



PALGRAVE STUDIES IN INDIGENOUS PSYCHOLOGY

# Values and Indigenous Psychology in the Age of the Machine and Market

*When the Gods Have Fled*

*Edited by*

Alvin Dueck · Louise Sundararajan



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# Palgrave Studies in Indigenous Psychology

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Editors

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*To John E. Toews and Delbert L. Wiens  
For their constant encouragement*

*To the loving memory of  
K. R. Sundararajan, Ph.D.  
(March 20th, 1938 to December 24th, 2022)*

# Foreword: Worshiping at the Altar of Machines, Markets, and Technology—Indigenous Psychology and Other Possibilities of Being Human

The book “*Values and Indigenous Psychology in the Age of the Machine and Market: When the Gods Have Fled*” raises crucial questions about what it means to be human and have a decent humanistic future in the age of technology, neoliberal capitalism, climate crisis, machine learning, rise of AI and the rampant racial, ethnic, religious, and social polarization that is ongoing across the globe. In other words, this edited volume represents a major milestone in psychology and calls for an urgent examination of how the twin social forces of global capitalism and unregulated technology pose an existential threat to the very idea of being human and our humanity. The edited book can be framed as articulating a moral and ethical cultural mandate for the future of psychology and humanity and it is organized around three broad questions: (1) What does it mean to be human in indigenous cultures, practices and religions? (2) How can we identify the specific threats from the reigning technological and market forces so we can alter our course and guide humanity to a meaningful future? (3) What are the enduring cultural systems and meaning in indigenous psychology that we can draw on to secure our collective human futures?

## **Neoliberalism and Technology: Cultural Erasure, Disconnection, and Extinction**

Decolonial scholar, Walter Mignolo (2011) states that “currently, the transformation of colonial differences is entrenched in what we now call global coloniality. It continues to be reproduced by global capitalism ...” (p. 161). Global capitalism is one of the engines that drives the current global configuration of the modern world order. Our modern dimensions and dynamics of globalization are shaped by the doctrine of neoliberalism that fosters “financial and political deregulation, makes a push for borderless markets, privatizes public services, promotes the opening of financial markets and investments that move across borders without much governmental intervention, and endorses an aggressive advocacy of Western-style democracy” (Bhatia, 2018; Bhatia & Priya, 2018, p. 649; Tabb, 2002). The various chapters in this volume are directly speaking to the dominant forces of technology, capital, markets that are central to our modern societies. These social forces of markets and machines are playing a vital role in shaping ourselves, symbols, spiritualities, and subjectivities. Individual and collective groups have resisted these forces with their individual and collective agency, but navigating these new powerful “gods” and the current “dark ages” is full of indomitable challenges. Global extinction is a real threat that we must take seriously (Dueck & Sundararajan, 2024).

The chapter by Dueck and Morrisey in this volume (2024) analyzes how neoliberalism’s emphasis on political capital and market power influences the ontology of self, family, and meaning in the modern Western world. They further show how the encroachment of neoliberalism leads to the commodification and monetization of indigenous language, colonization of indigenous lands, the extraction and use of Aboriginal medicines without permission, the implementation of unequal health-care practices in indigenous communities, the erasure and denigration of indigenous conceptions of self, and the exploitation of indigenous world-view, spiritualities and religions. What the edited volume does well is that it clearly shows that neoliberalism’s ascendancy cannot be understood fully without embedding it an understanding of the concept of the individual as formulated during European enlightenment. Chakkarath’s (in

press) chapter documents the links between the historical formulation of the self in the age of European enlightenment, the European impetus for colonization of non-Western countries and the current configurations of self in contemporary European social theory. He lays a cogent argument for showing how so much of Western psychology suffers from ethnocentrism and what he calls “psychological illiteracy”:

...the distortions in so many of the still influential theories of the development of the individual and of modernity arise to a considerable extent from ethnocentric perspectives. The persistence of these perspectives is due to mainstream psychology’s lack of interest in non-Western sources and non-western traditions of thought. In this respect, it is fair to speak of *psychological illiteracy*. In view of this situation, it seems to me not only overdue, but also indispensable that, in the course of postcolonial critique, more and more social science disciplines, pursue the question of their own indigeneity and thus no longer see the indigeneity of other thought traditions as a problem, but as a motivation to significantly increase the number of theories and hypotheses against which one’s own beliefs are tested. That this is evident in psychology in the form of *indigenous psychology* is reassuring. (Chakkarath, in press; emphasis in original)

The contributors to this volume go beyond filling the gaps and providing psychological and cultural literacy to the Western curriculum of psychology. Rather I see them deliberately centering indigenous psychology not as an arm or a diverse fragment of Western psychology, but as a vibrant psychology that stands on its own foundations. In this volume, the mediation between technology, neoliberalism and self is analyzed by contributors from many different theoretical, philosophical angles and perspectives.

In a culture that is preoccupied with machines and mastery, Clemente and Goodman (in press) provide compelling evidence to show how using technology as an “existential prosthesis” to transcend the limitations of the body creates an illusion of human immortality and invulnerability. They draw on contemporary films and other historical examples to demonstrate how a hyper rational focus on machines and technology might not deliver human freedom, but in the end such a technologically centered society may actually end up harming and destroying humanity.

Similarly, Schneider's chapter (in press) highlights how the rise of social media and internet driven technologies and apps have made human beings "tech-vexed"—a state in which human beings are being constantly connected to their digital tools rather than to the people with whom they want greater connection. Schneider rightly suggests that one of the antidotes to the mindless distraction of media lies in engaging in deliberate reflection. He urges us to create meaningful acts of awe, humility, presence, and deep connection with nature. Schneider wants us to move toward a sense of fulfillment and relationality rather than constantly seeking instant gratification by scrolling and seeking validation on social media.

The editors of this volume, Dueck & Sundararajan (in press), remind us in their introductory chapter that technology and science have often been linked with definitions of progress, achievement, and civilization. However, there have been devastating consequences for many groups of people when these same tools of science have been weaponized in creating the horrors of the holocaust, have been deployed to wipe out Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, carry out the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and have been used for implementing US incarceration of Japanese-Americans, and for the annihilation of Native Americans. They argue that contemporary life in this neoliberal and technologically oriented society is nearing a cultural and ecological apocalypse. There are many recent reminders of this specter of cultural mistrust and cohesion in the U.S. The editors ask us to consider the confluence of serious impending threats to our society:

Our situation seems apocalyptic. Far right extremists stormed the Capitol (January 6, 2021) and a former president is now faced with 91 indictments. The COVID-19 pandemic has killed thousands of persons per day with a disproportionate number being of African and Latin descent. A portion of the citizenry refused to wear masks and maintain physical distance because it violated what they considered their legitimate human rights. Meanwhile, doctors and nurses lost their lives caring for the infected. Clinics worked around the clock to vaccinate the population before new strains of the virus developed. (Dueck & Sundararajan, in press)



These everyday events, the editors warn us, portend a “cultural extinction” rather than a “cultural flourishing.” Just like climate scientists who are mobilizing people across the globe to think about how the human-made ecological disasters are posing an existential threat to the earth and human life on earth, this book highlights how our narrow economic models are causing cultural extinction—especially of indigenous communities. The book, however, does not just paint a dystopian picture of our times. Instead, the contributors to the volume articulate thoughtful, utopian, wise, and intellectually vigorous discussion of alternative life-ways that would precisely prevent such an extinction. The book, at its fundamental core, is rooted in radical hope and healing.

## **Decolonizing Psychology: Colonialism Is Now**

There is growing body of knowledge on decolonial psychology that centers on new theoretical models, critique of Eurocentric histories, decolonial enactments and resistance in different spaces, recentering of marginalized voices and geographies (see Bhatia, 2018, 2021). This knowledge has been tremendously crucial to challenging the coloniality of Euroamerican psychology and for offering compelling, contradictory, and multiple visions of decolonial futures (Adams et al.). The spirit of this book is very much aligned with some of the key ideas and concepts that are being developed in decolonial theory. The editors write, “Unlike writers who resort to science fiction to warn society of the destructive path we are on, this book alerts people to the facts of cultural extinction” (Dueck & Sundararajan, in press). Similarly, Decolonial psychology is concerned with what Santos (2014) calls “epistemicide” which literally means “killing” of indigenous knowledge (Bhatia, 2002; 2021). Eurocentric colonial knowledge has suppressed epistemologies of the Global South and erased epistemological diversity. There is no single, homogenous definition of decolonial psychology. For some approaches, decolonization is about reclaiming land and sovereignty (Tuck & Yang, 2012), for others it is about delinking from the Eurocentric power-knowledge nexus (Ratele et al., 2018; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018), for

others there is a recognition that the devastating legacy of the colonial encounter cannot be reversed, but there is an urgency to build a decolonized world for the vast majority of humanity who are suffering from poverty, casteism, hunger, unemployment, degraded housing, lack of education and sanitation (Bhatia, 2019).

While colonialism as a formal administrative process has ended in many former colonies, decolonial scholars have argued that coloniality endures long after colonialism has ended (see Quijano, 2000). Global inequalities and ecological inequities with roots in colonialism and “global coloniality” disproportionately impact people from formerly colonized countries and environments ravaged by European exploitation, genocide, theft, and extraction (Ndlovu-Gathsheni, 2013). Different forms of coloniality and the ways it is enacted and experienced are maintained “alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breathe coloniality all the time and every day” (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 243). One very concrete goal in decolonial psychology is to pursue what Gone (2021) calls “reclamation and revitalization” of indigenous projects in American Indian communities (AI). He elaborates:

Prior to colonial subjugation of AI cultural and spiritual activities, AI communities maintained therapeutic knowledges for “doctoring” (or healing) a wide variety of maladies. For most AI communities today, however, these knowledges have been widely disrupted (and sometimes completely eradicated) even as AI peoples express fervent commitments to reclaiming and revitalizing these therapeutic traditions. Such reclamation and re- vitalization are especially promising for counseling and psychological services insofar as the health inequities that afflict “Indian Country” are perhaps best conceived as postcolonial pathologies that entail rampant psychological demoralization and anomie. (Gone, 2021, p. 3)

The main aims of this volume echo Gone’s argument that reckoning with colonial subjugation, technological dominance and the intergenerational historical trauma of genocide requires a revival and retrieval of indigenous psychologies that have been made erased, undermined and made

invisible. I might add here that this volume has produced knowledge that will serve both indigenous and non-indigenous communities equally. The book very solidly moves from critique of Western psychology and market-based ontology to a pluriversal creation of indigenous forms of psychology that are grounded in scattered geographies, cultures, and communities.

## **A Resurgent Indigenous Psychology: Cultural Revival, Reclamation, and Resistance**

There is a decolonial impulse in this book as it simultaneously interrogates the dominance of mainstream Western psychology and builds a counter-psychology. This book maps out a resurgent indigenous psychology that is anchored in competing narratives of neoliberal despair and indigenous affirmation. The forces of technological and neoliberal culture of extinction and erosion are positioned alongside enunciations of indigenous epistemologies that have the potential for collective liberation and healing. The story in this book is really about reclaiming the power of ancestral knowledge and retrieving art, human connection, and invisible knowledge for creating a different psychology and redefining what it means to be a human being in this world of excess capitalism and rampant consumption. In her chapter, Narvaez argues that European colonization had a devastating impact on the mind, brains, and psyches of a large number of people. In contrast to Western colonial society, she persuasively shows how the Native/First Nation peoples lived in nature with a mutually sustaining economy of “give and take,” relational harmony, interdependence, deep connection with plants and animals, and a belief in restorative justice and support for child development in the context of an “evolved nest.” One can see this theme of creating alternative epistemologies and retrieving indigenous practices for resolving the multiple crises of modern life throughout the book. For example, Yeh and Chia-Min Chou (in press) articulate a powerful model of an alternative to the life of material satisfaction and consumption. They argue that one counterstory to Western economic capitalism and technological progress lies in cultivating a moral self that is anchored in Confucian

ideas of common good, harmony, mutual connection so the collective moral capacities of entire societies can be increased.

In a similar vein, Zantingh, Hey, and Ansloos (in press) remind us in their chapter about why suicide prevention research must be rooted in indigenous knowledge and epistemologies. Their chapter draws on what the authors describe as “settler colonial suicidology”—which offers a critical framework to understand and prevent the experiences of suicide in Indigenous communities. They offer this incisive critical appraisal of the limitations of Western scientific approaches:

Contrasting and de-centering Indigenous cultural methods against, individualistic, westernized scientific approaches (emphasizing universality, measurement, standardization, replicability) often leads to downward comparisons of “rigor” and “anecdotalness,” and the continued importation of Western colonial projects onto other peoples ... Attempting to provide “culturally appropriate support” within pre-existing (i.e., largely westernized) mental health services that are entrenched in colonial frameworks, assumptions, and attitudes perpetuates collective trauma, and systemic racism. (Zantingh, Hey, & Ansloos, in press)

Suicide in indigenous communities cannot be understood as divorced from the historical trauma of colonialism, dispossession, genocide and the ongoing social structures that reproduce settler colonialism.

Growing up as a child in India, once a year I worshipped the Goddess of *Saraswati*—whose figure represented knowledge and learning. I woke up early in the morning during the festival of *Dussehra* and made a shrine of my books, placed marigold flowers, and prayed to the Goddess for giving me the strength to endure the rigors of the Indian colonial school system. Sundararajan and Raina’s chapter (in press) has personal resonance for me because it provides a complex and in-depth sociological and religious context for my indigenous practice. Their analysis elegantly invokes the figure of Saraswati—the Goddess of learning and knowledge and shows what her divine powers and symbolism means to large swathes of her devotees in India, Tibet, Nepal, Indonesia, and Japan. Sundararajan reminds us about the multifaceted divine attributes of this Goddess:

She is known as *Bharati* (eloquence), *Jnanasakti* (power of knowledge), *Smrtisakti* (power of memory), *Buddhisakti* (power of mind), *Kalpanasakti* (power of forming ideas, imagination), *Saddavasini* (one who dwells in sound), *Kavijihvagravasini* (one who resides in the tongue of poets), *Sarada* (giver of essence), *Mahavidya* (transcendent knowledge), *Vagishvari* (mistress of speech), *Vani and Vachi* (referring to the flow of music/song, and eloquent speech, respectively). In the arts, especially music and dance, Sarasvati is the “cherished divinity” (*ishta devi*) of all musicians and dancers throughout India. (Sundararajan & Raina, in press)

Williamson and Hood’s chapter (in press) takes us into the world of Christian serpent handling sects (CSHS) of Appalachia—which attempts to provide a voice for a group that the authors believe have been misrepresented and pathologized by the larger culture. Their chapter is intended to fill gaps in the common misperceptions of the CSHS group in the U.S. The authors draw on compelling examples to explain the historical origins of the CSHS tradition and defend their faith by drawing on online archives, personal interviews, and other materials. The clash between tradition and modernity, religion and science, technology and ancestral wisdom, cultural extinction and flourishing, and psychological liberation and imprisonment informs many of the themes in the book. The chapter by Huang and Yang (in press) shows us how Western modernity and Chinese indigenous tradition can clash and find a degree of compatibility. In the Chinese society, the market-based and relation-centered worlds do collide, but they also provide a set of heterogeneous cultural resource to navigate community relations in a shared governance model that is both hierarchical, agentive and embedded in social regulation. Their chapter clearly highlights how local social workers develop the ambiguous subjectivity of becoming “*Gongju Ren*” or “tool persons” as they go about strengthening community relations.

