A New Model of Human Cultural History Centered on 'Modes of Relating'

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ABSTRACT

This paper synthesizes two models of human cultural evolution, Marxian materialism and environmental idealism, into a single, more powerful model. At the center of the new model is a constraint: It is argued that any given human society tends to be dominated at by a single 'mode of relating'. That is, human societies tend to relate to the spiritual world and the natural world in a way that follows the pattern set in the human social world by the mode of economic organization. The focus on 'modes of relating' mirrors recent advances in the anthropological study of animism as humans' original mode of relating to the natural and spiritual worlds. A hypothesis is offered to explain the animist 'mode of relating' as rooted in ancestral humans' hyper-sociality.

Within the great diversity of human societies, certain forms of religion and certain forms of economic life seem to tend to 'hang together.' We would consider it extremely odd to come across a tribe of hunter-gatherers that is monotheistic, for instance, or a modern industrial state that is polytheistic in the manner of ancient Greece or Rome, or a feudal agricultural society populated by animists. Why should that be?

A number of explanations can be offered for the orderly appearance of newer and more complex forms of human social organization and culture over historical time (even as instances of simpler forms persist). This paper summarizes two that have been discussed in the literatures, Marxian historical materialism and what might be called 'environmental idealism'. The paper goes on to introduce a third, a new dynamic model that combines elements of the other two and makes use of a further constraint, a supposition that cultures are characterized by coherent 'modes of relating,' as explained below. The paper offers a hypothesis to account for the origins of that coherence.

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MARXIAN MATERIALISM

The first model of social and cultural development, Marxian historical materialism (Marx 1977 [1859], preface; Marx and Engels 1964 [1845–1846], Part I (on Feuerbach); Childe 1947; Cohen 1978), takes economic organization, or mode of production, as primary (Fig. 1). Every other aspect of cultural life – including politics, law, science, art, and religion – is dependent. When the material economic basis of a society shifts, everything else shifts with it. Thus the conception of the divine closely echoes the material basis of life. Hunters and gatherers perceive spirits within or behind the animals and plants and landscapes that sustain them. Complex agricultural societies, like those of the archaic Greeks, have divinities responsible for natural forces, and also divinities responsible for human crafts and activities and institutions. Centralized states tend to evolve supreme gods and are congenial to monotheism. If feudal in structure, societies have hierarchies of gods or angels or ancestors.

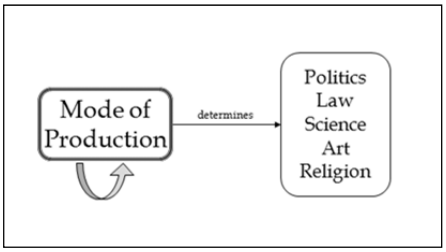

Fig. 1. Marxian Historical Materialism

According to the Marxian view it is tensions and developments in the economic sphere alone that cause the forms of economic relations to shift, carrying the whole superstructure along. There is no feedback mechanism from the world of spirit.

ENVIRONMENTAL IDEALISM

A second model (Fig. 2) can be distilled from the writings of environmental thinkers (White 1967; Leiss 1972; Merchant 1980, 1989). Seeking to explain why modern societies are so environmentally destructive, they look at the history of technological advance, but they also look even deeper – at societies' changing ideas and attitudes about nature, the changing stories we tell ourselves about our place in this world – the heart of religion. They trace a progressive ‘disenchantment of the world’ as societies have become more complex, leading to fewer inhibitions about altering the face of nature even as our technological capacity to do so has increased. Arguably the changes in consciousness were necessary even to conceive of developing and applying increasingly disruptive technologies.

