

## A Formal Intermezzo

James Henry Breasted wraps up his disquisition on the historical emergence of conscience thusly:

I am discussing the history of man and something which, especially in its earlier stages, is quite unmistakably disclosed as a force visibly present and operative for several hundred thousand years, and which I believe is still at work. No one can define it, or tell what it is, but like the force of gravitation, we can observe what it does.

1933: 408

But, of course, there have been no shortages of names and definitions when it comes to this something-force. Most theologies assure us that this “something” is god. Philosophy has attempted to wrestle it to the ground but philosophical answers have not quite gotten ahold of the whole thing.

That there is “something” is not open to doubt. And that this “something” is a force of some kind (what the Greeks called *energeia*, what Spinoza called *conatus*, what modern physics calls energy) is self-evident to anyone capable of observing nature. The question is not *whether* but *why* there is something. Why nature? Why energy? Why being? Why becoming?... The question of being is primordial and recurs constantly. Yet no one can answer it.

COMTE-SPONVILLE 2007: 85

Psychology, too, runs into dead ends. Jaynes opened *The Origins of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* with an amazing passage that eloquently encapsulates the overall problem of the Western intellectual tradition as seen from the vantage point of psychology.

O' what a world of unseen visions and heard silences, this insubstantial country of the mind! What ineffable essences, these touchless rememberings and unshowable reveries! And the privacy of it all! A secret theater of speechless monologue and prevenient counsel, an invisible mansion of all moods, musings, and mysteries, an infinite resort of disappointments and discoveries. A whole kingdom where each of us reigns and reclusively alone, questioning what we will, commanding what we can. A hidden

hermitage where we may study out the troubled book of what we have done and yet may do. An introcosm [sic] that is more myself than anything I can find in a mirror. This consciousness that is myself of selves, that is everything, and yet nothing at all – what is it?

1990: 1

The “bicameral mind” thesis is ultimately incorrect but the book belongs to that class of works we might call the “intellectual hellride” that should be read for their sheer audaciousness (another in this genre, to name only one, is Brown’s *Life Against and Death*). Earlier, M.C. Otto came at the same basic problem of this “something” from a different angle toward the end of one of his works:

For there is a rock fact of human nature against which the waves of rhetoric and logic dash in vain; a rock fact which, after all the proofs and disproofs have fallen back into the sea of words from which they came, stands forth the clearer for the spray dashed over it. What is this stubborn fact? It is the fact that human beings refuse to be psychically alone in the universe; the fact that they demand that somehow there shall be a Power at the heart of things which will not let them suffer ultimate defeat, let appearances be what they may.

1924: 283–84

Between the passages from Breasted, Comte-Sponville, Otto, and Jaynes we encounter a bundle of fundamental riddles that resisted even partial solutions until the end of the 19th Century: the ontic status of surplus moral energy; the crystallization and organization of what Alain calls this “human fire” into a constellation of inhuman mirrors;<sup>1</sup> consciousness of this reflected energy; the emergent self-conscious awareness that the subject and object are dynamically linked and even identical in some way (subject-object identity); and, if all goes well, self-consciousness raised to consciousness of self-consciousness and the emergence of Spirit into the noontime of reason. But it can be darkest at noon. “Man” “looks in vain for himself, he turns the universe upside-down, trying to find himself, he finds masks, and behind the masks death” (Maritain 1939: 3). In the final analysis we live in a demon-haunted world (Sagan 1995).<sup>2</sup> And, as Žižek says somewhere, this excess is with us *forever*.

Just as we think we have a grasp of the ultimate Thing we tend to continue circling around it rather than penetrating its depths. “I would like to add, in

1 “Such then is this human fire, as inhuman as any other, which burns within the hearth of hearts” (Alain [1934] 1974: 115).

2 “Skepticism doesn’t sell newspapers” (Sagan 1995: 57).