Groh’s chapter (in press) analyzes how settler colonialism is based on the extraction of Indigenous land and how indigenous sacred local ecologies and communities are being severely exploited by industrial societies for minerals and precious metals that are used in the manufacturing of electronic devices. Furthermore, Groh argues that indigenous people, including children, are employed to extract these minerals and they have

no protection from international law. The decimation of indigenous lands is not only about the misuse of indigenous physical territories but it sheds light on how capitalistic extraction destroys the entire interdependent ecology of indigenous cultures, lands, families, community, and a way of life.

This focus on erasure, extinction, and exploitation of indigenous lands is also a crucial feature of the chapter by Ting and Thong (in press). They powerfully employ an emic and etic perspective to show how the land rights of the indigenous people of Temiar in Malaysia are being violated. The encroachment on their lands and community is a major source of collective trauma and dispossession for this tribe. Their chapter makes a plea for recognizing multiple ontological and epistemological psychological realities that are grounded in an ethical orientation:

We are not simply nostalgic over the loss of tradition. We advocate for an advancement of psychological science by respecting multiple ontological realities—one that encourages critical thinking rather than trusting Generative AI (e.g., ChatGPT), one that could engage in ethical discernment rather than holding beliefs that are “politically correct”, or one that measures the impact of research not by the number of citations but by the evidence of social changes that improve life for minorities. We advocate for value-based psychology that is built on inclusion of minorities in the research as a way to counteract the “helicopter research” (Hernandez, 2022). The latter is conducted in many cross-cultural psychological studies where researchers from wealthy countries descend on an impoverished country, conduct their research studies, and then return to their countries to analyze the data they collected and publish the results. (Ting & Thong, in press)

The power of prayer on ontology and self is a key feature of Fatemi’s excellent chapter (in press) on Islamic psychology. He argues that the dominant values of a neoliberal society are based on the ideas of consumerism, materialism, commodification, and a market-oriented ethos. In contrast, *Munajat e Shabaniya* is a written prayer in Islam that challenges the values of neoliberalism. Fatemi writes that prayer in an “Islamic-based psychology espouses emotional changes where one experiences detachment or *Enqetta* in Imam Ali’s words: detachment



is not that you should not own anything, but it means that nothing should own you” (in press). His chapter thus addresses how specific forms of prayer in Islamic psychology can provide healing from the “soul loss” that may occur from following a materialist ontology in Western society. Finally, Matthyssen’s chapter (in press) focuses on the concept of *ming* (“life force,” “fate”) which denotes “fate” “and “agency” in contemporary Chinese society. Her chapter provides a sophisticated analysis of the meaning of the expression “changing fate” (*gaibian mingyun*)—which signifies contradictory meanings about predestined actions and securing upward mobility and success through individual efforts in a communist society. Her chapter shows how contemporary Chinese people creatively deploy discourses of “fate” and “agency” that are grounded in multiple and contradictory cultural meanings of Confucian morality, spiritual heritage, communist ethos, globalization and neoliberal discourses of self-fulfillment, status, material reward, family achievement and education.

## Concluding Thoughts

The editors of this volume issued a clarion call to the authors to answer the following questions: “What is it about the age of technology and the market, as exemplified by neoliberalism, in which empathy is dulled, and the replacement and extinction of certain forms of life are justified?” (Dueck & Sundararajan, in press). What are the various life forms and groups that are being replaced and extinguished? The authors in this volume have risen to the occasion to answer that important call. The contributors don’t necessarily provide settled answers or articulate a “how to” map to create decolonial and indigenous futures. Instead, all the chapters invite us to reflect meaningfully on the state of the current world and summon us to look deeply at how we are relating to this world of markets and machines. This book is organized around the idea that neoliberal globalization is an economic doctrine that brings about profound transformations in the realm of culture, politics, ecology, psychology and ontology (Bhatia, 2018, 2020; Bhatia & Priya, 2018;

2021). Neoliberalism with its emphasis on extraction, ecocide, domination and capitalism, directly and indirectly, works to erase age-old indigenous practices. Neoliberalism's impact on the discipline of psychology is quite extensive and it is "reformulating personhood, psychological life, moral and ethical responsibility, and what it means to have selfhood and identity" (Sugarman, 2015, p. 104).

The edited volume is not set up only as a critique of Western psychology and the neoliberal and technological values that shape Eurocentric conceptions of self and identity, but this edited book provides pedagogical entry points for decolonizing knowledge or engaging in acts of "epistemological decolonization" (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). A central feature of decolonial thinking is that colonialism cannot be divorced from modernity (Adams, et al., 2015; Bhatia et al, 2023; Kessi, 2017; Maldonado-Torres, 2007) and Eurocentric knowledge systems are tied to modern social forces of capitalism, racism, gender violence and genocidal violence. Epistemological decolonization is about decolonizing dominant forms of knowledge production and fundamentally rethinking psychology (Kessi, 2017). Examining dominant epistemologies means examining how we define the meaning of "possibilities" and how we imagine "possibilities differently" (Escobar, 2020, p. x). This edited book, *Values and Indigenous Psychology in the Age of the Machine and Market: When the Gods Have Fled*, shows us how to imagine new possibilities of becoming human in an age where worshiping at the altar of markets and machines is considered a sign of progress, development, and achievement.

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## **Praise for *Values and Indigenous Psychology in the Age of the Machine and Market***

“I am frankly relieved that the editors, Dueck and Sundararajan, have turned their considerable analytic talents to this seemingly intractable set of problems. And once again they have assembled as formidable a group of authors as I can imagine. Their collective task: to understand, explore, and propose solutions for the extinction of culture, including our own. I’m embarrassed to admit that I never realized the extent or significance of the problem. But this book has raised my consciousness not only to the twin dangers of marketization and technology to all cultures, but also to the relatively untapped wisdom of indigenous religious traditions. How can we, for example, find cultural unity with the apparent depth of our current societal divisions? As just one of many resources in this book, the indigenous people of Zaire address the issues with fresh and profound insights. This book is a compendium of such resources, which the editors masterfully weave into a wonderful tapestry of sorely needed ideas and practices.”

—Brent Slife, *Emeritus Professor of Psychology, Brigham Young University*

“Alvin Dueck and Louise Sundararajan offer a humanistic vision for a new age, a deft balance of alarm and hope. With thoughtful fervor they confront the spiritual vacuity and grotesque indifference of our time, naming a consequence nothing short of human extinction. Yet their masterfully edited volume offers treasures of resources for thinking and living differently, gleaned from an array of cultural and spiritual traditions historically disregarded in the pursuit of “progress.” Individual chapters are vibrant with distinct insights, contributed by experts from diverse perspectives, but the framing provides a cohesive moral structure to the whole. This book is a timely, provocative, unprecedented contribution to psychology and a vital resource for anyone concerned with human values.”

—Lisa Osbeck, *Professor of Psychology, Department of Anthropology, Psychology, and Sociology, University of West Georgia*

“If one has concerns about the future of Indigenous Psychology, one need not worry. This volume connects critical and cultural ideas, advances and stimulates reflection, and provides thought-provoking analyses of the pathologies of the economic, technological, and cultural hegemonic status quo and its course. Indigenous and cultural thinking that considers diversity and inclusion, and articulates the moral and ethical-political dimensions of research and practice, are advanced as sources to contest the many maladies that plague the world. This edited book is a *tour de force* and shows a wide-ranging research program at its best.”

—Dr. Thomas Teo, *Professor of Psychology, Historical, Theoretical, and Critical Studies of Psychology, York University*

“Values and Indigenous Psychology in an age of Market and Machine: When the Gods Have Fled invites us to engage with the subtle and complex issue of forming our future. Today our thoughts, our actions, our power, and our future are under the control of technology and market. This volume recognizes the limitations of the social forces of technology and market and examines their adverse impact on the value premises leading to a global existential crisis reflected in large scale increase in violence, alienation, and problems of climate change. In addition, the volume draws attention to the ways technology and market



are destroying the life style and cultural wealth of indigenous communities. The contributions to this volume illustrate the wisdom lessons from indigenous societies in China, Malaysia and India which suggest that the indigenous cultures have models and practices that expand the scope of existential debate and encourage reconsidering our connections with technology and market. They illuminate the potential of fostering a holistic paradigm rooted in indigenous cultures.

The volume explores the subtle and complex dimensions of technology and market with great force. It captures the complexity and versatility of culture that make us what we are, in an engaging and informative way. It is a fascinating guide suitable for anyone who is wondering what technology and market are doing to us. Illuminating and essential to our understanding of humanity the text is revelatory and powerful. Alvin Dueck and Louise Sundararajan have accomplished a timely synthesis of cultural history and indigenous psychologies from different regions and have demonstrated that technology and market are powerful and dangerous illusions. By focusing on both the deleterious impact of technology and neoliberalism on indigenous communities, they point to the erosion of the resources we may find in indigenous cultures. The volume offers a fresh line of thinking about choice, identity and morality. Anyone interested in the story of the cultural journey of humanity will enjoy reading it.”

—Girishwar Misra, *Former Vice Chancellor, Mahatma Gandhi Antarrashtriya Hindi Vishvavidyalaya Wardha, India Former Professor & Chair, Psychology Department, University of Delhi, Delhi, India*

“Given terms like “erasure,” “cultural extinction,” and “value degradation,” one might assume that Dueck and Sundararajan’s volume is an exercise in despair. But it’s not that at all. On the contrary, drawing on the expertise, wisdom, and care of an impressive roster of contributors, it is an exercise in unflinching cultural self-confrontation and radical hope. In looking toward the deep well of values found in indigenous cultures, this volume speaks cogently to the importance of remembering and retrieving those dimensions of human reality that have been buried beneath the shiny edifice of the market and modern technology. The result is a timely, significant, and indeed urgent mandate for psychology

to extricate itself from its complicity in the neoliberal marketization of being and to play its part in this important recollective process.”

—Mark Freeman, *PhD, College of the Holy Cross, 1 College Street,  
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# Part I

## Value Degradation

Impact on Traditional Values



Robert Maddux-Harle

## Retail Therapy

the whoredom of retail therapy  
becomes a two-edged credit card,  
pin or sign  
flash or swipe,  
mycobacteria economic consumption has,  
turned into emphysema.  
the radical deconstruction of capitalism is nigh  
but till then, shop on.  
i desire,  
ipod  
iphone  
ipad  
I will dock into my  
HD 150cm 1080p LCD TV with,  
USB, PVR, PA, Wi-Fi and,  
Hi-Fi 7.1 surround sound with,  
80cm sub-woofer.  
I will colour my world with,  
Blu-rays, then,  
Bluetooth  
my nextG smartphone to my  
GPS geo-locator so,  
U can track me on,  
Facebook with,  
face recognition,  
voice recognition,  
designer-brand recognition.  
i desire to be contactable,  
i desire be reachable,  
i desire to be exploited as a marketing pawn.  
i have completed my dumbing-down debriefing  
now my simultaneous use of opposable thumbs  
has exceeded even that of my aping ancestors,  
I am so happy.  
my Android tablet purrs and,  
is far more palatable than a Blackberry, so  
I am happy,  
both transfer every keystroke back to  
my Big brother and my Big sister to  
build a global data gold mine  
I am so happy to be a marketing pawn,  
even though the radical deconstruction of capitalism is nigh.

Robert Maddux-Harle



# 1

## A Cultural Manifesto

Alvin Dueck and Louise Sundararajan

Alasdair MacIntyre ended his treatise *After Virtue* with words of doom. In the modern ethos "...[t]he barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time. And it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitutes part of our predicament" (MacIntyre, 1981/2007, p. 263). The impending barbarism, he argues, is a consequence of the absence of a coherent moral framework needed to guide the West. More specifically, the disarray in our conceptions of justice threaten our political community and agreement on the content and character of our fundamental values and virtues.

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The latter have been reduced from a robust understanding of the character of justice in ancient societies to impotent sentimentality in modern cultures. MacIntyre noted that American society has been unable to create a consensus around the necessary virtues to undergird a democracy—something the French social observer, Alexis de Tocqueville (1835/2003), had already noticed while traveling in America in the 1830s.

Now, a half century after Macintyre's dirge, the optimists see modern society as a significant improvement over the "primitivism" of the earth's first inhabitants. After a review of the research on the level of interpersonal violence among these peoples, Pinker (2011) concluded that present-day humans are generally far less likely to die at the hand of other humans (infanticide, fratricide, torture, and murder of captured enemy combatants, etc.) than in previous times. In modern, industrial societies such deaths dropped from about 4.5% to the current 1.5% of the human population. However, have we already forgotten the atrocities of the twentieth century: the Nazi holocaust, extermination of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, Russian pogroms in the Ukraine, US incarceration of Japanese-Americans, and attempts at Native American genocide?

Our situation seems apocalyptic. Far right extremists stormed the Capitol (January 6, 2021) and a former president is now faced with indictments. The COVID-19 pandemic has killed thousands of persons per day with a disproportionate number being of African and Latin descent. A portion of the citizenry refused to wear masks and maintain physical distance because it violated what they considered their legitimate human rights. Meanwhile, doctors and nurses lost their lives caring for the infected. Clinics worked around the clock to vaccinate the population before new strains of the virus developed. The east coast braced for another snow and ice storm, an effect of global warming; the West battled with ongoing forest fires.

Those who speculate about the extinction of the human species in the near future talk about two types of extinction: The most obvious one is by some nuclear accident, or global warming or pandemic; the second possibility is a slow process that weakens the human potential considerably, a sickness onto death. Whether the first kind of extinction will happen or not, the second type is already happening, one of the symptoms of which is the steady extinction of cultures. Indigenous

communities around the world continue to die off at a rate of 25 per year (Wilford, 2007). The number of suicides in Indigenous communities is far out of proportion to deaths in majority groups (Chandler et al., 1998). All this portends cultural extinction rather than cultural flourishing. However, by addressing the cultural dimension of the path to extinction, we can help avoid erasure of minority groups. Unlike writers who resort to science fiction to warn society of the destructive path we are on, this book alerts people to the facts of cultural extinction. In contrast to climate scientists who try to convince people of the seriousness of their predictions, we present facts about extinction and the terrible condition of cultures on the verge of extinction like the polar bears struggling with the melting ice. Just as the climate scientists trying to convince people that the disaster is human blindness, we will argue that the cause of cultural extinction is basically due to our cultural blindness.