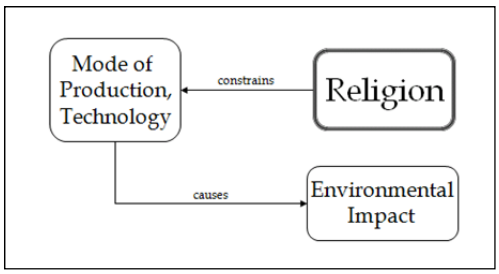

Fig. 2. Environmental Idealism

Environmental idealists, as we might call them, emphasize the importance of consciousness in regulating economic activity. Under this account, our species evolved in an 'enchanted' world, a world animated by spiritual beings and forces that govern every facet of the natural environment. The spiritual life of the animist is chock full of taboos and rituals that limit the amount of damage one can inflict on the environment; indeed they limit the amount and kinds of damage one can *conceive* of inflicting on the environment (though it certainly does not mean that hunting and foraging animist societies have no impact on the environment – overhunting of megafauna is fairly well documented, for example). Thus they tend to keep economic life within prescribed limits, and to limit the development and application of newer, more disruptive technologies. The history of religion in civilization is thus the story of the progressive dismantling of taboos and rituals that keep our relationship with the environment stable, and the fostering of new values that encourage exploitation of the environment. The changes in religion wrought changes in our economic life.

So: In the earliest Neolithic civilizations, peasants' relationship with the land, and thus their economic life, was mediated by a priestly caste that had the specialized astronomical expertise (and the aura of divine sanction that accompanied it) to say when it was time to plant and harvest. In feudal societies, man exercises dominion over nature as lords exercise authority over vassals; the medieval Christian understanding of dominion led to unprecedented liberties in agriculture, mining, forestry, *etc*., and it influenced ideas of land as property, critical to economic development. In the seventeenth century, specific religious innovations within Protestantism licensed and encouraged people to take up science and technology and engineering as divinely endorsed callings, leading to European domination in these fields in the early modern era (Weber 1930 [1905]; Tawney 1926; Merton 1970 [1938]; Huff 2003). With the secular turn of the modern era the 'disenchantment' (a term introduced by Weber)

of nature was complete and modern man was left with no religious restraint on the exploitation of nature for economic gain.

Each of these models leaves something to be desired. For example: The Marxian discounting of non-material culture in explaining historical change is simply not credible (Ranalli 2016). Environmental idealism fails to explain why ideas change, and why they change at the pace they do; and it presents a distorted view of religion, which is naturally about much more than taboos and environmental practices. My intention, however, is not to offer a detailed critique of these two models. Rather, it is to point out that the apparent contradiction between the two – one putting material life (or economics) in the driver's seat, and the other giving primacy to spiritual life – can be resolved by combining them into a larger, more powerful model.

AN ORIGINAL SYNTHESIS, AND A CONSTRAINT

I wish to propose a third model that combines and reconciles the other two. This third model posits that any given culture applies a 'mode of relating' consistently across multiple domains. Specifically, it posits that in a given culture people tend to relate to the natural world and the spiritual world in the same terms with which they relate to each other in the human social world. I intend to show that this supposition is supported by the evidence. I do not, however, attempt to offer a definitive explanation for it. It could be the result of neurological constraints, or it could be a matter of aesthetic coherence or cognitive laziness – a 'habit of mind' that could be broken with modest effort but usually is not. Either way, it provides a key to reconciling the materialist and idealist models into a third model with greater explanatory power.

It is widely believed that the development of large brains in primates was due to the need to encode the complexity of social interaction, though there is still debate about whether the evolutionary advantage this development was supposed to provide was 'Machiavellian' (for reproductive success within the group) or more about bonding (for adaptive success of the group as a whole) (Barrett and Henzi 2005). In either case, we emerged as a species that was intensely sensitive to social cues. It stands to reason, and I offer it as a hypothesis, that *spirituality emerged in our species as a by-product of this hyper-sociality*.

The original form spirituality took for our species was animism. (Of course, we are unable to directly observe this, but it is a reasonable inference from the fact that animism is the form of spirituality shared by virtually all known contemporary and historical foraging cultures.) According to our hypothesis, the original humans were animists because they were hyper-social. They were so attuned to cues about personhood and personality that they saw personhood and personality everywhere they looked.

That is, as hyper-social creatures, our ancestors related to the natural world socially, as a domain populated by spirits (Fig. 3). Since that time, animists have continued to live in a 'full' world populated by persons both human and non-human, visible and invisible – the social, environmental, and spiritual worlds intersecting.

