ARCHEOPSYCHOLOGY AND THE MODERN MIND

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CHAPTER 1

The Archeopsychology of Mental Fossils

Cognitive science often carries on as though humans had no culture, no significant variability, and no history. - Merlin Donald, Origins of the Modern Mind

[It is] *highly probable that with mankind the intellectual faculties have been mainly and gradually perfected through 'natural selection' and this conclusion is sufficient for our purposes*. - Charles Darwin, Origin of Species

These words are an exercise in archeopsychology as it attempts to elucidate past minds from an archeological perspective. We start with the notion, if only as a hypothesis, that like ideas appear and re-appear over time. To be sure, they are modified by culture, and therein lies our challenge, for the ideas may appear to be new and inventive in different times, places and cultures. Seeming moderness with each appearance grants them a long-life.

Archeopsychology

That we may dig for ideas, using the archeological metaphor as a tool, has been suggested by intellectual historians who have proposed the term 'archeopsychology' for the venture. For example, the historians Le Goff and Nora in 1985 wrote:

> "There is much talk of the history of mentalities, but convincing examples of such history are rare. It represents a new area of research, a trail to be blazed, and yet at the same time doubts are raised as to its scientific, conceptual, and epistemological validity. Fashion has seized upon it, and yet it seems already to have gone out of fashion. Should we revive or bury the history of Mentalities?" [1]

LeGoff presents the case that history should and must study mentality because he felt that, "the mentality of any one historical individual, however important [i.e., however unimportant], is precisely what that individual shares with other men of his time." Further, "The history of mentalities, then, represents a link with other disciplines within the human sciences, and the emergence of an area which traditional historiography refused to consider . . . The history of mentalities is to the history of ideas as the history of material culture is to economic theory" [2] High prospects indeed! Le Goff offers advise for the practice of an archeopsychology:

> "What men say, whatever the tone in which they say it, conviction, emotion, bombast is more often than not simply an assemblage of ready-made ideas, commonplace and intellectual bric-a-brac, the remnants of cultures and mentalities belonging to different times and different places. This determines the methods which the historian of mentalities

must use.

> "Two stages may be noted: first, the identification of different strata and fragments ["striates et Bordeaux d'archeopsychologie" in the original], this the maiden usage of the term of what, following Andre Varagnac's term 'archeo-civilisation', we may call 'archeopsychology' and, secondly, since these remnants are nevertheless ordered according to certain criteria of mental, if not logical, coherence, the historian must determine these psychic systems of organization . . ."[3]

Le Goff cites the 'mentalities' of Christopher Columbus as an example. However much Columbus's own mind supposedly differed from those of other people of his time, differed because of his willingness to argue for a western route to the treasures of Asia and the Orient, whatever else was in his mind was firmly set in his time and place. Imagine his notions about medicine, religion, law, or ethics. His ideas of these, his understanding of himself, were presumably much like those of his sailors. It is no news, of course, that all of us are trapped in the mentality of our times. To know the nature of those mentalities is difficult, because our ways of thinking are locked into the orbit dictated by current mentalities. Yet, mentalities change; somehow cultures slip from the pull of the orbit. Sometimes they merely think they have done so.

The idea of an archeopsychology is a fundamental notion of Foucault's as well. [4] Although through him, the idea has achieved some attention from historians and sociologists, it has been resisted, if not wholly ignored, by psychologists, those who would study the human mind. Likewise, both Freud and Jung showed interest in an archeology of the mind, although their followers have chosen not to highlight this interest, evidently thinking such interest on the part of their intellectual history to be aberrant. Freud's [5] works on the origins of humankind's symbolic thinking and his interest in Egyptology are evidence of his interest in the evolution of mentations. Jung's [6] emphasis on the mind's carrying archetypes, universal symbols of the mind akin to Platonic 'forms', surely makes a powerful statement regarding the possibility for an archeology of mentation.