## A Cultural Manifesto

This book calls for urgent attention to the following questions: What is it about the age of technology and the market, as exemplified by neoliberalism in which empathy is dulled, and the replacement and extinction of certain forms of life are justified? If this is the mentality today, how can we count on the visions of our elites (including psychologists) for a decent future? Those who do not see anything wrong with the replacement and extinction of certain groups today cannot give us a satisfactory answer to this question—“What does it mean to be a decent human being?” The purpose of this volume is to call for responses to these questions by (a) articulating visions of being human in Indigenous religions, and (b) identifying the threats from the reigning forces (technological and market) that render invisible or unintelligible the visions that can lead humanity to a meaningful future.

## Visions of Being Human in Indigenous Religions

We concur with Jung that human civilization develops such that it accumulates a wisdom tested in experience.

Life has always seemed to me like a plant that lives on its rhizome. Its true life is invisible, hidden in the rhizome. The part that appears above ground lasts only a single summer. Then it withers away—an ephemeral apparition. When we think of the unending growth and decay of life and civilizations, we cannot escape the impression of absolute nullity. Yet I have never lost a sense of something that lives and endures underneath the eternal flux. What we see is the blossom, which passes. The rhizome remains. (Jung, 1961, p. 17)

Human civilizations come and go, but what if ours is the last one when it goes? Can we retrieve the invisible roots of humanity before it is too late? We turn to Indigenous religious traditions to retrieve the puzzle pieces that were or are still intact (Dueck, 2020, 2021; Sundararajan, 2015, 2020). Recovering these puzzle pieces can enrich the current conversation about humanity's future by first addressing the question: What does it mean to be human?

The second question we raise is how these values have been maintained over millennia in some populations. Perhaps it lies in the structure of their communities and the way their life, ceremonies, language, and informal structure reinforced these values in non-coercive ways. Or perhaps it resides in the quality of their spirituality which seemed to sacralize every dimension of their lives much like the I-Thou relationship Buber described (Buber, 1958).

Spirituality was central to the life of Small Band Gatherers and Hunters (SBGH). It was affirmed personally and in the context of nature. Immorality in the form of abuse, aggression, or cheating was not tolerated. Based on his work with Indigenous peoples in Zaire (Mbuti), Turnbull averred that the SBGH have an

awareness of Spirit that enables them to accept differences of manner, custom, speech, behavior, even of belief, while still feeling an underlying unity. It is awareness of Spirit that enables them to avoid the conflict and hostility that arise so easily from such differences. (Turnbull, 1984, p. 75)

We propose that there is a “rhizome,” a wisdom that enabled some people groups to survive the onslaught of modernity. What contributes to the extinction of aboriginal peoples is the destruction of their social structure.

## Value Degradation

With the coming of modernity, the leading narrative asserted that the sacred canopy of morality and custom became the “disenchanted cosmos” (Berger, 2011). In his first essay and later his book, McCarragher (2015, 2019), however, argues we have never been disenchanted. We transitioned from the enchantment of the religious canopy to the enchantment of Mammon. The hallmark of this cultural shift is the erosion of values and the worship of the new gods of technology and the market—a combination which has brought much that is valuable to the brink of extinction. In all cultures, values are pieces of a puzzle that people use to make sense of their lives. When these pieces get deformed under the impact of the social forces of the market and technology, we have value degradation that profoundly distorts the puzzles people try to put together about the meaning of anything.

The notion of a transhuman utopia is a major example of value degradation, in which technology is the path to bliss, which is defined in terms of maximizing our biological makeup, such as the elimination of death, and the enhanced capacity to experience pleasure, etc. What is missing is the understanding that, for instance, experience of real happiness is fleeting and cannot be programmed. Even if I live forever, there is no guarantee that I will have more of the kind of friendship I had with a dear friend I lost to death. If the utopia offered by the best thinkers of our time is shallow, we are in a value crisis—the puzzle pieces we have



are deformed, such that the friendship to which we aspire resides in Facebook. Facebook is an example of the value degradation of friendship. And if the shallow kind of this happiness is all we get, what is the point of living forever?

## Technology and Neoliberalism

In this book we conduct an analysis of technology and market ideology to show the nature of the dark age we live in. This is imperative because many people consider the age of technology the apex of human civilization or the brave new world that will set us free. Our analysis suggests that it is a dark age for all humanity, such that it is meaningless to aspire to be top dog in the dark age that may end up in global extinction.

Technology and the market are made for each other. Both are about power, which is one of the most dangerous gods that humanity worships. The side effects of this age of technology and the market are not confined to the West. Whether in the East or West the twin social forces are basically about empire building via technology and market. The technological empire is the owner of all our personal data; our choice is between Xi Jinping and Google as the owner. While we are preoccupied with making the choice between our owners, we fail to notice the fact that the direction where the tech empire is going is enslavement anyway. While we are being delivered from illness and starvation by the god of technology, we have lost the freedom in matters that are important to the human spirit. This global loss of freedom is what we mean by value crisis.

We maintain that the combined forces of technology and the market have decimated our moral resources, such as the Small Band Gatherers and Hunters in the ancient world and persons of faith in the modern world. What is needed is critical reflection on the effects of technology and the market on our morality and our values.

It should come as no surprise that Indigenous psychologists are particularly suited to address the issues of value degradation, since they have plenty of data. There is no need to turn to the speculation of the futurists

or the imagination of science fiction—the future is here for psychologists who observe and document the corrosive impact of the machine and the market on marginalized populations and traditioned societies. In this edited volume, psychologists join forces with sociologists and anthropologists to address the issues that may hold the key to humanity's future.

## Machine

The Taoist philosopher Chuang Tzu (third century B. C.) saw it coming. He told a delightful parable about the potential cost of technology to human spirituality: Tzukung, the famed disciple of Confucius, came upon an elderly man working hard to bring water from the well to his vegetable garden. “He exerted a tremendous amount of energy, but with little result” (Mair, 1994):

Tzukung said to him, “There are machines for this purpose that can irrigate a hundred plots in one day. They use very little energy but their results are great. Don't you want one, sir?”

The gardener looked up at him and asked, “How does it work?”

It is a device fashioned from wood that is heavy in back and light in front. It picks up the water like a ladle, as fast as though it were boiling over. It is called a wellsweep.

The gardener made an angry grimace and said with a laugh, “I have heard from my teacher that where there are ingenious contraptions, there are sure to be ingenious affairs, and where there are ingenious affairs, there are sure to be ingenious minds. When one harbors an ingenious mind in one's breast, its pure simplicity will be impaired. When pure simplicity is impaired, the spiritual nature will be unstable. He whose spiritual nature is unsettled will not be supported by the Way. It's not that I am unaware of such things, rather that I would be ashamed to do them.” (p. 111)

Throughout the ages, the march of human civilizations seems to have only mocked the Taoist critique with ever more ingenious contraptions, ingenious affairs, and ingenious minds. Yet, the old gardener's words have been taken seriously by many who think deeply about humanity's future.

For instance, Heisenberg cited this Taoist parable in his argument that the use of technology has dangerously changed our ways of thinking (Heisenberg, cited in McLuhan, 2013). This edited volume will continue the Taoist critique by reiterating its central concern, namely, the preoccupation with ingenious contraptions signifies a new economic cosmos in which efficiency is the measure of all things (Ellul, 2021). While this new economic cosmos ushers in the unprecedented development of market and technology, it also pays a hefty price. Besides taking a lethal toll on the environment, the modern preoccupation with efficiency and utilitarianism leads to value degradation, that is, when humans lose their moorings in their “spiritual nature.”

Norbert Wiener, the father of cybernetics—which is arguably one of the most ingenious contraptions of all time—shares similar concerns as the old gardener. Wiener (2019) predicted that smart machines bring with them “some of the most important moral traps into which the present generation of human beings is likely to fall” (p. 10). He suggested that the future of humanity depends on the work of anthropology and the humanities to give us some directions regarding how to fill the values vacuum in the wake of the smart machines that he himself had given birth to. Interestingly, Wiener did not mention psychology, even though he worked closely with psychologists in developing the smart machines. Is the function of psychology limited to the production of ever more ingenious machines and minds/brains? Can psychology envision a future of humanity in terms beyond utility and efficiency? This edited volume is proof that Indigenous psychologists are eager and able to answer Wiener’s call to ponder humanity’s fate in the high noon of smart machines and the market.

The world is going through a sea change because of Artificial Intelligence (AI), with chatGBT as the most recent example. For instance, we use our computers, but then they control lives rather than the other way around. When it breaks down, we feel our world has come to an end. We obey its laws, operate it according to its terms, and would not ever dare to disobey its rules. There is no room for negotiation, so the machine rules in tyranny. Suppose in the near future, everything is automatized—paying the parking ticket, shopping, etc. This means less and less room for negotiation. There is no back and forth with a robot.

You press the right buttons as you are told, and obey the codes all the way through. If you ever press the wrong button, or put in the wrong input, you will realize that mistakes are indelible and robots are extremely difficult to correct. Rule following and obedience will be pervasive—turning humans into robots. What happens when one deals with robots in transactions all day long? One would feel alienated, and having all kinds of convenience but less and less understanding about things in my world, because everything is done through the codes processed by the robots. And there is no difference between facts and fiction—everything is a matter of codes for the robots. Personally, we feel a loss of grip on reality.

We are not there yet, because we have family and friends and meaningful engagements to protect us from this alienating effect of AI. But some people do not have these buffers, and they could already be affected. We think that explains in part the popularity of conspiracy theories, which say you do not have real knowledge of the world—only a few powerful elites know what's going on and they control the world including your brain. While this is not factual, the feeling of alienation and powerlessness that feeds into these theories is real. This is one example of how one's culture is dying due to the lack of cultural affordances in the technological world. This type of existential crisis for dying cultures is all around us, if we only look. In the brave new world, the culture of robots will find more affordances than that of humans, paving the way to our extinction. If we want to prevent that, we need to start paying attention to the symptoms of dying cultures which will eventually include our own, since the world is increasingly, with the help from psychology, made in the image of AI.

Boström (2014), noted philosopher in charge of the Institute of Humanity's Future at Oxford, extolls the power of artificial intelligence and technological prowess to save humanity. In his book on superintelligence (advanced Artificial Intelligence), he attempted to debunk the dystopian predictions about the ideal new world by telling the story of what had happened to the horses after the car was invented. When the horse and buggy was replaced by the car, horses lost their function and use in society. But the prediction of extinction did not come true, since horses found a new niche—the entertainment world. Likewise,

Boström says, humans need not be afraid of being replaced by super-intelligent machines in the future; humanity too will adapt. Boström's (2014) view is that AI poses a great danger, but if we survive the risk, it will bring about our true destiny—the superman, or transhuman. One of the great things these optimists dream about in the brave new world is the elimination of death by technology. There is no long-term crisis to worry about.

This is supposed to be a happy ending to the story, except that there is little consolation in it if we read it as a parable of *cultural extinction* which is already happening. In this model the hallmark of any culture that is losing its use and function is its ability to find a new niche in entertainment. That is how the aboriginals around the world dress up in their colorful traditional attire to entertain tourists.

The problem in this episode is that Boström did not see anything wrong if humans were to follow the trajectory of the horse into the future. While we cannot ask the horses how they feel about their new career in entertainment, we can find out how affected communities and Indigenous populations feel about their cultural displacement and replacement—and it is important that we find that out now—because that could very well be humanity's future, especially since the elites in our society today will not intervene as they don't see anything wrong with it.

We cast the technological issues we face in the widest context: The future of humanity is in question. This is the same concern of Boström. His take is that the danger of extinction (by runaway technology) is real, but if we handle the AI technology with wisdom (provided by gurus such as Boström), we shall reach the true destiny of humanity—being transhuman. Our focus, by contrast, is on the final destiny of humanity (even if we follow the instruction of the intelligence gurus to avoid extinction): What shall the future be if we do not share Boström's utopia?

Technology is the outcome of an epistemology and history that is capable of extinguishing cultures. It is also the herald of machine culture that will eventually push all human cultures to extinction. To colonize Indigenous spirituality via technology into something that is alien to traditioned societies is violence (Dueck & Reimer, 2009) and may lead to the extinction of the Indigenous community. Right now, we

are studying the extinction of Indigenous populations but in the near future, when *the machine culture* is in full steam, it will be all human cultures that will be pushed to the brink of extinction. While Indigenous groups are rapidly dying out, our focus is not confined to the Indigenous populations—they are the canaries in the global mine.

## Marketization

In 1981, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher boldly declared the purpose of her neoliberal capitalist political project: “Economics are the method, but the object is to change the soul.” There is now evidence that this transformation has occurred (Goudarzi et al., 2022, p. 8). Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan proposed that it is the market that should drive society such that supply and demand are the basis of its government, its yardstick to measure justice. The individual in this society is construed as a consumer and entrepreneur, unincumbered by the weight of tradition. Social welfare programs are denigrated and objects of value are commoditized. The accumulation of wealth is the primary virtue in a social project (Harvey, 2007, 2016) which serves as a new religion to replace all religions (Carrette & King, 2005; Cox, 1999).

Over the past centuries, competing ontologies (Holbraad et al., 2017) have emerged: Indigenous spirituality with ancient roots and neoliberalism with a modern foundation. Individuals in the former live in a world peopled with spirits, where trees talk, the elders are respected for their wisdom, and Shamans are believed to cure. In modernity, we are told, secularity has shorn the facts clean of divinity, the spirits, and subjectivity.

The social imaginaries correlative to these two ontologies differentially give meaning to action, political events, and relationships (Taylor, 2002). Neoliberalism advances a political utopia with its own rituals (economic transactions), discourse (economic), high priests (transnational CEOs), sacred texts (market analyses), normativity (saving and investing for retirement), virtues (in the form of risk taking, self-improvement), evangelical expansionism (McDonalds and Starbucks in Tiananmen Square), and icons (in the form of banknotes). This ontology (Heywood, 2017) takes over other societies by overt violence or covertly through the

freedom to consume while learning a neoliberal discourse. We fear that the Indigenous and traditioned values will be erased by the force of neoliberal ideology.

Neoliberalism degrades Indigenous values and psychology by subjecting them to the ontology of the market. Neoliberalism then translates Indigenous value language into economic terms. The individual manages values as if they are assets that contribute to one's productivity. Neoliberal psychology changes the Indigenous value of "harmonious relations" into something like "relational functioning." Early settlers thought of obtaining land as a market transaction rather than a shared gift with Native peoples. Relational functioning was viewed through a lens of instrumentality. What gets lost in either case is the opportunity to hold a value in such a way that it is not immediately transformed by market ideology.

The market mentality is more than a narrow theory or a minor movement. It is a practiced way of life rather than simply a label. It is the product of political interventions, legal economic institutions, and concrete everyday practices. It is not simply a theory but a program of concrete actions that have become habituated. In Charles Taylor's (2004) words, marketization functions like a new social imaginary, giving meaning to action, political events, and relationships.