Conventionally, animism has been interpreted by moderns either patronizingly (as a matter of irrational superstition) or with relativism, either resigned or enthusiastic (treating the animist culture as radically 'other', with an epistemology that is incommensurate with our own and thus intractable to study but nevertheless valid). Understanding animism as a matter of *relationality* rather than as a belief system helps us to escape that bind (Harvey 2013). The first published description of the 'relational' interpretation of animism appears to be a 1999 article by Nurit Bird-David entitled '"Animism" Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology.' Bird-David's compelling account, which I discovered only after independently developing in 2011 the model presented in this article, includes nuance and insight into the nature of animism beyond that which I provide here. What my own research contributes is a provisional answer to the 'most intriguing question' posed by Bird-David (1999: S79) for future research: 'why and how the modernist project estranged itself from the tendency to animate things'.

In Fig. 3, the large circle centered on the brain is meant to suggest coherence in mode of relating among all the domains that radiate out from the center.

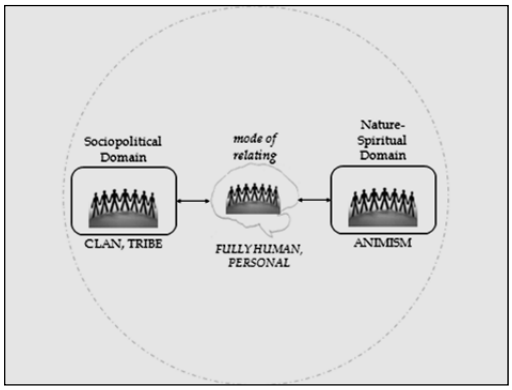

Fig. 3

According to the unified model, as we developed settled agriculture and civilization and non-animist forms of religion, certain elements of this schema remained constant and others varied.

What varied was, first and foremost, the nature of relations between man and man. This change was driven by changes in patterns of material production. As the hunter-gatherer lifestyle (Fig. 4) gave way to complex, settled agriculture (Fig. 5), we developed specialized roles and institutionalized relations of domination and submission. This is because settled agriculture required a laboring class and a priestly class and a ruling class and made possible specialized merchant and artisanal classes as well. So here we borrow from the Marxian model: economic patterns determine social and political relations.

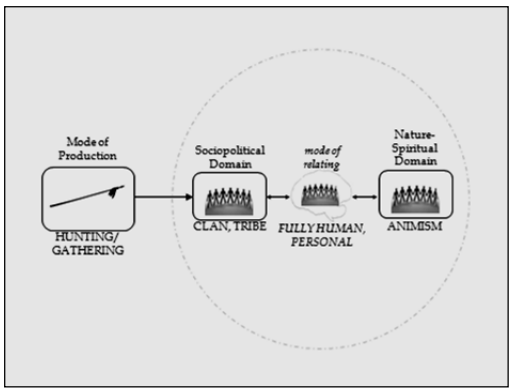

Fig. 4

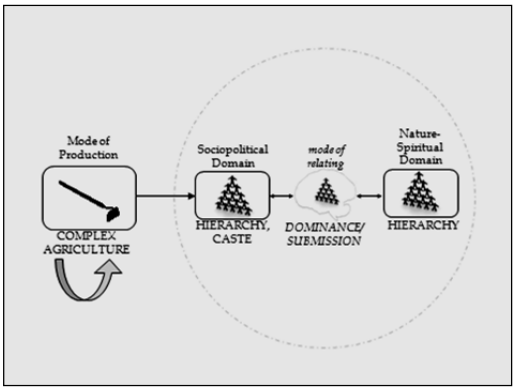

Fig. 5

What stayed the same was the coherence of the framework. Changing social relations within the human tribe and clan altered our mode of relating in the socio-political domain, and that change colored or was projected out onto our relations with the spiritual and natural worlds, which

gradually separated according to the logic of hierarchy (Fig. 6). We developed ideas of divine hierarchies, gods as kings and rulers (and then of course kings as gods). And we developed ideas and attitudes of superiority toward and domination of the natural world, notions that were completely second nature and unquestioned by the time of Aristotle.

