-breaking work shows that Eastern and Western identities are not as narrowly founded as we might think. Sustained exposure to Western culture in the East, or to Eastern influences in the West, can result in significant and influential cross-cultural 'borrowings' which undermine our assumptions about both East and West. Shihui Han, introduces "a culture–behavior–brain (CBB)-loop model of human development, which posits that culture shapes the brain by contextualizing behavior, and the brain fits and modifies culture via behavioral influences"[20]. He continues "genes provide a fundamental basis for and interact with the CBB loop at both individual and population levels. This model aims to advance our understanding of the dynamic relationships between culture, behavior, and the brain"[21]. Finally, Han discusses "the implications of cultural neuroscience findings for understanding the biosocial nature of the human brain and the sociobiological nature of culture."[22]

Recent findings in cultural neuroscience allow us "to rethink strategies of school education, cross-cultural communication, and clinical treatment of neuropsychological mental disorders in different cultures."[23] Clearly this is not the blunt separation of one 'race' from another. It is rather an example of human flexibility and of a rich biological osmosis between peoples, casting new light upon a host of social possibilities. Moreover, as Han understands it, "genes provide a fundamental basis for and interact with the CBB loop at both individual and population levels. This model aims to advance our understanding of the dynamic relationships between culture, behavior, and the brain"[24]. Han points here to a much more flexible network of meanings and values which contribute to, and themselves inform, our evolving human identities. It is worth noting that the typically Chinese adoption of highly complex and sophisticated language (the Chinese script) is in fact itself a function of the CBB loop itself.

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[19] *Han Shihui*. The Sociocultural Brain. A Cultural Neuroscience Approach to Human Nature, Oxford 2017.
[20] Ibid., vii. The CBB loop is discussed at length by Han in chapter 8, 'A culture-behavior-brain-loop model of human development', 190–214. This model was first developed by Han and Ma; cf. *Han Shihui*; *Yina Ma*, A culture-behavior-brain loop model of human development, in: Trends in Cognitive Sciences 19 (2015) 666–676.
[21] Ibid., vii.
[22] Ibid., vii.
[23] Ibid., vii.
[24] Ibid., vii.

*2.5 Language and Personhood*

Whatever else may be the case in the field of language, language remains a central feature of the human, and of our human relations. It will also be at the centre of questions concerning our own essential viability in the face of climate change. After all, language itself appears to grant us a genuine form of beginning since language can move across the border of sound: We speak, we fall silent, and we speak again. We can call this the principle of *addressivity*. The world is 'activated' for us when we either address or are addressed by someone else. And here, the principle is already in place that we should not seek to dominate or deceive our addressee, for instance. This will undermine our capacity to build 'addressivity' together. Without this common commitment, communication and relationships will fall apart. And so, the question returns: Where do we begin? How do we start to think about language creatively when we already find ourselves bound to its flow? This becomes an even more important question in the context of clashing civilisations; and especially, today, given the encounter between the English language and Chinese. It might seem inevitable that these constraints will always be in play, fostering new misunderstandings, despite the arrival of Shihui Han's new science. But there is also, potentially, another way forward.

## 3. Towards 'Open Community'

The challenge before us lies in our human capacity to build societies which can sustain and support themselves against the threat of conflict from *within* communities and *between* communities. Sometimes the former will be in play and sometimes the latter. We can make a case for the view that it was Western science which introduced a profound instability, since it tended not to accommodate other modes of thinking. Rather, it resisted more traditional ways of viewing the world. This splintered the world as it had been, and the 'scientific turn' quickly became a vehicle for social and political power. But history is dynamic and the pertinent question today is where are we now?

Recent advances in neuroscience and evolutionary science seem to suggest that – like it or not – we are tending to move into more interdisciplinary ways of viewing and experiencing the world. Today's science points to our sociality, re-orientating the meanings and practices of the human face – and interface – that define us. A single harmony, too fast for us to see, now becomes the ground of our social communication. We can potentially define what is happening here as the beginning of the formation of an 'Open Community', where 'openness' is constituted in terms both of our human intimacy on the one hand and our large scale belonging in the cosmos on the other. Indeed, we can think of the principle of 'Open Community' in terms of a self-multiplying generosity which concretizes our openness through its pluralistic social nature: or indeed, through its unconditionality which then becomes its openness to the cosmos. Additionally, the multiple structure of our social freedom *in* promises to become a constantly repeating configuration of contacts and exchanges. The activated phenomenon of 'Open Community' in the world then is both the 'pulse' of

the dance and the 'logic' of ritual. Otherwise stated, in 'Open Community', mind and body productively converge.

We live in strange times, however. More particularly we can say that we live in times where we might expect that things long hidden can now come into view. The place of science is perhaps very significant here. It allows us to build a much better picture of who we are, and the possibilities of our becoming. The risk with science however is that we will confine our attention to very narrow topics and will fail to engage with those broader themes which are critical for a better understanding of who we are in our fullness. Again, the difficult questions of interdisciplinarity and the languages of interdisciplinarity now come into view. The theme of 'Open Community' is already on the table but we need to go further. We need to ask: Where does language *come from*? What indeed *is* language? And how can we hold a stable understanding of language today in the face of its many different permutations?