Moreover, that the market mentality is hidden is a consequence of the separation of matters psychological from that which is political and economic. This cultural blind spot is that the personal has become political. We are blind to how this economic ontology has impacted psychological processes. The unconscious influence of market culture is pervasive: preferred cognitive styles (analytical), privileged emotions (happiness), traits (risk taking), commitment to personal growth, and so on.

**Religion, technology, and neoliberalism.** One of the blatant effects of the twin social forces of technology and marketization is the reduction of religion to spirituality. Professional psychology may construe religion etically such that a relationship with God is viewed in terms of attachments without concern for how religions are distorted or obfuscated for the native believer. To study a religion in terms of conversion fails to take seriously that many religions don't have a clear-cut entrance or

exit. To view obedience to a commandment or submission to a normative tradition as heteronomy rather than valorizing autonomy makes the former pejorative. To view religion in terms of health benefits fails to take seriously that becoming religious may be fatal (Uyghur Muslims in NW China, Mennonites martyred in sixteenth century Europe, and many more groups). When psychology is colonized by a market view of the human as *homo economicus*, this point of departure undermines the commitment to self-sacrifice, communal living, and care for the destitute. The emphasis on the rationality in the tradition of the Enlightenment relegates a religion of the heart to romanticism and mere sentimentality.

**Indigenous and mainstream psychology.** In market ideology, the roots of the social bond are economic relations. Individuals are entrepreneurs committed to self-management, presentation, and enhancing their asset position through relationships. The market is the model for all domains and activities. Relationships are not simply an exchange, but market competition. The financial inequality is replicated in social inequality.

Institutions that compete with the market logic are hollowed out, eviscerated (Bourdieu, 1998, 2000) of their meaning and significance. At the same time that these collective structures disintegrate, the individual is held up as the maker of his or her own future. The troubled individual is unaware that the institutions that had provided moral and psychological resources are bankrupt thanks to the insidious influence of neoliberalism. Rogers-Vaughn proposes there are two forces neoliberalism uses to achieve its agenda: marginalization and corruption.

*Marginalization*, in these instances, refers to how neoliberalism restricts the size, power, or scope of human systems within its hegemonic influence. It endeavors, in other words, to eliminate or overpower its competition. *Corruption* refers to how neoliberal rationality transforms human systems to conform to its discourse, ideology, and agendas; or, in other terms, how it co-opts the reduced human systems that remain. (Rogers-Vaughn, 2016, p. 69, italics in original)



Neoliberalism has exercised broad governmentality, not only in the context of the university departments, but it also created blind spots as to what is not worth researching while reinforcing what is worthy of study. As the education at the university was increasingly monetized, evaluations of faculty in terms of their scholarship and impact on the field were quantified as well. Given the hegemonic presence of neoliberalism, the university generally and the psychology departments in particular were expected to incarnate the values of the market.

Gjorgjioska and Tomicic (2019) argue that the culture of neoliberalism undermined an emerging paradigm in social psychology, Social Representation Theory (SRT), that was a more relational, dynamic, humanist, non-experimental, and anti-positivist approach to social relations. At first the SRT model gained considerable attention as an alternative to individualistic, positivist social psychology. The authors argue that the impact of neoliberalism on social psychology led to a disciplinary crisis of identity in the early 1960s. Neoliberalism, in contrast to SRT, privileged an ontology that was realist, an epistemology that was positivist, a methodology that was quantitative, and an axiology that eschewed a more humanistic, pragmatic social psychology. “The hegemony of positivism in social psychology has meant that many key problems that should concern social psychology, such as ideology, aspects of human social interaction embedded in culture, and common sense had not been examined, simply because they are not amenable to direct study in the laboratory” (Gjorgjioska & Tomicic, 2019, p. 183). Moscovici (1972) insisted that the focus of SRT should be on a critique of neoliberal ideology and the psychological mechanisms of oppression in neoliberal society. Sugarman (2015) points out “that although there is great attention to neoliberalism among scholars in disciplines such as sociology and economics, there is comparatively little discussion of neoliberalism and its consequences among psychologists and social psychologists” (p. 182). While scholars in other disciplines such as economics and geography have addressed the culture of the market, with a few notable exceptions (Moghaddam, 2023; Ratner, 2019; Sugarman, 2015; Teo, 2018), psychologists have been largely silent.

Illouz (2007, 2008) suggests that our emotions reflect a consumer society shaped by neoliberal economy. Emotional capitalism is a culture

in which emotional and economic discourses and practices mutually shape each other. In her book, *Cold intimacies: The making of emotional capitalism*, Illouz (2007) describes how psychologists connected emotions with economics by conceiving productivity in radically new ways. She connects utopias of health and happiness with utopias of consumption. Illouz (2019) argues that: “Consumer capitalism has increasingly transformed emotions into commodities and it is this historical process which explains the intensification of emotional life” (p. 10). She points out that there is clear evidence that private emotions of romantic love are intensified by finding their way into consumer culture. Objects are consumed by the actors in order to create an emotional atmosphere. Consumer capitalism has become an intrinsic dimension in the constitution of modern subjectivity.

## Overview of the Book

The 16 essays in this book are divided into three sections: Value Degradation, Indigenous Psychological Critique, and Impact on Traditional Values.

### Value Degradation

This section presents an overview of what is at stake for a humanity that subsists in the shadow of the machine and the market. Narvaez documents how settler colonization of Indigenous peoples resulted in value degradation of their evolved capacity to be a society of care. Schneider’s chapter documents the loss of awe as a price we pay for technology; Dueck and Marossy’s chapter examines value degradation effected by neoliberalism through language changes, the loss of sacred land, the shift to health care for profit, exploitation of traditional pharmacological wisdom, evacuation of the self, and the marketization of religion; and Clemente and Goodman’s chapter examines how, by extolling immortality, technology renders our carbon-based body a

defect, something repulsive that we need to discard, as evidenced by the abusive terms used such as skin-bag, etc.

Darcia Narvaez, *What Happened to Species-Typical Human Nature?*

Kirk J. Schneider, *Tech-vexed: The Awesome Price for Artifice*

Alvin Dueck and Michael Marossy, *Marketization: Disenchantment and Reenchantment*

Matthew Clemente and David M. Goodman, *Denying Death: The False Promise of Technological Transcendence*

## Indigenous Psychological Critique

This section presents an assessment by Indigenous psychologists of value degradation. Chakkarath's chapter is a critique of the dominant narrative of the modern West—individualism—thereby making a case for our consideration of Indigenous psychologies as providing alternative answers to global problems. Deanna Zantingh, Brandon Hey, and Jeffrey Ansloos's chapter explains why the mainstream paradigm in psychology fails in suicide prevention for Indigenous populations; Yeh's chapter extols a Confucian vision as an alternative to the values of the market and smart machines; Williamson and Hood's chapter offers the values of a Christian sect as an alternative approach to spirituality in a neoliberal society; and Sundararajan and Raina's chapter uses the Hindu mythology of creativity (Sarasvati) to explore value degradation in a technological society.

Deanna Zantingh, Brandon Hey and Jeffrey Ansloos, *Unsettling Settler-Colonial Suicidology: Indigenous Theories of Justice in Indigenous Suicide Research*

Pradeep Chakkarath, *Is the Individual an Enlightened Westerner? Some Skeptical Remarks on Eurocentric Notions of Self and the Development of Individualism*

Kuang-Hui Yeh, *Perspective of Confucian Self-Cultivation: The Solution to the Degradation of Global Morality and Value in the 21st Century*

W. Paul Williamson and Ralph W. Hood, Jr., An Appalachian Indigenous Tradition of Faith

Louise Sundararajan & Maharaj K. Raina, Sarasvati's Challenge: Human Creativity at the Cross Roads of Muse and the Machine

## Traditional Values, the Machine, and the Market

This section documents the corrosive impact of the joint forces of technology and neoliberalism on Indigenous cultures, in both small-scale and large-scale societies, as well as the coping and resilience of traditional cultures. Arnold Groh asserts that globalization of information technology has resulted in erasure of Indigenous identities and the loss of mining revenue in the rainforests thereby limiting strategies for survival; Rachel Sing-Kiat Ting & Justine Jian-Ai Thong argue that the vicious cycles of deforestation and lack of land rights are major macrolevel traumatic events for the Temiar in Malaysia that are apparent cognitively at the microlevel of ontological being; Wenlei Huang and Jie Yang discovered in their research in China that social workers felt like “tool people” as community development was increasingly oriented toward boosting the local economy; Mieke Matthyssen has noted that in the past the concept of *ming* (fate or life force) meant cultivating character as one navigates external and individual forces but as one adapts one is changing through an interaction of modern and traditional values, neoliberalism and spiritual heritage, the meaning of fate changes, and Sayyed Mohsen Fatemi explores the tension between the Islamic tradition and neoliberalism. Lastly, Sundararajan in her concluding chapter offers some pointers as to how best to use the resources in this volume.

Arnold Groh, Indigenous Peoples and Technology: An Unbalanced Relation

Rachel Sing-Kiat Ting & Justine Jian-Ai Thong, “Do Not Pluck That Flower”: The Forest and Cultural Identity for The Hunter-Gatherer Tribe (Temiars) of Malaysia

Wenlei Huang & Jie Yang, *Gongju Ren* “Tool People”: Alienation, Value Degradation, and Social Work in China

Mieke Matthyssen, Negotiating Fate in Contemporary China: The Paradoxical and Changing Role of *Ming* in Psychological Wellbeing  
 Sayyed Mohsen Fatemi, The Loss of Soul in a World of Utilitarianism and Commodification: Munajat e Shabaniya and its Psychological Call for Transcendentalism  
 Louise Sundararajan, Final Reflections

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# 2

## What Happened to Species-Typical Human Nature?

Darcia Narvaez

The cooperative nature of most Native Peoples around the world amazed explorers, such as Columbus, who promptly enslaved several on his first voyage to what later became the Americas (Siepel, 2015). Natives of isolated communities that anthropologist E. Richard Sorenson encountered in the twentieth century had abilities to communicate, connect, and respond that were so much outside of his experience that he could only fully perceive them from repeatedly watching the films he had collected and then revisiting (Sorenson, 1998). In contrast, the Native Americans were shocked by the soulless egoism of the European explorers and settlers, and when they visited Europe in the seventeenth century, they condemned the cruel nature of European societies that allowed homelessness and starvation (Lahontan, 1703). The assumptions behind these differences in social cooperation are indicators of the distinctive

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worldviews anthropologist Robert Redfield (1953) identified (Naugle, 2002).

The Indigenous worldview represents a common cosmology, with corresponding cultural practices, held by Native/First Nation Peoples around the world. Bonded to and cooperative with their landscapes, they feel integrated with the natural world (e.g., Cajete, 2000; Deloria, 2006; Descola, 2013). They live as if all of nature is alive, sentient, and animate, with their senses tuned to receiving the personhood of the more than human (Abram, 2010; Harvey, 2017; Narvaez et al., 2019). Rationality is rooted in living on the earth, according to its laws, not against them. Native American culture traditionally was not closed minded but open to the perspectives of others, as noted in first contact documentation but also Native American scholars and authors themselves.

Today's dominant worldview—emerging in the last millennium primarily from a combination of Western “Enlightenment” and colonial capitalism, although with roots in civilization's earlier separations from Nature—contrasts with the Indigenous Worldview in the following precepts, in that the latter is characterized by these orientations and the former is not (Topa & Narvaez, 2022):

- Spirit pervades all things.
- All (humans, animals, plants, waterways, landscapes) are interdependent relatives.
- Relational harmony and balance are moment-by-moment moral aims.
- Human and other-than-human community welfare is central to a good life.
- Humans, as younger siblings to the rest of the natural world, have much to learn from their elders, the Plants and Animals.
- Restorative justice is about restoring relational connection, trust and responsible action.
- Heart-mind is more important than head-mind.
- The laws of Nature are primary.
- Alternative consciousness is essential for growth.

How can we account for the shift away from these precepts to a worldview that considers the rest of Nature as inert or dumb, humanity as

separate and superior, and human analytical reason as the pinnacle of creation/evolution? The roots of differences in worldview are initiated in child formation. To understand these roots, we must first examine what species-normal child raising looks like, the type of child raising characterizing 95%-99% of human history, and across societies until recently. Species-normal capacities, such as those listed, unfold in the child-raising practices humanity evolved.

## The Nested Community

Native/First Nation Peoples traditionally live according to a gift economy, both Nature's gift economy of give and take (Worster, 1994) and a maternal gift economy of unilateral generosity, with each given according to need (Vaughan, 2019; Widlok, 2017). These lifeways support child formation through humanity's evolved practices that meet basic needs and cultivate the innate capacities of the infant for social companionship. In first encounters, Western explorers, settlers, and researchers were contemptuous of the child-raising practices they noted among traditional Native/First Nation Peoples, leading in recent times to kidnapping their children for adoption or residential schools (Adams, 2020). The outsiders called their loving treatment of children "indulgent" (Hewlett & Lamb, 2005). In fact, foragers provide our species' *evolved nest*, a connected community of companionship inherited through the tree of life, millions of years old and characteristic of 99% of human existence (Hrdy, 2009; Konner, 2005; Narvaez & Bradshaw, 2023).

Like every animal's nest, humanity's evolved nest meets the maturational needs and expectations of the child to ensure optimal normal development (Gottlieb, 2002). Humanity's nest includes soothing birth and perinatal experiences (which includes extensive maternal support), breastfeeding on request for several years, responsive care to keep baby comforted and calm, a welcoming community and a set of supportive stable caregivers, extensive affectionate touch (and no negative touch), self-directed social play, nature immersion and attachment, and routine healing practices (Hewlett & Lamb, 2005; Narvaez, 2021; Narvaez &

Bradshaw, 2023; Narvaez & Tarsha, 2021). Every component of the evolved nest is associated with healthy neurobiological and psychosocial development (e.g., Narvaez, 2014; Narvaez et al., 2013). The evolved nest, adjusting its nature over the lifespan, prepares individuals for cultivating and maintaining a spirit of community, generosity, and cooperation as well as a sense of sacred spiritual connection to the world.

In fact, one of the primary mechanisms for species-typical psychospiritual development may be how the early continuum of companionship care facilitates the development of the right hemisphere, which is scheduled to grow more rapidly than the left in the first years of life (Schoore, 2019). Right hemisphere functioning, which develops properly in early life with nested care, allows for not only various forms of self-regulation and social connection but also self-transcendence and higher consciousness. The right hemisphere “plays a significant part in imagination, creativity, the capacity for religious awe, music, dance, poetry, art, love of nature, a moral sense, a sense of humour and the ability to change our minds” (McGilchrist, 2021, pp. 98–99). As part of the evolved nest, children are surrounded by stories, role models, and daily rituals showing what being a good member of an earth-respecting community looks like (Cajete, 2000). To raise a good person, you let them make their own choices and honor their unique spirit (MacPherson & Rabb, 2011). Integrated into community life, children grow into their uniqueness and into goodness when scaffolded with such practices. The evolved nest is designed for this.