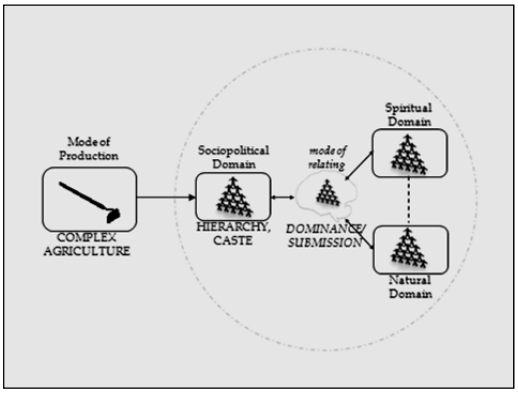

Fig. 6

The idea of the divine took on a life of its own now, independent of the natural world which used to be its context, and more or less separated from it. Hinduism, for example, maintained vestiges of its pastoralist origins in its spiritual practices, while Judaism tried hard to erase them. Christianity, having emerged as a mostly urban religion, has almost nothing to say explicitly about the human-environment nexus, and is in this sense an outlier.

Thinking about the divine world, the socio-political world, and the natural world together in the context of dominance and submission gives us the notion of the 'Great Chain of Being': Every being in the universe has its place in a single dominance hierarchy (Lovejoy 1936).

As feminist scholars have pointed out, patterns of dominance and submission were deeply engrained in gender relations in many 'civilized' pre-modern cultures (Merchant 1980; French 1986). Chief gods were male, and surviving archaic female gods were transformed into monsters. Female imagery became standard in our conception of the natural world. In social relations, egalitarianism between the sexes was replaced by patriarchalism at a very deep level, far below conscious reflection.

A feminist reading of cultural history (*e.g.*, French 1986) suggests that the course of Western civilization runs from egalitarianism to patriarchy and is returning to a new sort of egalitarianism. I think that narrative arc is largely correct. But of course the new egalitarianism is of quite a different nature than the old.

Returning to our schematic diagram: With the advent of the modern era – industrial, democratic – hierarchies have broken down and been replaced by a new egalitarianism of sorts (Fig. 7). Modern economic life, with its constant flux and instability and the unprecedented power and freedom it grants to so many, prescribes social relations that are atomistic, no longer bound by custom; we come to relate to each other in a purely instrumental fashion. (See, for example, philosopher Charles Taylor's identification of social atomism and instrumental reason as key symptoms of what he has termed *The Malaise of Modernity* [1991]). Consequently we come to relate to nature and to the divine in the same instrumental way. In the social realm relations are governed by contract rather than custom, and political custom is justified as an implied 'social contract'. In the divine realm we choose to believe in God or we choose not to; we choose from among dozens of strict or permissive Christian denominations or among several flavors of Judaism or Islam, or we choose to become Buddhists or Baha'i or secular humanists. In the realm of the natural world we consider natural resources to be property, and we exploit them as such – and when we become cognizant of the destruction we are wreaking, we try to remedy the situation instrumentally, with laws and policies and economic incentives.

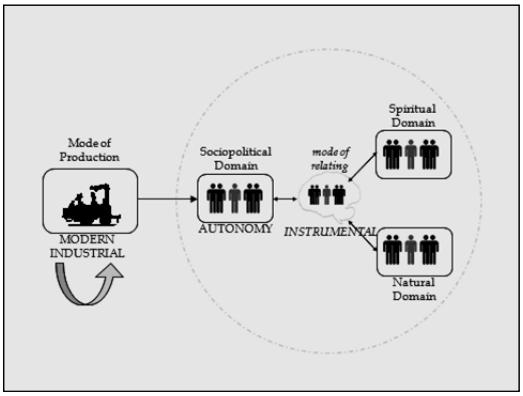

Fig. 7

Over the course of cultural history, the pace of social change is determined by feedback loops between ideas about the divine (and about nature) on the one hand, and patterns of economic life on the other (Fig. 8). Here is where 'environmental idealism' fits in.