Folk-psychology

The word 'folk-psychology' has come to have many meanings, but is important here insomuch as it referred to ideas so commonplace and so obviously true as to make examination and skepticism unnecessary. Wilhelm Wundt [1832-1920], the pioneer of experimental psychology and trainer of the first generation of German and American academic psychologists, uses the term "Völkerpsychologie" to refer to the fact that experimental psychology, while it may do well at measuring the conscious state of individuals, is not well suited for studying the consciousness of groups of individuals. His ten volume "Völkerpsychologie" [1900, 1906, 1914, 1916, 1922] and his "Elements of Folk Psychology [1916] presented a clear use of the term, but the fact that all these volumes have not been translated into English has provided an opportunity for English-speaking academics to re-invent the term and its meaning.

Contemporary users of the term would do well to examine Wundt's use of the term, and why it required ten volumes to make his point. He writes:

> "The word 'Völkerpsychologie' [folk psychology] is a new compound in our [the German] language. It dates back scarcely farther than to about the middle of the nineteenth century. In the literature of this period, however, it appeared with two essentially different meanings. On the one hand, the term 'folk psychology' was applied to investigations concerning the relations which the intellectual, moral and other mental characteristics of people sustain to one another, as well as to studies concerning the influences of the characteristics upon the spirit of politics, art, and literature. The aim of this work was a characterization of peoples, and its greatest emphasis was placed on those cultural peoples whose civilization is of particular importance to us — the French, English, Germans, Americans, etc." [

Practically coincident with the appearance of these earliest studies, however, was a radically different use of the term 'folk psychology'. The mental sciences began to realize the need of a psychological basis; where a serviceable psychology did not exist, they felt in necessary to establish an independent psychological foundation of their work. the idea gradually arose of combining into a unified whole the various results concerning the mental development of man as severally viewed by language, religion, and culture [7]

Wundt then tells us that by folk psychology he does not mean 'community psychology' or 'social psychology', nor 'sociology', but, using my translation, a 'cultural psychology', the psychological history of human kind. He suggests four stages in the development of folk psychology: that of the primitive 'man', a totemic age in which objects were worshiped for their symbolic meaning, an age of heroes and gods, and, in his time [1910], the development of the national state and the national religion. The case for these four stages occupies the remaining 498 pages of his translated book.

The translator, Edward Schaub, a professor of philosophy at Northwestern at the time of the First World War, advises us, intelligently I think, that:

> "It should not be overlooked, however, that the examination of the mental processes that underlie the various forms in which social experience comes to expression involves a procedure which supplements, in an important way, the traditional psychological methods. More than this, Wundt's Völkerpsychologie is the result of a conviction that there are certain mental phenomena which may not be interpreted satisfactorily by any psychology which restricts itself to the standpoint of individual consciousness. Fundamental to the conclusions of the present volume, therefore, is the assumption of the reality of collective minds." [8]

"The reality of collective minds." The book you hold concerns exactly that. Although Wundt wrote of sweeping aspects of folk-psychologies, of myths, religions, heroes, totems and symbols, the book you hold concerns itself with 'little' folk- psychologies.

But Wundt's definition and understanding of folk-psychology has become lost. Writing in a 1960 introductory psychology text, Calvin Hall [1909-1985] begins a discussion of folk-psychology by saying that:

> "This approach may also be called popular psychology because it consists of notions of the average person as to why men and women behave as they do. It is self-evident to many that 'sparing the rod spoils the child,' that 'slums breed crime'." [9]

In recent years, the term 'folk psychology' has been pushed further in that direction. Stitch writes:

> "In our everyday feelings with one another we invoke a variety of commonsense psychological terms including 'believe,' 'remember,' 'feel,' 'think,' 'desire,' 'prefer,' 'imagine,' 'fear,' and others."

The use of such terms is governed by a loosely knit network of largely tacit principles, platitudes, and paradigms which constitute a sort of folk theory. Following recent practice, I will call this network folk psychology. [10]

Certainly, I agree that the categorization, analysis, and formalization of the concepts used by folk to explain psychology is a reasonable datum of anthropology and psychology. However, the earlier definition, which I prefer, seems to encompass that task, while not limiting discussion to what 'folk' believe about the mind. Though some of the 'little' folk psychologies we will examine will involve the mind (for example, its relation to the appearance of the body), much more general ideas will be found as well.