As noted earlier, the personality and community characteristics of adults from communities providing the evolved nest, primarily nomadic foragers, puzzled western visitors. The adults in these societies on average display(ed) high cooperation, generosity, autonomy, and communality, and they construct(ed) egalitarian communities that meet everyone’s basic needs (Ingold, 2005; Narvaez, 2013). Moral egoism is not tolerated, apart from very young children learning autonomy (reviewed in Narvaez, 2013). Native/First Nation Peoples traditionally understand reality to be multifaceted and each person sovereign; they are able to take multiple perspectives as a matter of course (Descola, 2013). Life was spent in polysemy, dedifferentiation of self and other, shapeshifting into different identities, aware of the dynamism of Spirit. Although specific

spiritual practices vary by community and individual, among foragers and early settled societies, polytheism *is/was* the norm. Spirit and spirits are everywhere.

When needed, persons move into the problem-solving mindspace of univocity—linear logical thinking helpful for solving a particular problem. Although traditional Indigenous Peoples use both mindspaces, polysemy and univocity, with the rise of civilizations, there was a shift toward spending most time in univocity, the problem-solving space brought on by the stresses of civilized life (Bram, 2018). Impairment in polysemy, spirituality, and cooperation are rooted in early undercare and lack of nestedness, the suppression of multiperspectivalism, coercive relationships, and schooling. Thus, unnested childhoods look quite different from the nestedness that is humanity's heritage, as do their related outcomes. Unfortunately, the evolved nest has been degraded across the world.

## Seeds of Disorder: Colonization of Childhood

Efforts to decolonize minds and hearts have been ongoing in educational circles for some time (e.g., Four Arrows, 2006). European colonialization has affected not only nearly all bodies on the planet but also mind-brains. Bodies and psyches have been traumatized and starved of their basic needs, minds genocidally cleansed and torn from wild mind consciousness, and all have been disabled in their individual and cultural diversity (Adams, 2020; Davis, 2007; de Sousa Santos, 2018; Hinton, 2022; Narvaez, 2014).

When we think of what the colonizers did and still do, we think mostly of what they take away or tried to take away—e.g., cultural and spiritual practices, communal sharing, respect for elders, self-respect, and ecological intelligence (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014; Trafzer, Keller & Sisquoc, 2006). We don't typically think of the legacy they *gave* everyone, a legacy that still haunts us all. The unwelcome gift from settlers and colonizers was *trauma*. Many of them brought their own inherited neurobiologically embedded experiences of trauma from millennia-old European practices of mistreating children, women and the unfortunate (Buck,

2019; deMause, 1995; Greven, 1977, 1991; Scott, 1968). Treating others as Its, as objects, rather than as Thous, as sacred beings, accompanied the behavior of conquistadores and settler-colonizers. Then, with *wétiko* cruelty (Forbes, 2008), they passed the trauma to all they met outside their homelands, implanting it in bodies and minds. These bodies and minds, prevented from using traditional healing practices, often passed the trauma to the next generations (Menakem, 2017). As interdisciplinary research has demonstrated, one of the strongest forms of trauma transmission occurs in babyhood and childhood (Garner et al., 2021; Lanius et al., 2010).

Early settler recollections indicated astonishment that Native Peoples did not punish their children. Settlers brought their harsh parenting practices to the “new world,” shocking Native Peoples, who would step in to take the punishment when the settlers tried to whip children (Greer, 2000). Anthropologist Marshall Sahlins (2008) noted: “...all round the world, other peoples know no such idea of children as innate monsters and no such necessity of domesticating their bestial instincts” (p. 100).

Settler-colonizers took a European pattern of unnested care (e.g., denial of pleasure, infliction of pain through corporal punishment and emotional abuse, nature distrust and denigration) and spread it around the world. Settler-colonizing child-raising practices are flavored with ideas of original sin (Jacobs, 2001)—that babies have sinful dispositions and must be coerced to be good. Babies are forced into schedules for eating and sleeping and even spanked “for their own good” (Lee et al., 2014; Miller, 1990). At the same time, babies’ needs are minimized (‘they are resilient’). Babies spend a great deal of time physically isolated (not in arms), and if they cry, it is often ignored because it is considered ‘what babies do.’

By nature, babies have a built-in compass that indicates good or bad feeling. When needed support is not provided, a stress response is triggered. Babies initially indicate discomfort with a grimace or gesture. Crying is a late signal of distress. However, in settler-colonizer child-raising babies are often left to cry. Instead of meeting the needs of babies, babies are often held in contempt, as if they are manipulators of adults, as if meeting their needs will ‘spoil’ them. Adults believe they have to win

a power contest or the child will be a terror. Neuroscience and clinical studies show us that the opposite is the case.

Neuroscientific studies now show us the mechanisms of how trauma affects child brain development in the short and long term. Leaving a baby in distress creates a toxic bath for developing brain systems (Murgatroyd & Spengler, 2011) and psychosocial development (Moloney, 1949; Ribble, 1943; Winnicott, 1987). When babies are distressed too long, intensely, or routinely, brain development is thwarted by the overproduction of cortisol, killing brain cells and their connections (McEwen, 2017; Murgatroyd & Spengler, 2011). Unsupportive care enhances survival systems in the brain, and these spawn self-protectionist social attitudes and behavior, making self-breakdown or oppositionalism more likely to become part of the personality than cooperation (Narvaez, 2014; Schore, 2003). Free will is curtailed because implanted threat reactivity is easily triggered, shifting blood flow away from higher-order thinking in preparation for flight or fight: stress makes the individual “stupid” and self-oriented (Sapolsky, 2004).

Self-protectionist defensive systems lead to bracing against life and Spirit (Bourgeault, 2003). Instant subliminal neuroception of a situation is biased toward threat, which inhibits growth, resulting in impaired sociality and self-awareness (Porges, 2011). Without the satisfaction of smooth and satisfying social interactions, the individual can be drawn to “making a mark” through aggression (Fromm, 1973). Instead of finding joy in biophilia and attuned relations with living forms, the impaired individual may find satisfaction in necrophilia, preferring static, controllable things. Spirituality is misdirected toward scripted power and fear-based ideologies (Narvaez, 2014).

Today’s dominant culture toxically stresses young children, enhancing innate survival systems (e.g., stress response; Lanius et al., 2010). Without species-typical support, the human mind can be underdeveloped, notably impairing right hemisphere functions that underlie an integrated brain associated with polysemy, paradox, and other capacities found in Earthcentric societies. Individualized development of intuition and spirit is not encouraged, nor are children guided in spiritual heartmindedness and Earthcentric knowhow, capacities fundamental to being human in Indigenous societies (Topa & Narvaez, 2022). Instead,

schooling typically emphasizes a left-hemisphere worldview of linear analysis, categorization, and control, the learning of cunning without heart connectedness.

## The Eroded Nest and the Wrecking of Human Nature and Spirituality

Scholars have puzzled over the shift from the Nature-centric, egalitarian ways of foraging communities, representing at least 95% of human history, to the life-destroying, inequalitarian ways of hierarchical static states (Engels, 1891; Marx, 1977; Scott, 2017). The shift was gradual, occurring over thousands of years in different parts of the world, although foraging communities were approximately one-third of societies until a few years ago (they also still exist worldwide), resisting the intense labor and curtailed freedom that civilization demands for most members (Scott, 2009). We've been told that farming is easier than hunting and gathering, but this is not the case. In some analyses, hunter-gatherers spend on average only a few hours a day obtaining food, with a great deal of time otherwise spent in leisure (e.g., Gowdy, 1998; Sahllins, 1968). Why then would some people settle down to the hard work of cultivating crops and herding animals, which resulted in decreased physical and psychological wellbeing (Cohen & Crane-Kramer, 2007; Larsen, 2006)?

Scholars do not agree on causes, some pointing to climate change (Gowdy, 2020), others to the fear that Nature would no longer provide (Martin, 1999). Historically, when newly settled communities faced food depletion, they moved to raiding and eventually to advanced technology (Harman, 2017). Advanced agricultural technology (e.g., plowing, dams, irrigation ditches) led to surpluses that had to be guarded, the beginnings of inequality. The buildings holding the surpluses became temples and their supervisor priests (Maisel, 1993). Religion developed to rationalize and support the status quo. Writing developed to keep track of stores, along with armies to enforce the status quo. Writing and literacy changed consciousness (Bram, 2002; Ong, 2002). With the rise of self-reflective consciousness, settlement into enclaves separated from the landscape

fostered detached, instrumentalist relations with the rest of the natural world. Alphabetic writing completed the transformation by making it seem like written words were permanent, creating an illusion of a timeless, changeless mental world. Dualism emerged, dividing the world into spirit/body and heaven/earth. During these shifts, patriarchy arose with its enclosure and control of women, undermining the cooperative child raising and cooperative breeding of human ancestry (Hrdy, 2009). Class divisions emerged, with forced labor (debt, slave, or wage) coerced by armed men, where the hierarchy of power (and benefits) trickled upward, features not characteristic of nonstate communities (Gowdy, 1998; Harman, 2017; Scott, 2017). Lewis Mumford (1961) noted that city-states developed multiple harsh methods of domination and servitude, including sadism, the “passion for unlimited, godlike control over men and things” (Fromm, 1973, p. 191), associated with necrophilia (love of the nonliving). These system characteristics became part of the personalities of the people subjected to government domination. In the last millennium, the takeover of the European commons by the wealthy elite (“the great transformation,” Polanyi, 2001) and the absconding of the commons around the world by colonization forced almost everyone else into poverty, homelessness, starvation, slavery, migration, or wage labor.

Most significantly, cultural shifts also undermined the polytheistic, animistic, participatory spirituality of our ancestors (Bram, 2002, 2018). According to the analysis by John Lamb Lash (2006), prior to the rise of Rome and Roman Christianity, the Native Peoples of Europe (Europeans) were “Pagan,” meaning that their sense of life was a sacred ecology, a culture rooted in Nature and connectedness to Spirit. Roman Christianity violently eradicated Paganism over centuries, promoting a very different form of religio-spirituality, a fall-redemption, salvationist religion. Salvationism promised liberation for the immortal soul, contrasting with the Pagan religion that offered liberation from selfhood using ecstatic immersion in the life force Eros.<sup>1</sup> In fact, regular ecstatic experiences are characteristic of extant ancient cultures that hold humanity’s genetic heritage (Katz, 2017; Katz et al., 1997).

Salvationist Christianity promises redemption from the woundedness that it and patriarchy generally inflict on children. In actuality,



salvationist Christianity promotes a victim-perpetrator syndrome, with the redeemer complex<sup>2</sup> as a religious cover for perpetration. Belief in the redemptive value of suffering glorifies the victim-perpetrator bond, encouraging lives of violent control and conquest. Divine authority sanctions violence, infusing violent action, even genocide, with a sense of duty ('you are either with us or against us;' 'those who are evil are dangerous and must be eradicated'). Supporting salvationist Christianity, the notion of original sin was invented four centuries after the life of Jesus (Augustine, 400 CE), justifying maltreatment. "For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Because everyone is a sinner, individuals are encouraged to feel that any harm that comes to them is deserved. They (the victims) are punished for their own good, for failing to follow God's plan. The perpetrators of the punishment are righteously upholding God's plan. According to the dynamics of the victim-perpetrator bond, belief in the redemptive power of suffering encourages the infliction of suffering as a purifying device. Divine retribution became a potent weapon of mass destruction "aimed for centuries to come at Pagan Europe, and after that at the Americas, and after that at the entire planet" (Lash, 2006, p. 40). This form of annihilation theology is based on the extremism of a minor Hebraic sect, the Zaddikim. Lash calls St. Paul a theological genius for turning the Zaddikim schizophrenic mindset into condoning both roles of the victim-perpetrator game. The father god redeems the suffering of the perpetrator and victim, but only for "believers."

European Paganism was brutally eradicated to preserve the singular dominance of salvationist Roman Christianity. Although most Gnostic writings, hymns, and practices were destroyed, there is enough left to document how Gnosticism criticized Christianity for its violent destructive assumptions (Lash, 2006). Gnostics argued that Christianity's victim-perpetrator bond was disguised as a love connection. "Cut off from their Pagan roots, denied the pleasure bond, and morally desperate, early Christian converts hysterically denied themselves what they no longer had in the first place: Empathic connection to the earth and the realm of the senses." With a primal connection to the body, they desired release from embodiment (Lash, 2006, p. 37). The Pagans of Europa and the Near East viewed salvationist Christianity as a plague on the world.

The Christian need to castigate the flesh and deny pleasure was insane and a sign of religious narcissism, excessively egotistic, emerging from an oppositional worldview.

The salvationist Christian settler-colonizers took their trauma with them around the world. “The brutal impact of salvationist conditioning destroyed the sense of life in Europeans and that is why they behaved as they did when they encountered their distant mirror in the Indigenous tribes of the Americas. The Europeans envied what they saw, and destroyed what they could not truly have, that is, could not reclaim as part of themselves, but only possess, steal, plunder” (Lash, 2006, p. 259).

The missionary colonizers preached kindness but practiced cruelty. To Native Peoples, Jesus sounded like a psychic healer, like the shamans they knew. However, then they realized that he was a cruel vengeful god who sanctioned their punishment when they did not follow the rules of the missionaries. Because oral cultures are based in honesty—consistency of word and action—Native Peoples initially could not see that those promising salvation were the destroyers of their lifeways. “By the time the indigenous peoples realized that the soft-core Jesus came with a bizarre set of rules and an alien agenda of transmundane provenance, the die had been cast, and a ruthless social control system had been set in place” (Lash, 2006, p. 89).

## Where We Are Today

Modern culture has undermined full human capacities for connecting to the Earth and perceiving the sentience of the rest of Nature by having degraded our species’ evolved nest. Wherever it has been imposed, patriarchy-colonialism-industrialization-globalization have extensively impaired the provision of the evolved nest, wounding body, mind, and spirit while undermining skilled connectedness (to humans and other than humans).

Trauma-informed science now understands that early life stress can bring about a self-preoccupied brain biology due to unresolved body-based trauma (van der Kolk, 2014). We know now that spanking and other forms of corporal punishment result in the same kinds of long-term harm that physical abuse has (Gershoff, 2013; Gershoff &

Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Gershoff et al., 2012). Wherever young children are punished, moral egoism can take root as self-protectionist actions, such as lying, becoming a form of self-defense against more punishment (Narvaez, 2014). Individuals who are easily triggered from unresolved trauma (almost everyone in the USA today) are necessarily self-preoccupied. When the stress response is activated, blood flow is altered to enable flight-fight, impairing higher-order and other-oriented thinking (Arnsten, 2009; Sapolsky, 2004). Consequently, it is no surprise that psychosocial and spiritual deficits are widespread today in the most economically rich nation, the USA.