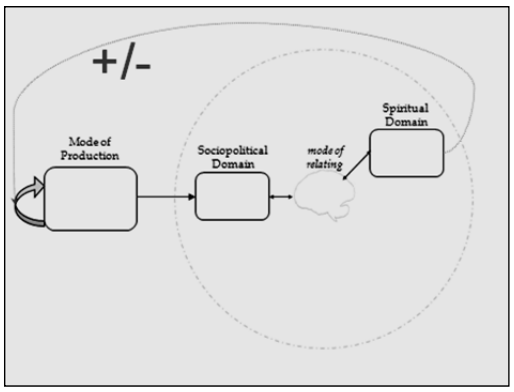

Fig. 8

For many millennia, ideas about interpersonal responsibilities to the divine held economic life steady and stable through a strong negative feedback loop (Fig. 9).

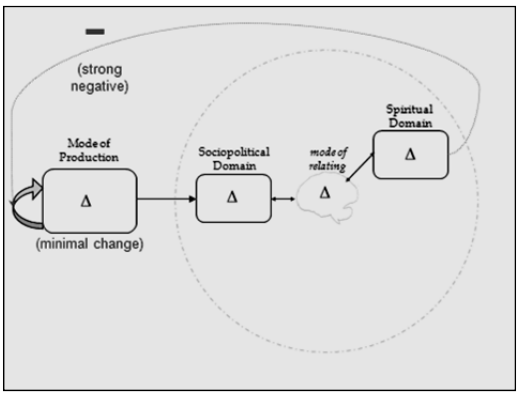

Fig. 9

Gradual changes in economic life, producing gradual changes in our social circuitry, led to mutations in our ideas of the divine. Innovations accumulated slowly, and then faster (Fig. 10).

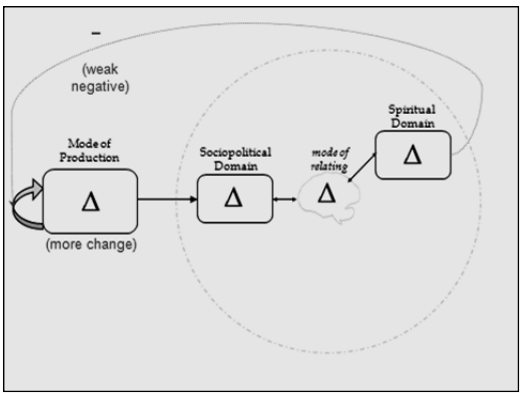

Fig. 10

By the 1600s, in Europe at least, ideas about the divine had shifted so radically that the feedback loop became a positive one that actively hastened the pace of social and economic change (Fig. 11). The effect of this mutating and accelerating feedback loop on the natural world – the environmental crisis – is simply a by-product.

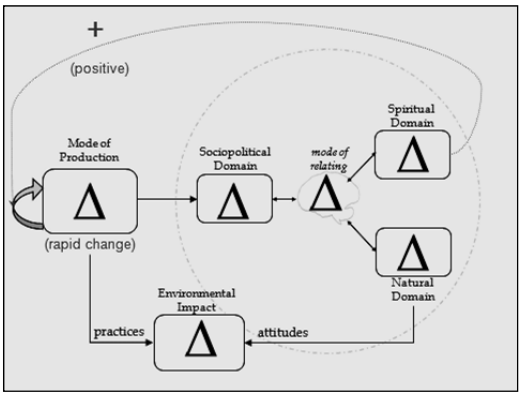

Fig. 11

The tripartite schema of human cultures used in this model (animist, pre-modern, and modern) is necessarily crude. One can cite examples of cultures that cross the boundaries. The Amerindian tribes of the Pacific Northwest, for example, had such great surpluses of fish that they were able achieve levels of social complexity normally associated with Neolithic societies while remaining technically 'hunter-gatherers.' And recent research indicates that the earliest Neolithic societies of Mesopotamia were not particularly patriarchal – male dominance of public life was not

consolidated until many centuries had passed (Graeber 2011: Ch. 7). Arguably, however, such exceptions merely prove the rule. And one may note that the tripartite schema presented in this paper is quite comparable to others in the literature: for example, the schema recently put forward by anthropologist Ian Morris in *Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels*.