### *3.1 The Neolithic Face*

Faces and the smile are of paramount importance. Faces are foundational for our social interactions however. And yet, only some ten thousand years ago, it is difficult to find artistic representations of the human face. The relative absence of representations of the human face at a time when we would expect the expansion of such skills – is summed up in an influential article, where we read the following:

> "Palaeolithic figurative art is mainly animalistic, the schematic or idealised treatment of human figures contrasting with the naturalistic portrayal of animals (Leroi-Gourhan 1982). Human facial features were generally avoided. In the Near East, early Natufian art is mainly non-figurative (Bar-Yosef & Belfer-Cohen 1999), the few anthropomorphic representations often ambiguous and with little detail (Cauvin 1994)."[25]

Why then is there such a lack of engagement in this period with the representation of our fellow human beings and especially the face? Surely we would expect the proximity of our neighbors to be a strongly motivating force for their representation? Might we not also expect prominent people to engage artists in order to extend their influence and renown, as clearly happens later? It is a paradox then that 'non-figurative' art predominates in a period when early human communities are developing rapidly and showing ever greater manufacturing skills and skills of representing the world around them. The fact that the Neolithic period was a period of rapid growth and discovery makes the relative absence of representations of the human face particularly striking.

### *3.2 Tactility, Face and Language*

It is in the light of this absence then that – as modern human beings – we can take a second look at how Neolithic communities appear to have developed new capacities of

[25] *Jesus Gonzalez-Urquijo*; *Juan José Ibáñez*; *Frank Braemer*, 'The human face and the origins of the Neolithic: the carved bone wand from Tell Qarassa North, Syria', in: Antiquity 88 (2014) 81–94, here 81.

understanding with respect to our humanity and to representations of the human face. In sum, this was a movement from *visibility* ('seeing the face') to *tactility* ('feeling the face'). This marked a very profound change, in which the human head was seen as an agent with its own vitality, maintained by living ancestors after an individual's death. As Ibanez, Gonzalez-Urquijo and Braemer have it, "[T]he human head was the locus of a certain type of vitality, to be maintained among living people after death"[26]. Our Neolithic forebears effectively immersed themselves in the tactile impressions of the faces of loved ones as these were rebuilt on the skulls. We must ask the following question then: Is the meaning and value of the human face, as given in this passage, a way of breaking new ground, by bringing a new level of facial *tactility* into play? Did this lay the foundation for the generation of new and deeper community, for instance, in line with the development of advanced language?

And we must ask a further question. Can we see in this new *tactility* of the face a certain 'openness of mind' which is akin to what we have called 'Open Community'. 'Tactility' suggests both the power of touch and openness of mind. We have a moment of choice here then. We can, if we like, simply view the images of Neolithic faces as something which is external to us. They may interest us; but equally we may fail to engage with these ancient statues, deeming them not to be relevant to me. They lived then; and we live now. But alternatively, we may choose to internalize these heads, to ask ourselves what must it have been like to live and to look out upon the world? After all, we are equally human creatures. In a quite fundamental way, we are the same.

Once again Derrida comes into view. Through his intuitive understanding of the unity of ritual, across difference, Derrida begins to embrace a trajectory which differs radically from his previous positions, as it does in fact from the Western inheritance itself. But with our conventional Western lack of interdisciplinarity, we struggle to integrate, for instance, the Neolithic understanding of the face and of *tactility* as a feature of the real. But if we take seriously the presence of *tactility* and its features in the Neolithic context, then we will see that this is also a call, or invitation, to enter into an ancient reality in a different way: through our own speech and tactility. Surely we can learn from these ancient humans how we preserve peace, by seeing how they preserved peace.

Climate change presents far-reaching challenges to our humanity. We are generally not familiar with the imperatives of thinking and acting on a genuinely planetary level. And yet, if we are to heal our human divisions, we shall need to learn swiftly how to think globally, in philosophical, social and political terms. We argue here for one part of the answer which may lie in ancient memory from some 12,000 years ago, as reconstituted within modern evolutionary science. We engage with a precise point in time, during the Neolithic period, when seeing the face of the other was assumed into a profound and imitative tactile communication with the other, through the intensive shaping of death masks by hand. This glimpse of such a key period in our past, through

[26] Ibid., 91.

such innovation in our shared humanity, may offer us new resources for understanding human relations in the modern period. We begin with an analysis of the ways in which the Western world has been shaped by the rise of science and technology, from the mid-nineteenth century, and point to the significant evolution of Derrida's thought in light of his late prioritisation of ritual, culture and shared religious traditions. Finally, we pose the question whether the 'tactilic' revolution of the interfacial Neolithic world can still be included within our own evolving history and, if so, what it is that we can learn today from earlier human beings in the face of such challenge and diversity.