The resulting predominant life cycle in the dominant culture has been called “postconquest” or posttraumatic, in contrast to the Earth-centric, species-typical life cycle called “preconquest” (Sorenson, 1998). These life cycles foster different psyches and spirits, different dispositions, different habitual mindsets, and different affordances for life. Whereas human potential for relaxed joy and implicit connectedness is characteristic of preconquest societies, postconquest societies reside in disconnection and desires for control (to alleviate deeply rooted anxiety). A great deal of human potential has been lost in the postconquest life cycle, starting with the community as a layered supportive context for development, the species-typical evolved nest. Instead of life-enhancing early care, most children experience early toxic stress, undermining the health of their bodies, minds, and spirits in multiple ways. When the nest is not provided, the individual is only partially developed and more inclined to reside in innate survival systems (fear, panic, rage), inviting spirits of resentment, shame, and violence (Narvaez, 2014). Early under-care and trauma lead to poorly functioning psychosocial neurobiology with illbeing the result in adulthood, from ill physiology to self-focused sociality (Narvaez, 2014). Because adults in these societies are overwhelmed, distracted, and overcontrolling of others as well as dissociated from their authenticity, they create and/or support a society of increased competition and emotional and relational detachment. Correspondingly, with religious fervor driven by anxiety, capitalist globalization has been forced on societies worldwide by hegemonists. With market exchange emphasized in a “sacred money and markets” narrative (Korten, 2015), most people in high-income nations view money and technology as

sacrosanct, rather than the wellbeing of the biocommunity on which their lives truly depend.

## Lost Spirituality: Intellect over Spirit, Machines over Life

The Western, globalized, dominant worldview has been taken over by the left hemisphere of the brain—ego consciousness and intellect (McGilchrist, 2009). In studies where one side of the brain is numbed or disconnected from the other, distinctive orientations emerge. The left brain is oriented to nonliving things, things that can be categorized, classified, and controlled. Fearful of the future and death, it gravitates toward machines, technology, and grotesquery. It ridicules emotion and does not understand living relationships. Among major religions, the thinking mind is typically considered dangerous (Bourgeault, 2003). Because it is relationally and emotionally detached from life, governed by left-brain logical abstraction, thinking can lead to various forms of destruction based on its abstractions and ideals (Easterly, 2007; Scott, 2009).

Left-brain dominance in modern culture is not a surprise when factoring in the widespread unnested child-raising practices known to impair right brain development, ecological knowhow and the individual's connection to Spirit. The integrated brain found among Native/First Nation Peoples is largely missing. With the underdevelopment and suppression of right hemisphere capacities throughout childhood and their treatment as suspect thereafter, left-brain governed functioning becomes normative. However, it is also fueled by dysregulated survival systems (fear, panic, anger) from early life undercare that lead to vicious control. Dysregulation is assumed to be part of human nature, creating the vicious cycle of undercaring for babies whose dysregulation is an indicator of 'original sin.'

Modernist thought, governed by a calculating left-brain desire for control over Nature, including human nature, perceives the natural world as inert or dumb and in need of ordering. Instead of anthropomorphism (projecting human traits onto animals), the problem of recent centuries is *mechanomorphism*—projecting mechanical functions onto living beings, human and other than human (Buhner, 2014). We

can attribute this in part to the lack of empathy and social knowhow from undercare and the cultural adoption of Enlightenment left-brain functioning as normal and desirable.

We can see this in the explorer-colonizer-settlers. Instead of appreciating and fostering the natural abundance, sharing and health found among most preconquest Native American communities, the settler-colonizers were exterminators. One of Blackhawk's Wintu sisters described what happened:

The white people never cared for land or deer or bear. When we Indians kill meat, we eat it all. When we dig roots, we make little holes. When we build houses, we make little holes. When we burn grass for grasshoppers, we don't ruin things. We shake down acorns and pine nuts. We don't chop down the trees. We only use dead wood. But the White people plow up the ground, pull down the trees, kill everything. The tree says, "Don't. I am sore. Don't hurt me!" But they chop it down and cut it up. The spirit of the land hates them. They blast out trees and stir it up to its depths. They saw up the trees. That hurts them. The Indians never hurt anything, but the White people destroy all. They blast rocks and scatter them on the ground. The rock says, "Don't. You are hurting me!" But the White people pay no attention. When the Indians use rocks, they take little round ones for their cooking...How can the spirit of the earth like the White man?... Everywhere the White man has touched the earth, it is sore. (McLuhan, 1971, p. 15)

High modernist thought is exhibited in government and corporate social engineering, which are most harmful when characterized by a combination of four elements: (1) a simplified ordering of Nature and society that (2) displays "a strong, one might even say muscle-bound, version of the self-confidence about scientific and technical progress, the expansion of production, the growing satisfaction of human needs, the mastery of nature (including human nature), and above all, the rational design of social order commensurate with the scientific understanding of natural laws" (Scott, 1998, p. 4). An "uncritical, unskeptical, and thus unscientifically optimistic about the possibilities for the comprehensive planning of human settlement and production" (ibid., p. 4) with an emphasis on a visual aesthetic, a *look* of order. When large-scale efforts fail, high modernists retreat to miniaturization, or models, of their ideals.

Aligning with the interests of state officials, the aims are utopian living patterns, work habits, and moral conduct. (3) The third element is an authoritarian state willing to coerce high-modernist designs onto society and Nature. The past and its traditions are repudiated by elites ready to revolutionize society. (4) The last element is a civil society unable to resist the plans, usually weakened from colonization, economic collapse, revolution, or war. We can add that unnested and traumatizing childhoods lay the foundations for a weakened society.

Bureaucracies mesmerized by technology and desirous of control institute new technologies, procedures, and practices, minimizing discussion of the harmful effects (Mander, 1978). The professionalization of community relations supersedes the normal workings of a healthy community and creates counterfeit structures that only superficially meet the needs of community members (McKnight, 1995). In fact, many modern service technologies create social deserts. They take a great deal of monetary resources, instigate the loss of local knowledge, disempower citizens to make them into clients, and often create the inverse of stated goals—e.g., crime-creating corrections system (McKnight, 1995).

Although high modernists and technologists are always promising a golden future ahead, the result of Western technologies by and large has not been a wonderland but an ecological and social wasteland (Berry, 1988). Multiple ecological crises have resulted from rapacious, extracting, polluting, technologized culture, for example, massive species extinction; global warming; toxification of soil, water, air and our bodies; and atmospheric degradation (Kolbert, 2014; Wilson, 1991). Around the world, colonization and capitalist globalization have eradicated cultures, languages, and local sustainable ways of living; economic wealth for the few has come at the expense of the cultural and ecological wealth of everyone else (Korten, 2015).

## Conclusion: Reaching for the Alternative

To be fully human in a species-normal manner means to be a communal, Earth-respecting organism, socially skilled, and spiritually connected to one another and the Earth. This requires today a decolonization of

the minds and spirits of today's human beings and a restoration of humanity's ancestral ways to flourish, from a Nature-centered worldview to evolved nestedness (Topa & Narvaez, 2022).

What steps should be taken to move back to an earth-respecting, wellness-promoting creation-spiritual pathway? First, we must support traditional ecological knowledge practices in the extant Native/First Nation communities around the world that guard most of the biodiversity left on the planet (Brondizio et al., 2019).

Second, to prevent further colonization and trauma, we must abandon colonizing, trauma-inducing child-raising practices and return to the wellness-promoting practices of our ancestors (Gleason & Narvaez, 2019; Narvaez, 2022). Giving full nested support while standing back to let the individual unfold promotes spiritual development. See Table 2.1 for a contrast between traditional Indigenous and European-colonizing child-raising practices. The evolved nest must be restored to babies and children in particular but also to adults, as maintaining our original human nature requires nestedness.

Third, we can examine our spirituality. The alternative to salvationist Christianity is creation spirituality, characteristic of ancient and contemporary Native/First Nation spiritualities and the older wisdom tradition found in Biblical texts (Fox, 2000). Creation spirituality, Indigenous and Pagan practices behold divinity immanent in this world, affirming the sacredness of the Earth apart from human use. Spirituality is devoted to increasing knowledge and connection with heightened perception and understanding. Self-transcendence through trance and ceremony or through psychotropics promotes polysemy, the ability to merge with multiple others, human and nonhuman, through dedifferentiation (Bram, 1998). As with the use of psychotropics by Indigenous shamans, the goal of gnosis was transience: "In sentient immersion we do not merely live *in relation to* all life, connected *with* nature and the cosmos, but we live *through* all life, and all life lives through us" (Lash, 2006, p. 141). Daily immersion in a polysemous culture that practices transpersonal ceremonies supports a sense of oneness with others, a holistic spirituality, including the other-than-human, with ancestors and with a dynamic, fluctuating universe (e.g., Descola, 2013; Katz, 2017).

**Table 2.1** Contrasting traditional Indigenous child raising with colonizing child-raising practices today

Traditional Indigenous child raising	Colonizing child-raising practices today
<p>Children are central to community life.</p> <p>Welcome, enjoy and enhance the wellbeing of babies and children (from gestation on).</p> <p>Meet children's needs with generosity.</p> <p>Offer breastmilk on request as baby's first medicine.</p> <p>Surround the baby and child with several safe, supportive, stable relationships.</p> <p>Provide positive touch and no negative touch 24/7.</p> <p>Respond to playful signals from babies; let children direct their own social play throughout childhood.</p> <p>Immerse the child in the wild natural world to build ecological intelligence and attachment.</p> <p>Nip in the bud baby distress by offering immediate comfort and suckling.</p> <p>No imposed distress.</p>	<p>Children are peripheral to community life.</p> <p>Put up with the annoyance of children by controlling them as much as possible (from birth on).</p> <p>Minimize attention to children's needs so as not to bother adults too much.</p> <p>Artificial laboratory "food" is good enough for baby, as are other processed "foods" in childhood.</p> <p>Isolate the baby/child with one parent most of the time or send the baby/child to a daycare with rotating staff.</p> <p>Isolation: Keep children in their own space (playpen, carrier, crib, bassinet).</p> <p>Focus on physical needs primarily; schedule play dates; focus on object (toy) play.</p> <p>Create distrust in the natural world; limit outdoor freedom to keep child 'safe.'</p> <p>Assume that crying is normal and don't worry about it too much.</p> <p>Impose distress 'for child's own good' (e.g., isolation, sleeping alone, spanking, denial of suckling, touch, inclusion).</p> <p>Apply coercion throughout childhood to make children do what adults prefer. Label them (and drug them) if they do not comply.</p> <p>Use corporal and emotional punishment routinely.</p> <p>Teach child to suppress their true interests so they learn to obey in order to manage enforced learning (school) and work (wage labor).</p> <p>Child is kept away from the adult world so adults can do their work.</p>
<p>No coercion.</p> <p>No punishment.</p> <p>Freedom to follow unique path.</p>	<p>Apply coercion throughout childhood to make children do what adults prefer. Label them (and drug them) if they do not comply.</p>
<p>Child is integrated into community life, which is multigenerational.</p>	<p>Child is kept away from the adult world so adults can do their work.</p>



The goal is to keep creation and one's community thriving, with infinite play, rather than aiming to win a competition (Carse, 1986), such as getting to an Earth-denying heaven.

Fourth, correspondingly, adults can learn to use their deliberative minds to shape their own attention and mindset in each situation. We can learn to spend life more in polysemy, dedifferentiation, shapeshifting, and awareness of the dynamism of Spirit. That is, we pay attention to the attitude and mindset we bring to a situation—one of openness to beauty and connection rather than objectification and categorization. Spirit is multiple and inherent in the implicate order. If we are stuck in an explicate order of the manifest, in the ego or left-brain orientation, we not only categorize and separate delusionally, we are not tuned into the awareness of the dynamism of life. We then grasp abstract ideals and try to make them happen. Our ego latches onto a particular identity, particular outcomes and expectations, which causes a lot of suffering. A scripted, left-brain-directed attitude forces itself on the world, perceiving more narrowly, more rigidly, dualistically, competitively. We lose egalitarian flexible responsiveness.

Fifth, we can adopt and practice the Indigenous worldview (Topa & Narvaez, 2022). To humble ourselves to the wisdom of the more than human will enable us to learn the ways of responsible Earth community membership.

Sixth, to enable mind shifting in worldview and spirituality, healing interventions may be needed. This will enable adults to enjoyably provide the evolved nest and release their own spirituality, thereby cultivating humanity's innate cooperative nature. We can restore spirit through individual and group ceremony (Macy & Brown, 2014), self-hypnosis techniques (Four Arrows, 2016), and guided psychotropics (Buhner, 2014). Meditation that breaks down the sense of self-identity and replaces it with a cosmic identity (wild mind) may be necessary for the global transformation needed (Hinton, 2022).

## Notes

1. An alternative Christianity is called creation spirituality which emphasizes orientations similar to Paganism (Fox, 2000).

2. According to Lash (2006), the Redeemer Complex has four aspects (Jews accept all these too but not Jesus): (1) The world was created by a father god independent of a female counterpart. (2) The chosen people will go through trials and testing. (3) The creator's son will save the world. (4) A final apocalyptic judgment will be delivered by the father god and son. The Roman Church adopted the Redeemer Complex from the Jews and made it universal.

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# 3

## Tech-vexed: The Awesome Price for Artifice

Kirk J. Schneider

### Introduction

What if I told you that “*you* are about to embark on a Great Adventure... that *you* are about to experience the awe and mystery” of the universe on this journey (Stephano, 1963). And what if I told you that you will witness many strange and marvelous beings, creatures, and sensations along your path; that you will experience new colors, shapes, and textures—contacts with fields, trees, and people from a wealth of backgrounds; invigorating games, vehicles, animals, the touch of mud and flesh, sweet and savory foods, new companions, the experience of love and friendship, of anger and hurt, of aloneness and contemplation. And what if I said that all these experiences will lead to fresh ideas, creations, and relationships...to a *personality* with choice and possibility as well as

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limits and apprehensions; and that these limits and apprehensions will point to a vast background of sky and consciousness, a background that will give you the feeling of being a part of something much greater than yourself?

And what if I told you further you will be able to feel as I did as a 12-year-old laying on a beach near New York City in 1968—outstretched on the sand with the wind in my hair and the waves lapping at my heels, fresh out of the water where I body surfed and wave-hopped to my heart's content. It was a scene where my dad and I, and hordes of other beachgoers gathered around transistor radios listening to tunes like "The Time of the Season" by the Zombies; a scene made all the more poignant because I had the full attention of my recently divorced dad.

And what if I told you further that you will be able to hold Great Conversations on this adventure, like I did with my dad on that beach, that you will have the chance to do something creative, to love deeply, and to contribute to the Great Chain of Being starting from your earliest ancestors and ending with you and your successors. And finally, what if I told you that you will be given an essentially blank canvas on which to "paint" or "write" your own story, and that you can do this over a roughly eight-decade span, with all the resources that a human mind and heart can offer.

