

THEY THREW GOD OUT OF THE GARDEN

Letters from Gregory Bateson to Philip Wylie and Warren McCulloch

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This is a small sampling of the voluminous correspondence of Gregory Bateson. This correspondence, along with all the rest of Bateson's professional papers, films, and tape recordings, is in the process of being organized and catalogued, following which a volume of the correspondence will be edited for publication.

The three letters in this selection were written in 1967, during the highly fertile period which preceded the publication of Steps to an Ecology of Mind (NWEC, p. 28). At this time Bateson was increasingly turning his attention away from the dolphins with whom he had been working since 1963 and towards the thinking which reached a peak in the 1968 Wenner-Gren Conference on the Effects of Conscious Purpose on Human Adaptation, the conference described by Mary Catherine Bateson in Our Own Metaphor (Alfred A. Knopf, 1972). These letters offer an illuminating glimpse into the evolution of ideas which preceded that meeting.

The first two letters - vintage Bateson - were written to Bateson's neighbor and friend, the novelist-essayist Philip Wylie, stimulated by a reading of the latter's The Magic Animal (Doubleday, 1968). Attentive readers will recognize an early, and much more colorful, version of the myth offered in 'Conscious Purpose Versus Nature' (Steps, pp. 434-436).

In the third letter, to neurophysiologist Warren McCulloch, Bateson expands some of the thinking in the Wylie letters to arrive at a new way of analyzing religious ideas and behavior.

- Rodney E. Donaldson

Oceanic Institute

Memorial Day

June, 1967

Dear Phil,

I want to get this written down while I have it vivid in my head.

I have read about half of Magic Animal and these are first reactions. Of course, as you know, I agree with nine-tenth of it and am delighted with much of it. You have said many things which I never knew how to say - some which I never knew.

But I want to write about points of disagreement. There are two points, and both of them derive from the same philosophic roots.

My colleagues and Darwin and Ockham always spit at me for saying these things - but I am willing Darwin should borrow O's razor to slit his own throat.

The first point is the concept of 'instinct' and the second is the relation between 'magic' and 'religion'

And bad cess to B.F. Skinner who resembles his famous namesake, the schoolmaster in *Way of All Flesh*, combining the 'wisdom of the dove with the harmlessness of the serpent.'

Be that as it may (or, as my former Swiss colleague Ruesch put it, 'May that be as it is...'), the instinct thing can be said two (and more) ways:

A. Rats have an instinct for spacing themselves, and when this is thwarted by overcrowding, complex confusions occur in their life processes, so that they die of endocrine imbalance. Or B. Rats have an instinct for endocrine imbalance, which is touched off by overcrowding. Failing such stimulation, the rats are forced into all the complex business of living - the symptoms of thwarted instinct for death by crowding.

Now, if I were an engineer, I would build rats on one or the other of these two systems, according to what specifications I had to meet. But, *pace* Darwin and the whole industrial revolution and Ockham, evolution is not an engineer; and I do not believe that rats are built on *either* of these principles.

The engineer's question is: on which side of the fence do you want to place the *complexity*? Is normal life simple and pathology complex? Or *vice versa*?

Now, we know from genetics that there are some cases in which a single gene determines a definite (?single) characteristic; and my namesake Gregor Mendel (my namesake is bigger than yours, Dr. Skinner) was lucky enough or cunning enough to happen on some of these. But, as genetic progresses, it becomes clearer and clearer that the characteristics of animals are determined by complex, interacting, overlapping and 'redundant' (in the technical sense) constellations of genes. And this probably is progressively more so as we approach more 'fundamental' characteristics (the great homologies, symmetry, etc.).

If this be true of physical characteristics, it is probably also true of behavioral-physiological characteristics, and it then becomes nonsense to ask the engineer's question, above. The complexity is on both sides.

And I do know this, that the older an automobile gets and the further it is from the engineer who designed it, the more *complex* it gets with multiple 'pathologies' and the more it takes on characteristics of a *living* thing - moods, caprice, etc. New cars are 'it' but an old car is 'she'.

So - I personally avoid the word instinct because it suggests to the reader a specific tag or gene or something which determines directly a specific 'piece' of behavior. There may be such tags for the dancing mice, but I doubt it for such constellations of behavior as are denoted by words like *territory*.