The Meme of the Meme

The most recent major innovation in thinking about the evolution of ideas must be Richard Dawkin's invention and conceptual development of the term "meme". In the simplest terms, if human ideas are to be viewed as evolving, in the most extreme sense of the metaphor, then the meme is the unit of selection, equivalent to the gene in biological evolution. (Of course, there is much debate over the role of genes in biology, and especially with regards to evolution and natural selection, but the assertion stands for what it is.) If we can properly define a meme, presumably we can learn how to investigate the course of its transmission or extinction. Dawkins' notion of the meme leaves ideas as simple, tiny units that exhibit the grace and agility of a gazelle:

> Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperm and eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain [11]

The idea of the meme, the unit of 'idea' that culture may spread, transmit, or terminate, which may thereby appear and disappear in different generations is engaging. Yet, in its present form, I think it unsuitable to our task at hand. An archeopsychology must indeed shift through such small variations in ideas or behaviors, however, as with archeologists, much of our concern is with phenomenon at a much higher level of analysis. By tracing the evolution of ideas through these minor variations, we have hope of finding commonality, or to be more specific homology.

If we examine enough physical fossils, we may find that they have in common a backbone, an ear, or an optic tectum. Such structures are constantly altering, yet their similarity evidences (usually) common origin and the workings of similar developmental principles. So too, a budding study of archeopsychology or memetics might concern itself with finding the common origin of, and principles which, lie hidden behind the surface-appearance of fleeting trends. Taking this suggestion more seriously, however, requires further development of the metaphor after which this book was titled.

The Mental Fossils Metaphor

Tracking Changes

I use the word 'fossil' not in its strict chemical sense, but in a metaphorical paleontological sense of a structure from which the change of evolution can be deduced. The fossil record may indicate relationships developed in the past, or it may, at any one time, reveal oddities whose significance are as yet unclear. We search for mental fossils whose structure allow us to follow changing ideas as they re-appears through history and attempt to determine if the fossils represent the same species, slightly changed, or a new animal altogether. The meaning of these mental fossils, as is true of the meaning of many physical fossils, will be uncertain and we can only speculate as to their significance. Discovery and re-examination of physical fossils is so frequent and quarrelsome as to suggest to some that this is no science at all. The repeated re-assessments of human evolution come to mind, for herein the discovery of even a tiny fossil remnant can and does lead to a thorough redefinition of human origins. Rarely is such so decided without disagreement. Such fighting is both inevitable and encouraging, for it establishes the hypotheses which drive future research. So long as we remain in the discovery stage of the fossil record, mental or fossil, observers will differ as to what they expect a find to unveil.

Digging

The plan to uncover mental fossils means that we must dig. We must 'unearth' the systems of belief that were prevalent at identifiable times and places. As is true of physical digs, mental digs are layered. Within any given site, dedicating extensive time to more fully uncovering a specific fossil may move us towards or take us away from the likely location of other buried treasures. The archeologist and paleontologist have tools and theories. Our archeopsychology tools are books, journals, film, and any other record we can find of what people thought, believed, and felt emotionally. Like fossils, these data are so scarce that we have no idea how representative any may be. A set of bones may represent different species, or differently sized members of a species, or differences in sex. Only context allows the paleontologist to establish the identity. Mental fossils can be expected to be more difficult to interpret we have almost n o established framework on which to build.

In our preliminary unearthing and comparing of mental fossils, we must expect the same turns of fate and disappointments as does the archeologist. We must remember that digs collapse. Sometimes great efforts — whole lifetimes and fortunes — are spent on excavations that turn up little of value or very little after an initial prize discovery. Sometimes there is simply nothing worth the effort. Sometimes one gets head deep (in the ground or in the book stacks) only to find

that environmental circumstances have wiped out all traces of the past. Both physical and mental evidence alike may be lost due to flood, poor preservation, or the high acid content of given age's paper.

Dressing and Redressing

A third aspect of the archeopsychology metaphor is that of having to discover similarities between things that appear different. Just as a variety of skeletal variations may belong to the same species, so a variety of seemingly disparate ideas may have an underlying commonality. Many of our fossil finds may be different dressings and re-dressings of the same of idea, in the same sense that a fossilized young calf and a fossilized full grow bull may be the same 'type' of animal. As when examining physical fossils, we should expect that, though the structures found at different times and places may appear different, when compared properly, we can see an orderly shifting in design. Identification of the underlying contents of recurring beliefs reveals that one aspect, then another, is altered in ways seemingly slight, yet, considered together, is of rich significance. At first glance, we see totally different structures, but on tidier and longer investigation we see the small changes that underlie and expose the mental equivalent of speciation.