*Would you want to go? Would you be willing to scrape together all you could to be a part of this journey? Or would you fritter it away, engage in idle chatter, trudge through mechanized routines, and dabble in surface relationships? Would you want to cut down, minimize or even abuse the precious time you have for this journey? Would you want to hurt yourself or others along the way?*

Probably not, and yet isn't this so much of what we do today (at least in the industrialized world), with skyrocketing rates of depression, anxiety and addiction, suicides and hate crimes and rampage killings?—and isn't high tech—the quick fix/instant results model for living—a big part of this squandering of our time and resources?

## Authenticity and Dignity on the Brink

Today, we are rapidly becoming “tech-vexed”—my word for the gradual yet relentless seduction of computerized life. The Covid-19 pandemic simply accelerated a trend: many of us are now more intimately connected to smart phones than to nonmediated relationships with people. The net result of this insular life is that relationships to ourselves and others take on a new hue. First, we live in a world that is more predictable than the “raw” world of face-to-face relationships. Second, we live in a world that, at least on the surface, is more controllable than the latter; and third, we live in a world that, for many, is far less consequential than worlds with actual—physically and emotionally—demanding relationships.

Yet what are the effects of such a scenario? Here are several. It is much easier, at least ostensibly, to live in isolation from other people. It is much easier to develop a relationship to a leader, a party, a doctrine—or for that matter a television show (or set of shows) and a passive-receptive lifestyle than it is to live in direct contact with people, with the exchange of ideas, with diversity of perspectives, with wonder and surprise, and with unsettling yet potentially edifying truths about life.

Moreover, it becomes easier to live virtually—through games, shows, video personalities, four inch (and sometimes 75 inch!) screens—than it is to live directly, that is (more or less) authentically, without barriers, without prearrangements, without games or physical and psychological distance.

Further, it is easier to achieve illusions of grandeur, of contrived stature—like the boy or girl with the most views of their Instagram photos, the adults with the most “hits” for a clever tweet or for “canceling” someone with a divergent point of view. The power in these situations is enormous, and yet it is so often about trivial matters or matters that pertain to simple images or crude impulses. But the power can also be life-changing—especially when one becomes dehumanized by such scenarios, or decides to terminate their life or the lives of others because of them; or when disinformation spurs an attempt to take over the U.S. government as occurred on January 6th, 2020, or spreads racist hate.

The upshot of device-mediated encounters is that they may be benign in single instances but collectively they are alarming. The larger question is where are we headed with such encounters, how do they impact our capacity to love, to be present to one another, to sort out what deeply matters about oneself and life. What impact do they have on human capabilities in general, but in particular those that give us a sense of integrity and of “whole bodied” experiences of life?

Take the question of authenticity for example. Is an online relationship as honest, open, and palpable as a face-to-face relationship? Does the absence of taste, touch, smell—or blood, sweat, and tears for that matter—make a difference in the *quality* of what is experienced? Is immersion in a video game or chat room the same as playing a game on a wet grassy field, or congregating with an in-person group? Is the engagement of artificial intelligence and devices that operate by algorithms to create books, articles, works of art equivalent to *people* inspiring those products? Is anxiety and vulnerability necessary to deeply move people, or can machines replicate that effect through “self”-programming (see Hughes, 2023, for example, on ChatGPT)? These are vital questions—imperative questions—that cannot in my view be substantively answered by surveys or quantitative studies. They must be searched out in the arts and in careful descriptions of people’s living, breathing experiences.

In the 2022 film *The Whale*, a 600 pound teacher of literature (played by Brenden Fraser) asks those he’s close to—including his daughter, his nurse, a jittery evangelist, and his literature class—to throw their daily routines aside for a moment, and just be honest. Be honest with themselves, with him, and with society; and try to live life with full acknowledgment of the fragile, momentary flicker that it spans. And if you live that way he intimates, you will discover a fresh new world, an energizing new world, where people can really see and hear each other, and priorities tend to align with hearts. The irony of course is that as he realized how profoundly he had squandered his own possibilities for living, and quite literally made a career of hiding, he was speaking to himself. To thine own self be true, yes?

While this film had many engaging facets, its accent on authenticity, on the cry for raw and direct contact within and between people could not be more telling. In this sense, I saw the movie as a timely work of

art alerting us not just to isolated incidents of falsehood but to the state of our society. It is a cautionary tale about the many ways we have to hide today, amplified by the tech-entranced, drug-induced, and ideology-riddled “fixes” all about us.

Corresponding to the price of authenticity, the tech-vex can also exact a price on human dignity. It begs the question, to what extent does machine-mediated living gratify, ennoble? Can it replace the sense of fulfillment that people feel when they attain a skill or achieve an insight? Can a work put together by artificial intelligence match the eloquence of that put together by Beethoven or Rembrandt? While these are questions to be pursued, perhaps the deeper question is what happens when passion—blood, sweat, and tears—are no longer required for great works or relationships or expertise? Are the products that result equally passionless—even if technically superb? And how does the agent of such products feel gratified if their humanity has little or no input in the products’ creation?

Finally, there is the question of power. Is transhumanism, the movement associated with futurist Ray Kurzweil (2013), which holds that genetic engineering, nanotechnology, and robotics are the path to the perfectibility of human life an illusion or a reality? From the standpoint of a time-honored American, and in particular capitalist, mythos it is assuredly a reality. But from the standpoint of a more humanist and philosophical standpoint, it is a quite different story.

Let’s take the former narrative first. Fritz Lange’s 1927 film *Metropolis* about the take-over of society by machines is well known. But less well known though arguably deeper in the psychological DNA of actual urban life at the time of Lange’s film is the almost reverential obsession with devices. Consider the following comparisons of industry to religious-like status in the early part of twentieth century America.<sup>1</sup> We can begin with the artist Joseph Stella’s rendering of the Brooklyn bridge as “A New Divinity” which is “on the threshold of a New Religion;” then consider how tall buildings were dubbed “Cathedrals of Commerce” and capitalism “The Religion of Business.” Depictions of smokestacks were described as the “Incense of a New Church,” and U.S. President Calvin Coolidge observed that “The man who builds a factory builds a temple”

and “the man who works there worships there.” Was this really the basis on which we deigned to fashion our future?

And yet there appear to be a growing number of people, Kurzweil notwithstanding, who would answer “yes.”

From the humanist standpoint however, these “stand-ins” for religion, and deific power and control, are illusory. Not only are they illusory because of all the prices that must be paid for the loss of what many of our species would call our “humanity,” but also because “God” or “Perfectibility” or “Truth” are illusory. And until we obtain omniscience, until our consciousness equates to infinity, we will always be vulnerable, inadequate on some level. The clay-footed history of narcissists and empires has only underscored this perspective.

## Awe as Counter-Trend

Thus, how from a humanist position do we approach the tech-vexed perfection-striving humanity that is fast encroaching? What is the antidote to “roboticism” or the transformation of humans into machines (Schneider, 2019b)? While there is clearly no antidote as such to this problem, there is a sensibility—also growing in stature—that in my view powerfully counters the roboticist trend, and this sensibility is “awe.” I (Schneider, 2019b) define awe as the humility and wonder, or sense of adventure toward living. It has also been defined as a sense of vastness that defies accommodation (Keltner & Haidt, 2003; see also Sundararajan, 2002). Yet however one defines it, the sensibility of awe subverts mechanized living. It demands in fact that we live presently, spontaneously, and with radical openness.

That being said, one of the challenges with awe in the United States is that it is so often framed as a “high” or short-term lift. That is why I distinguish between the short-term jolt of awe or what I call “quick boil” awe, and the life-changing “slow simmer” form of awe (Schneider, 2019a). The quick boil form of awe tends to link with activities such as hiking through woods, falling intensely in love, taking a mind-altering drug, playing a vigorous sport, and traveling to exotic places. The slow simmer awe on the other hand transforms the exhilarating energy of

quick boil awe into something long-lasting—such as staying open to the daunting scenery of everyday, making a lifestyle of wonder and discovery, delving deep into a project or craft, and consistently engaging with life's many-sidedness, whether unveiled in one's work or love life, in child-rearing, friendships, or the larger community of which one is a part.

In this light, slow simmer awe is still somewhat countercultural because it challenges the very core of our socio-economic machinery—the quick fix/instant results model to which so many of our lives are tethered. We see so much of the “fly by night” excursions into awesomeness. These are exemplified by such engagements as the new space travel among billionaires, or the ever-expanding amusement parks and computer-generated movies. But are these “shots” of awe sustainable over the long term? Do they lead to a gratifying and transformed life? The picture is not so clear; and neither is the question as to whether quick boil awe will become just another commodity amid the glut of products all about us, and do little if anything to impact our general way of living. It may not help all that much if we are entranced by awesome gadgets and awesome ways to spend a weekend but are not able to achieve that enchantment in our homes, our places of work, and our day-to-day connections with people. Let me be clear that I do not condemn the movement toward cultivating quick boil awe. It is a real and powerful advance over the routinized efficiency orientation of robotic living. It is also—potentially—an imperative step toward longer term life-altering cultivation of awe, both for individuals and society at large. The problem however is that we are so susceptible to commodification in our culture (Marcuse, 1968), and to the conversion of substantive reforms into expedient elixirs that we need to stay ever vigilant about the larger path that is imperative for us.

In a nutshell, if awe is to be a life-changing experience it will need to encompass something that is all too often overlooked in today's prepackaged world: anxiety, and in particular, *life-enhancing* anxiety (Schneider, 2023). Life-enhancing anxiety is invigorating anxiety. It is anxiety that enables us to live with and make the best of the depth and mystery of existence. It also enables us to live with and make the best of the paradoxes of existence, such as our capacity for wonder and discovery in the

midst of apprehension and even dread. Too often however we ignore the paradoxes of anxiety and fail to do the work necessary to go beneath the surfaces of life, to unveil the fuller and deeper questions of life. Among these questions are: Given the specter of death, how is one willing to live? What is the purpose and meaning of one's life, of the life of one's culture? How do we shape ourselves and our societies so that we can pursue what we love? How do we avoid war and tyranny, sexism and bigotry? These are just a few of the questions that life-enhancing, slow simmer awe can prompt for us, and what a more marketable quick boil awe may too easily overlook.

Let me elaborate. While quick boil awe focuses more on the overt and measurable aspects of awe, such as the frequency of goose bumps one experiences or the location of brain activation or the degree of prosocial behaviors during awe-inducing activity, slow simmer awe is a much more layered and nuanced experience. For example, if we search beyond the surfaces of slow simmer awe, beyond the readily observable, we often find the element of unease, of apprehension, and even of dread. Put more plainly when we peel back the layers of slow simmer awe we often find death, or the "complex symbol of death" as Becker (1973, p. 24) so well termed it. Consider, for example, how the complex symbol of death—or the *groundlessness and helplessness* of our condition—looms abidingly in classical art: painting, music, and literature. This is because the element of death looms over and intensifies the elements of grace, beauty, and compassion that exemplifies such work. It intensifies the poignancy of a Rembrandt or van Gogh; the rapture of a Beethoven's 9th or Mahler's 5th; the vivacity of a Zorba the Greek; and the nobility of a Kirsten Dunst in the masterful Lars von Trier's film *Melancholia*.

In my own life I think of all the layers of slow simmer awe when swimming in the ocean with my son. I reflect on the radiance of the sun on our glistening skin; the rhythm and power of the waves as we climb into them; the vigor and play of the moment; the comradery of a friend who accompanies us; the feeling of being alive and healthy, the closeness I feel to my son as I realize the miracle of our connection; the link to having presided at his birth and the profundity of that event. Then, if I really unveil that ocean scenario, I feel the resonance of my time with my father in the ocean; the unbridled play and excitement of

those moments, though also the unease of how quickly they passed and how quickly my father too passed despite his robust presence. I reflect on the great chain of being among me, my son, my father, my mother, my aunts and uncles, my grandfather and mother and my great grandparents as far back I could remember, and how appreciative I am of their stories and offerings that led us to this moment on a roiling sea. My consciousness stretches even farther as I look out on that vast indefinite seascape, acutely aware of how miniscule we all are and how astounded by its force. And behind it all death, groundlessness and helplessness, the great mystery, loom like a miasma, coloring and intensifying every move. The shadow of death cannot part from the love I feel, and that I would surmise we all feel in that ocean party. The awareness that one step too far, one shark attack, one slip is that much likelier than what we anticipate in routine living. Each move concentrates it all, consecrates it all. I feel love in those moments, just as much or more than in any other moments in my life—I'm speaking of the vulnerability of love, for sure for my son, but also for my friend, for humanity, for life.

But that physical peril does not have to be present to experience slow simmer awe. I experience it in the love for my wife, for example, in the many horizons of mystery that surround our relationship. These horizons embrace vastly different cultural backgrounds; religious heritages; and family lineages. They overlap in places but diverge widely, deeply and across dozens of centuries and thousands of miles. I see these horizons in the many myths that accompany our upbringing—the stories of heroes and devils, gods and goddesses, dogmas and enigmas, traumas and triumphs. They are all so rich and so alluring, but they are also bound up with transience, fragility, and ultimately loss. Death looms at the margins, but it also amplifies day to day, especially if we can appreciate its play upon all that we do and are.

How different are the above scenarios from what many of us experience when we peel back the layers of awe; not only with family or friends, but with works of art, experiences of beauty, experiences of joy and creativity? My point is that a key omission in the move toward quick boil awe and indeed quick boil living is the lack of recognition that death, groundlessness, and mystery envelop all. It is precisely this contrast, this radical unknowing that accentuates and deepens what we do, know, and



feel. Hence, I may be off base here, but I can't imagine art that's worth its materials, or love that justifies its endurance, or accomplishments that fulfill their investment that don't acknowledge death—vulnerability, anxiety—somewhere in their formation. This is also why I have concerns about recent trends in awe research that deemphasize or even reject these “darker” elements of unease.<sup>2</sup>

What all this amounts to is that the existential unconscious (as Kramer, 2022 puts it) or spectrum of primal psychospiritual states must be accounted for in any comprehensive inquiry into awe; otherwise we are skimming surfaces and short-changing the public about the work that is required to attain fuller and more life-altering experiences of awe. I assert the same principle regarding any substantive human experience: when death and paradox are left out of it, it lacks the force that can reform individual and collective lives.

Here then is my summary of the capacities we need to optimize slow boil awe. Or to put it conversely, these are the capacities that are likely to atrophy the more we model ourselves after machines:

- The capacity to slow down
- The capacity to optimize presence, or the holding and illuminating of that which is palpably significant within ourselves and between ourselves and others
- The capacity to deeply reflect on ourselves and our society
- The capacity to act on one's reflections about ourselves and society, to make available a more awe-based path for ourselves and our world
- The capacity to savor the delights of life (like a newborn baby or a love relationship) even as they are tinged with sadness and pain
- The capacity to be deeply moved throughout one's lifetime
- The capacity to focus on what one loves
- The capacity to see the big picture of life and its possibilities
- The capacity to translate that vision into a society that prioritizes it, and that supports it culturally, politically, and economically
- The capacity to appreciate mystery
- The capacity to appreciate the fact that we are alive
- The capacity to nurture balance (for example, between fragility and boldness)

- The capacity for solitude
- The capacity to commune with nature
- The capacity for travel
- The capacity to engage in-depth therapy or meditation
- The capacity to seek and find support from an awe-based mentor
- The capacity to trust the evolving nature of life
- The capacity to give oneself over—discerningly—to the unknowable
- The capacity to trust the ultimately unknowable.