Norbert Wiener once described ants as 'cheap mass-produced articles,' and it may be true that insects with their extremely economical circuitry are constructed on the engineer's plan but even this I doubt.

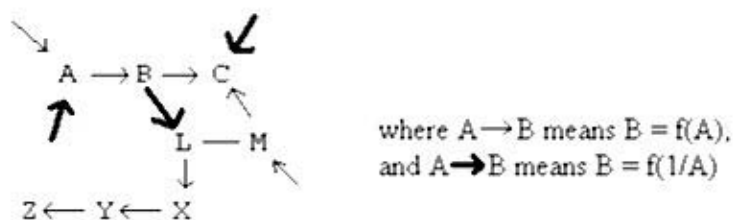
Consider the lilies of the field - they are not racked by separable purposes; and yet neither Darwin nor B. F. Skinner was ever arrayed like one of these.

The whole trouble (or a lot of it) results from the instinctive (innate) vulgarity of scientists, which is derived from the same 'instinct' as is the vulgarity of magic. (Even old Fraser knew that magic and science were somehow one.)

The innate component of this vulgarity is *relational*. It is the relation between mind and consciousness - a relation of partial separation. You and I and Darwin and Skinner are all genotypically built upon a plan whereby that small selection from mind which appears upon the 'screen' of consciousness, is, for the most part, those bits and pieces which will inform our purposes.

(The conscious/unconscious barrier is surely both an engineering necessity and genotypically determined. Whether the principles governing the selection of items for the screen of consciousness are also genotypically determined, I don't know. There is surely some learning and habit formation in this business. That *attention* and the content of consciousness are linked must be laid down deep in the genome. But, no doubt, the directions of selective attention are part learned and part instinctive. There are always difficulties of this sort whenever we ask about *components* of an 'instinct'.)

But the bits and pieces of mind which appear before consciousness invariably give a false picture of mind as a whole. The *systemic* character of mind is never there depicted, because the sampling is governed by purpose. We see on the screen that 'A ® B ® C' and 'L ® M' and 'X ® Y ® Z' but never the truth which looks more like:



We never see in consciousness that the mind is like an ecosystem - a self-corrective network of circuits. We only see arcs of these circuits.

And the instinctive vulgarity of scientists consists precisely in mistaking these arcs for the larger truth, i.e., thinking that because what is seen by consciousness has one character, the total mind must have the same character.

Freud's personified 'ego', 'id', 'super-ego' are, in fact not, truly personified at all. Each of his components is constructed in the image of only consciousness (even though the component may be unconscious) and the 'consciousness' does not resemble a total person. The isolated consciousness is necessarily depersonified.

The whole iceberg does not have those characteristics which could be guessed at from looking only at what is above water. I mean: the iceberg does - mind does not. Mind is not like an iceberg.

But the vulgar scientist talks and plans as if mind resembled iceberg. He plans and acts upon his

plans. Invents atom bombs and feels hurt when a beneficent deity screws up international relations and sends fall-out.

Now you are ready to think about religion and magic.

The instinctive, innate barrier between consciousness and the rest of mind is very old (though its effects have recently become disastrous through the technological implementation of consciousness). Even before man chipped flint, it must have been necessary to correct for the murderous destructiveness which necessarily goes with conscious, calculating and common-sense policies. If bacteria, or Jews, or rats offend you - import mongooses to exterminate them. Of course. This is Nazism and the bacterial theory of disease. As they say of Skinner's operant conditioning, 'It works'. But this theory, even in the Stone Age, would not work between people.

Love is contrary to conscious common sense because love involves the total *systemic* mind.

Cain was, appropriately enough, an inventor. He invented agriculture. God (Cain's total systemic mind or the systemic human ecosystem in which Cain lived) refused the cabbages, which Cain sacrificed. God then told Cain that Abel loved him (Cain). 'His desire shall be unto thee and thou shalt rule over him.' (cf. the curse on Eve in previous chapter - 'Thy desire shall be unto thy husband and he shall rule over thee.') This was the last straw because love is precisely that to which the pragmatic, headstrong, purposive consciousness must always be allergic.

So Cain picked up a big stone and smashed Abel's skull.

So Cain won.

As usual.

A more modern deity would have thrown a bucket of fall-out over the both of them.

But that's only a parable. Of course! The point is that, even before modern technology, something had to be done about the innate split between consciousness and the rest of the mind, because the unaided consciousness would always wreck human relations. Because the unaided consciousness must always combine the wisdom of the dove with the harmlessness of the serpent.