Story-Telling

The final aspect of our metaphor is that the results of digs need significant arrangement before they become sensical. Fossils are uncovered haphazardly even within a given site, often the finds of several sites must be combined to approximate a full skeleton, and rarely are full skeletons are never found. Individual fossils must be ordered and cataloged, placed in many different arrangements, and hypotheses are generated and discarded to determine if a given arrangement has coherence. Reports on most digs, physical and mental, begin with a statement as to what the searchers hope to find, The report then tries to make coherent the results of its excavation and the implications of its finds. Such is our task in searching for mental fossils.

Four Major Themes

I hope, in this series of digs, to follow the path or opportunities of four major ideas. These exemplars all had an especially dazzling brilliance at the Chicago World's Fair of 1893, but they can be found if in a simpler structure long before. Following the fair they continue to receive many re-dressings, and though they often are not always found together at later sites, their tenacity and tendency to commingle is impressive. The ideas continue to intertwine into the present. What is today's news is often a merely redressing of a longtime theme. Modernization does not guarantee truth and often merely disguises the origins of the idea. Here are the four themes that I consider to be both longstanding and often redressed. Think of them as basic fossil structures which have undergone many redressings.

Variation

The first of these examples is the idea of 'variation'. I propose that only recently has 'variation' become a staple of folk psychology. From nineteenth century Britain came

intellectual contributions from Darwin, Wallace, and Galton, that would invert our way of thinking: the focus shifted, like that of a figure-ground relationship. Charles Darwin [1822-1911] and Alfred Russel Wallace [1813-1923], co-discoverers of the importance of natural-selection, understood variaton to be the key to understanding how the world came to be as it is. In particular, they showed that species were not to be thought of as fixed entities, but instead as a concept produced by and best described by contrasting variation within and between different groups of organisms. There was no perfect form of elk, except in the mind of the man; there is variation in the physical aspects of elks. Given how long the opposite view had been held, that species where characterized as approximations to a perfect form, it is not surprising that altering this view created a rippling effect that brought other variation into stern relief.

Everywhere focus shifted from the study of "essences" to the study of varation. Into this changing world waltzed Francis Galton [1822-1911], Darwin's half-cousin (they shared the same grandfather, Erasmus Darwin [1731-1802]), who understood how to measure and describe variation. While Darwin wrote of variation in a general and abstract way, often providing select (but thurough) examples of its scope, Galton measured it directly, even obsessively, and invented statistical methods for quantifying it. Galton's measurement of human variation gave flower to the use of tests to establish differences in human abilities and the promotion of eugenics. (For this he is today widely derided but, as we shall see, we have reason to be concerned about our own uses of human variation.)

Measurement of human differences in intelligence and ability were featured at the Chicago Fair of 1893 to be described. The measurements former the first exhibits of the nascent science of psychology in America. There development would lead to nationalized tests, today used for admission to universities and professional schools, but once used to encourage 'appropriate' matings and reproductions, at times, by the sterilization, castration, and vasectomization of young persons regarded as genetically inferior. (Chapters 2 and 3)

Human Progress

The second example offered is that of 'human progress'. Though the idea has been ubiquitous in history, at least in Western society, at the close of the 19th century, it was advanced in ways unmatched by previous times in unanimity and intensity. Wallace, who in addition to being a scientist was an explorer and thoughtful commentator on intellectual and social issues, choose to write, in 1899, *The Wonderful Century*. In this book, he tells that, "A comparative estimate of the number and importance of [this century's] acheivments leads to the conclusion that not only is our century superiour to any that have gone before: it must therefore be held to constitute the beginning of a new era of human progress." Pointing out that speed of travel had not changed from Roman times to the 1830s, he marveled at the steamship and train. Photography, telegraphy, x-rays, and the principles of natural selection, all received praise for their revolutionary promise, [12] just as they did at the 1893 Fair.