I also wish to point out that I make no value judgments about the relative merits of the various stages of societal development. We have clearly gained something as civilization has advanced, as Marx argued, and we have lost something as well, as environmentalists recognize.

A NEUROLOGICAL BASIS FOR THE COHERENCE OF 'MODES OF RELATING'?

As noted above, it is not the purpose of this essay to establish whether or not there is a neurological basis for the coherence of 'modes of relating.' However, recent findings from the neurosciences shed some light on the question.

First, there is the well-known phenomenon of 'mirror neurons,' which fire in our brain both when we have an experience (say, biting into a hamburger, or smelling a skunk) and when we observe someone else having the same experience (*e.g.*, Rizzolatti and Fabbrio-Destro 2008; Cattaneo and Rizzolatti 2009). Mirror neurons, located in the inferior frontal lobe, appear to form a basis for empathy – we understand the internal life of others because we represent their activity in our brain as if we ourselves were having the same experience.

Also of interest is the so-called 'social network', a neurological network in the temporal and medial regions that is associated with social perception. In one set of experiments, Thalia Wheatley and colleagues compared activity in the mirror system of the brain and activity in the social network in response to identical simple visual stimuli that were framed by background cues to suggest either animacy or inanimacy. They found that the social network lit up only when the stimulus was consciously perceived and reported as animate, while the mirror system was responsive under both conditions. The researchers concluded that the social network, rather than the mirror system, may be the locus of animacy perception. The researchers also found it 'somewhat surprising' that a simple moving shape on a screen, interpreted as animate, 'activated the whole social network rather than a subset of it' (Wheatley *et al.* 2007: 471). The finding that the entire social network lights up at the mere suggestion of animacy is consistent with the hypothesis we framed above about the origins of animism: to restate it slightly, the hypothesis is that our ancestors actively projected mind and intention on both the human and non-human worlds when presented with cues that were merely suggestive of mind and intention.

Recent work by Christian C. Ruff and Ernst Fehr (2014) finds that social decision-making is, contrary to previous assumptions, handled by the same brain circuits that handle other kinds of decision-making. The authors interpret this as assimilating social decision-making to non-social. However, it could just as easily be understood the other way, with non-social decision-making being handled the same way as social decision-making. The subjects of the empirical research were presumably *moderns*, so it is perhaps not a surprise that decision-making was found in the lab to consistently rely more heavily on circuits that perform 'value computations associated with the rewarding properties of the choice options' than with circuits (in the dorsomedial prefrontal cortex and the temporoparietal junction) specifically dedicated to 'represent intentions, emotions, and actions of other people' (Ruff and Fehr 2014: 549). A comparative study of indigenous and pre-modern brains might conceivably show different results.

Positing differences in the brain wiring of animist, pre-modern, and modern cultures should not be taken as suggesting racial or even genetic differences in brain structures of different groups. Sharing a moment of biological evolutionary time, we share a common, plastic brain structure. The differences under discussion in this paper are mediated by culture.

CONCLUSION

The observation that cultures tend to cohere in their 'modes of relating' in the sociopolitical, natural, and spiritual domains allows us to combine the Marxian materialist and the environmental idealist views of history into a powerful model that accounts for both the direction and the accelerating rate of change in the evolution of human cultures. Whether the coherence in modes of relating is deeply engrained in our neurocircuitry or is a matter of casual habit, it is clearly visible in the historical record. This paper has offered a hypothesis to account for its origins. It is proposed that the original imposition of a 'social' interpretation on the natural world (viz., animism) by the earliest members of our species can be seen as a by-product of our ancestors' hyper-sociality, the unprecedented quantity of brainpower with which they were equipped to detect and interpret social cues.

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