And I will tell you what they did in the old Stone Age to deal with that split.

Religion is what they did.

It's that simple, and religion is whatever they could devise to beat into man the fact that most of him (and, analogously, most of his society and the ecosystem around him) was systemic in nature and imperceptible to his consciousness.

This included dreams and trances, intoxication, castration, rituals, human sacrifices, myths of all sorts, invocations of death, art, poetry, music and so on.

And of course, they did not and *could not* really say or know clearly what it was they were doing or why. And, often, it did not work.

Darwin says somewhere in the autobiography that as he got more famous (or old or something), he became less and less able to read poetry.

Perhaps the attempt to achieve grace by identification with the animals was the most sensible thing which was tried in the whole bloody history of religion. Australian totemism makes a lot of

sense. And the cave paintings of Altamira, and Konrad Lorenz drawing live animals on the blackboard.¹

See also God's rebuke to Job's arrogance:

'Dost thou know when the wild goats of the rock do calve? Or knowest thou when the hinds bring forth?' And so on.

I was delighted by what you said about the morality of animals!

But magic is something else again.

You describe magic as the voluntary parent of religion, but this is surely wrong.

Magic is what the vulgar and purposive consciousness snipped out of religion. (Just as the viruses are DNA that came unstuck.) The use of quasi-Religion to bolster priesthood is, of course, an another vulgarity.

So, you see, my objections to the vulgar scientific theories of instinct and my view of the nature of magic both spring from the same philosophic roots.

Now hurry back from Kauai so we can talk about all this before you leave Hawaii.

Gregory

.....Gregory.....

P.S. I keep meeting people who think that the opening words of Genesis are '*In the beginning* was the *Word* ... etc.' I hope you are not guilty of this error.

The correct text is as follows:

In the beginning, all was mush; and the mush was without form and void. And God brooded on the face of the mush, as it is written. 'A hen is an egg's way of making another egg.' And as he brooded, so the mush divided itself and became many small pieces of mush. And God looked and saw that it was good.

And behold the Name of that God was called Tinkertoy and Tinkertoy had a grab bag in which were very many handy little magical tricks.

And each small piece of mush reached into the grab bag to see what it could get. And the lucky got more tricks than the unlucky. As it is written: To him that hath shall be given, but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he seemeth too have.

And God called the tricks *adaptations*, and god looked and saw that it was good.

And after that they ran around, each according to his kind. And they did eat each other. And some kinds did eat their own kind. Only the dog did not so.

And God looked and saw that it was good and God said: Behold these creatures, which I have created in the image of Charles Darwin. How cleverly they do steal each other's ideas.

And it came to pass that, between meals, they all played a game. Each against all, and all against

each.

And the name of the game was 'Free Enterprise'. And each played as dirty as he could according to the tricks which he had received.

But God always won because he played zigzag as a snipe flies.

So they threw him out.

G.B.

Memorial Day + 3

Dear Phil:

On the last chapter now - 'supererogation' - No - check this word with Mrs. Malaprop -

I have told you the story of the Creation. Here is: 'The Garden of Eden' - The myth in biblical form is (as is so often the case) upside-down. Adam and Eve ate the fruit of knowledge. An apple, high on the Tree. They had to place one box on top of another in order to reach it. They then ate it - the sweet reward of a successful short-sighted scheme *consciously* planned. This, as you suggest, no doubt made them drunk, with partial arrogance.

The arrogance was partial in the sense that what they were arrogant about was that miniscule part of themselves which achieved the conscious plan. (No arrogance is total.)

In this arrogance, they threw out all the rest of themselves - thus breaking up the total systemic thing they called 'mind'.

I.e., *They threw god out of the garden.*

After that, the ecosystem of the garden got out of kilter - because God is the inner and the outer systemic character of everything - mind and garden.

So they said: 'It's a vengeful god.'

After the loss of the rich topsoil, of course gardening became very hard work, and Adam sweated (especially and the *brow*).

(This was before Cain had invented the combined tractor-plough-harvester, and all farmers devoted the rest of their lives to buying the damn things on the installment plan.)

Eve began to resent the processes of coition and reproduction, which always somehow reminded her of that larger life, which Adam had sacrificed in order to buy her a washing machine - which she had asked for.

So she experienced a good deal of pain in childbirth, and felt that the capacity and need for love was God's curse on women, which was true in an upside-down way.

Adam managed to get some vengeful satisfaction out of the game of Free Enterprise - killing everything in sight.

But the customs of that benighted time did not permit Eve to do this.

So she joined a bridge club.

As to their children, I have already told you that story in the literal unchanged biblical version - the 'Authorized'. (The newer versions, specially retranslated for illiterate inhabitants of the suburbs, have dropped the homosexual bit.)

Finally, god sent his only begotten sons, Wylie and Bateson, to try to unravel the whole mess, and I'd hate to tell you what happened to them.

Gregory

December 20, 1967

(To Warren McCulloch)

I begin to wonder whether I am mad or have hit on an idea which is much bigger than I am. Of course these are not mutually exclusive alternatives but I would like your confidential judgement as to whether one of these alternatives is true to the exclusion of the other or in what proportions they coexist.

You have had a memorandum which I prepared as a springboard for our summer conference in Austria. And what I am now thinking is a development from that memorandum. I suggested in that memorandum that the lineal arguments of human purpose necessarily conflict with the cybernetic arguments of physiology, sociology, and ecology, and that therefore, following his purposes, man almost inevitably messes up his own physiology, social system, and ecosystem.

I had joked, though not in my memorandum, about the idea that Original Sin was the discovery of planned purpose; and that, following this discovery, Adam and Eve expelled God from the Garden. This led to the loss of topsoil, etc. the general notion was that God symbolized the systemic and cybernetic nature of the environment which inevitably took vengeance on man's short-sightedness.

It occurs to me now that this little parable can be considered to be a serious truth - especially if we turn it upside down.

I suggest that one of the things that man has done through the ages to correct for his short-sighted purposiveness is to imagine personified entities with various sorts of super natural power, i.e., *gods*. These entities, being fictitious persons, are more or less endowed with cybernetic and circuit characteristics.

In a word, I suggest that the supernatural entities of religion are, in some sort, cybernetic models built into the larger cybernetic system in order to correct for noncybernetic computation in a part of that system.

I do not believe anybody has said this but I do not think that this view of religion contradicts what has been said by others - the religious, the mystical, and the scientific. There is therefore no conflicting hypothesis against which mine can be tested.

I have been reading over *The Cloud of Unknowing*² and most of the traps against which the author warns the would-be contemplative are precisely the patterns of purposive thought.

If I am right, my hypothesis will provide an almost totally new way of analyzing religious ideas and religious behavior. We shall have to ask, for example, what sort of corrective is introduced into an otherwise purposive system by the Mass. In this connection, it looks to me as though the whole Catholic insistence on the 'reality' of the metaphoric statement 'This is my body' is a command to approach the ritual in terms of primary process.

Totemism in its preheraldic forms also seems to be a constructing of cybernetic models using identification or empathy with animals.

There are also a lot of questions regarding psychotherapy. When the therapist catalyses group processes, is he in fact demonstrating a cybernetic model to his patients?

Are there any cybernetic systems made of hardware in which cybernetic models have to be embedded in order to correct for lineal computation?

I wonder a good deal how much of this should be considered at Burg Wartenstein.

Or am I crazy?

Our conference comes along pretty well. We now have fairly sure affirmatives from Peter Klopfer, Gertrude Hendrix, Will Jones, Taylor Pryor, Erik Erikson, Barry Commoner, Ted Schwartz, and Geoffrey Vickers, and doubtful affirmatives from Anatol Holt and Konrad Lorenz. These, at any rate, are sufficiently affirmative for their names to be given out. Donald MacKay unfortunately could not come, nor Evelyn Hutchinson. I am looking for a good theologian, preferably one who will combine both comparative religion and pastoral experience. Aoki would have been wonderful and wanted to come but could not.

Well, please tell me what you think. I think that the idea which I have sketched above is the biggest thing I have bumped into yet. May the seasons make sense to you and yours.

.....Yours sincerely,

.....Gregory

1. For more on Lorenz's drawings see Bateson's *Mind and Nature* (NWEC, p.28), p. 156.

2. *The Cloud of Unknowing*, author unknown (probably a late fourteenth century parson); translated by William Johnston; 1973; \$ 3.95 post-paid from Doubleday and Company, 501 Franklin Avenue, Garden City, NY 11530.

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