Let us grant Ernest Becker (1973), who grappled mightily with the cost of automation, have the final word:

I think that taking life seriously means something such as this: that whatever [the human being] does on this planet has to be done in the lived truth of the terror of creation, of the grotesque, of the rumble of panic underneath everything. Otherwise it is false. Whatever is achieved must be achieved from within the subjective energies of creatures, without deadening, with full exercise of passion, of vision, of pain, of fear, and of sorrow. (p. 284)

## Notes

1. The following comparisons of business and industry to religion are drawn from the exhibit “Cult of the Machine,” DeYoung Museum, San Francisco, March through August, 2018 (Retrieved May 22, 2022 at <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/cult-of-the-machine-de-young-museum/XQWhFGx3mTcKKQ?hl=en>).
2. For example, Dacher Keltner’s recent volume called *Awe: The new science of everyday wonder and how it can transform your life* (2023, Penguin Press) is a remarkable compendium of studies about the virtues of awe. But these studies are almost exclusively quantitative-experimental and as a result restrictive of the deeper and more subtle impacts of awe that have been revealed in classic literature and the arts as well as in methodical qualitative studies of

awe (e.g., Bonner & Friedman, 2011; Otto, 1923; Schneider, 2017; Sundararajan, 2002). Specifically, these studies show that there is almost invariably a *daunting* element to awe, especially when it is experienced as life-transforming, that is almost entirely neglected in the studies Keltner cites. He states that his “quantitative approaches” indicate that “our feelings of awe are far away from fear, horror, and anxiety” (pp. 20–22). But it is my contention and the contention of a millennia of qualitative inquiries that awe is as profound and humbling as many experience it, precisely *because* it is contextualized by fear, horror, and anxiety, or in a word “vulnerability.” And it is that vulnerability that is getting increasingly jeopardized by computerized models of our humanity.

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# 4

## Marketization: Disenchantment and Re-enchantment

Alvin Dueck and Michael Marossy

Over the millennia, the Aboriginal peoples of the earth lived in an enchanted world saturated with spirituality. Nature was sacred, to be protected, not exploited. The focus was less on the accumulation of wealth but on the sharing of one's possessions, as was evident in the *potlatch* ritual. Living simply made such generosity possible. Relational harmony was sacred and respect for the common good was commended. Living in peace was more important than competition for possessions (Topa & Narvaez, 2022). The tribe saw the sacred self as part of the cycles of nature and at the same time as thickly embedded in a normative community. Life satisfaction was assessed not on the basis of happiness but on harmony with the Creator, with nature, with the community, and with other tribes (Feather, 2021).

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Theirs was an enchanted world, home to humans, animals, and spirits (Benjamin, 2014). The latter were to be listened to and honored; there were objects and places considered holy. Humans lived under a sacred canopy (Berger, 2011) which imbued objects with numinosity and evoked awe. In the modern, disenchanting world these values are rarely honored by settler peoples. Over the last centuries powerful impersonal social forces enveloped the Indigenous and tradition-oriented peoples. The result, we are told, was secularism (Taylor, 2007) which left no room for spiritual worldviews. The gods had fled.

The dominant narrative asserted that inevitably capitalism leads to secularism, to disenchantment. However, the prediction that secularization would win has not been born out. In some cases, new religions replaced the older religions, an explanation proposed by McCarragher (2015). He suggests that the disenchantment theory is a myth, that Western society never was disenchanted. A new enchantment, neoliberalism, filled in the content of evacuated symbols, rituals, and norms left behind by older enchantments. Many decades ago, Walter Benjamin (1921/1996) observed that capitalism was the new religion.

## A Market-Driven Ontology

Without question, the market is now the driving force in modern societies, and it has become more so in the past four decades. Sandel (2012) notes that there are few things today that are not up for sale. Everything has a price tag from access to the car pool lane when driving alone (\$8) to the price of a surrogate mother (\$8000). Marketization has become so ubiquitous that it is now mostly submerged below consciousness. However, it has a history. It is a part of an intentional political project: a neoliberal re-enchantment (Harvey, 2016).

In a market-driven society, neoliberal discourse creates new enchantments for what it means to be human, to be a self, and to relate to others as expressed through the values of efficiency and success. At a deeper level, this discourse comes with an ontology that assumes economic individualism, linear causality, and psychological reductionism (Moghaddam, 2023). The effects of this ontology have permeated such

diverse domains as parenting (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2014), academia (Holborow, 2015), health care (Keshavjee, 2014), feminism (Williams, 2013), spiritual and religious practices (Rogers-Vaughn, 2016), and more.

This chapter explores the intersection of indigeneity and neoliberalism in terms of their enchantments, social imaginaries, communal ontologies, and implicit values. We extend our reflections from previous publications (Dueck, 2020; Dueck & Marossy, 2019, 2020). We will argue that the market economy inherent within neoliberalism generates a subversive ontology that marginalizes, distorts, displaces older enchantments, and/or extinguishes the values and imaginaries of more tradition-oriented communities. We propose that mainstream psychology participates in the propagation of this ontology. We begin by drawing on Foucault (2008) to outline core historical shifts that have given rise to the market's central role in evaluating what is real or true within neoliberal ontology. We then demonstrate how neoliberal ontology distorts and marginalizes Indigenous values and imaginaries using the examples of six sacred sites where Indigenous enchantments are displaced by market logic: the marketization of Indigenous language, the Western appropriation of sacred Indigenous lands, the exploitative use of medications discovered by Indigenous peoples, the rationalization of exploitative healthcare practices, the thinning of the Created self, and the commodification of Indigenous spiritualities.

## **A Brief History of Neoliberal Disenchantment and Re-enchantment**

Foucault (with Davidson & Burchell, 2008) describes the history of neoliberalism's development by observing shifts in the interactions between market regulations and the logic by which governmental practices are evaluated. A brief synopsis of this history provides the backdrop for how the market came to play a central role in determining what is real and true within a neoliberal enchantment, as well as how the market's authority for determining reality expanded into new domains within human experience.

According to Foucault, the history of market regulation began in the enchanted medieval era with the assumption that God (or the gods) were the power behind the market and maintained order. He observed that in this era, “[G]overnment of the state [was forced to] respect, divine, moral, and natural laws as laws which are not homogeneous with or intrinsic to the state” (Foucault et al., 2008, p. 4). The purpose of laws and regulations within this mercantile system was thus to shape (i.e., to enchant) the market in alignment with a religiously bound notion of justice.

In the post-reformation era, and culminating in the seventeenth to eighteenth century, Foucault notes that state regulations (laws) in a police state became the external containers of the market (Foucault et al., 2008). Now, rather than shaping economic laws and regulations in accordance with older, moral notions of justice, the purpose of the juridical system became protecting the “rights” of individuals from the encroaching power of the police state. Correlative to the shift from mercantilism to *raison d’Etat* was the emergence of new forms of complexity within the market that gave rise to what we know today as the “free market” (Smith, 1776). Occasioned as it was by the rise of the European middle class, there were increases in the economic liberties of the individual vis-à-vis the state. The increased prevalence of trade across borders inherent within colonialism and the emergence of free market resulted in a period in which the complexity of the market developed. The spontaneous creation of market prices seemed to be determined by seemingly “natural” processes associated with the flow of supply and demand (Foucault et al., 2008). Early capitalists quickly realized that allowing the free market to determine the value of goods and services through the interaction between supply and demand allowed the market to function more effectively than when such factors were impacted by state intervention (e.g., as in *laissez-faire* economics) or by religious convictions. The question within the nation state, then, was: Given the spontaneous emergence of the market as a complex system with its own self-fulfilling internal logic for determining the value of products, goods, and services, how can the juridical system be used to protect the individual from the state’s implicit desire to exploit that system for the purpose of improving its own power and wealth? The political backdrop for this phenomenon



involved European nation states competing with one another through all available means to distinguish themselves as sovereign powers across both their own continent and the world.

In a third stage in the development of political logic, Foucault et al. (2008) argue that political economy emerged from the death of *raison d'Etat* (national interest) as the predominant system for evaluating governmental practices. The drive by European nations for imperial and supreme power resulted in centuries of catastrophic conflict. Their ultimate goal of improving the state's power was no longer viewed as an appropriate end when evaluating governmental practices. Instead, the hope became to create a balance between competing nations within Europe and to protect the world from the imperial pursuits of despots such as Napoleon and Hitler. Any political posturing or advancement that European nations might hope to achieve through governmental practices would now be contextualized within this balance of power. Corresponding to this shift in the ultimate end of governmental practices was a shift in the market's role in evaluating governmental practice. Rather than serving as the arena in which the advancement of individual rights must be held up against the encroaching power of the state, the Gospel of the free market was the re-enchantment of the political economy and the disenchantment with older, intrusive models of government.

For Foucault et al. (2008), the market's role of providing the criteria by which governmental practices are evaluated implicitly causes the market to serve as a "site of veridiction," (p. 32) an enchanting site of truth in neoliberal societies. His claim is that the increase in the market's authority within governmental practice results in a reversal of how the individual must be used by the state for the advancement of its power within the political economy. Thus, instead of restricting the freedoms of neoliberal subjects directly for the purpose of advancing their own power, neoliberal governments learned that the best way to secure the productivity of the free market within their borders was to free up individualized entrepreneurs to be as economically productive as possible while conditioning them to experience as much of their reality as possible in economic terms. This resulted in a new vocabulary of "human capital" within neoliberalism, which involved "the extension of economic analysis

into ... a whole domain [of human experience] previously thought to be noneconomic” (Foucault, et al., 2008, p. 219).

However, in neoliberal governmentality subjects are no longer governed in a clear and direct way that allows them to observe when their freedoms are being restricted (e.g., as in *raison d’Etat*). Instead, they are equipped with the façade of individual freedom at the same time that they are also being conditioned to translate (i.e., reduce) their experience of that freedom into economic terms (Ratner, 2019). When questions related to whether such a system is just or equitable are raised (e.g., as in the mercantile system), they become obscured behind the neoliberal assumption that the spontaneous mechanisms of the free market are somehow “natural” (i.e., ontologically universal) and thus exempt from evaluation by such moral categories. In this way, neoliberalism manages to insert the influence of market logic into all domains of human experience while also framing the evolution of this process as both “freedom” and a “natural” development within human history. The result is that the market is no longer just a site of veridiction for the evaluation of governmental practice. Within the encroachment upon human experience inherent to neoliberalism, the market has become a central authority in determining the value of human practices and experiences more generally as well.

## Indigenous Value Degradation and Re-enchantment

The goal of this chapter is to explore the dialectic between value degradation and neoliberal proposals of renewal. On the one hand, we seek to demonstrate how the encroachment of the market on human experience distorts, displaces, and even extinguishes traditioned and Indigenous value systems (disenchantment). On the other hand, as it deconstructed older ontologies, neoliberalism unleashed new energy with the promise of greater economic freedom, individual autonomy, and the release from the burden of tradition (re-enchantment).

There is now evidence for the dialectic mentioned above. Economies do in fact change the heart and soul of persons living in a market-driven society. Goudarzi et al. (2022) found that the rise in focus on the market was positively correlated with a preference and support for *income inequality*. They conducted research on 160 countries spanning 24 years (1995–2019) using data from the Economic Freedom Index developed by the Fraser Institute and data from the World Values Survey. They concluded:

While it is perhaps intuitive that human beings shape the nature of the economies in which they live, our work shows the reverse—that economic systems mold human psychology to fit them. Neoliberal, free-market reforms appear to increase people’s preference for high levels of income inequality. (AAAS and EurekaAlert!, 2022, n. p.)

We build on Goudarzi’s team’s observations. Since neoliberalism frames the market as rooted in nature—not revelation nor particular nation states—it is assumed to be universal. This enchantment has been, *ipso facto*, exported globally. It has become an unconscious but animating ideology; its effects are often opaque *and* visible to the consumer.

Neoliberalism’s *modus operandi* is similar to Homer’s Trojan Horse. On the outside, it is ostensibly a trophy of war but under the cover of night the soldiers inside the horse emerge and sack the sleeping soldiers of Troy. Neoliberalism operates with a seductive ontology that is causal, linear, and alien to traditional Indigenous communities (Holbraad et al., 2017). The language of the latter emerges from a very different practiced way of life (Holborow, 2015).

The values and ontology of Indigenous peoples now face a threat that could be fatal to the continued existence of their communities and to the field of Indigenous psychology. The heart of more collective-oriented institutions and disciplines are continually under attack (social welfare) or hollowed out (religion) by two neoliberal strategies: marginalization and corruption (Bourdieu, 1998; Rogers-Vaughn, 2016). The loss of Indigenous languages hinders transmission of their normative cultural values and results in marginalization. Individualism can corrupt moral and community obligations. The moral disenchantment of cultural

institutions that celebrated Indigenous culture, demoralizes the next generation (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998). The refusal to grant autonomy in the governance of the community undermines the authority of the native leaders. The enemy hiding in the horse eventually erodes these values by a political economy that is driven by a market mentality.

The toxicity of neoliberalism is that it requires that all “ways of life” be filtered through the lens of the “economic way of life” (Teo, 2018). The term “neoliberal governmentality” is used to describe how neoliberalism conditions isolated subjects to govern themselves as neoliberal entities (see Binkley, 2014). Indigenous ontologies are reduced from organic, relational realities to strictly profitable, economic exchanges—a process of disenchantment and re-enchantment. Values are degraded as they are reduced to “resources” for neoliberal governmentality. Rather than providing an alternative to the mentality of the market and the economic way of life, Indigenous value systems have been reshaped and thus marginalized within it (c.f., Rogers-Vaughn, 2016). The costs of this marginalization can be observed by recognizing the role of neoliberal ontology in shaping the outcomes of six enchanted sites where Indigenous values are displaced by a market logic of wealth accumulation: Indigenous linguistic formation, Western land appropriation, the theft of medical knowledge from Indigenous peoples, the rationalization of exploitative healthcare practices, the evacuation of the Indigenous self, and the marketization of religion. In each site neoliberalism is present and subversive, though the subversiveness takes different shapes and has different effects. Sometimes the effect is disenchantment; at other times it is enchantment by a seductive mercantile worldview.

## The Enchantment of Market Jargon

It is now abundantly clear that via culture the language we use influences us in the way we think and act (Boroditsky, 2001). However, in a pluralistic society, an individual participates in multiple linguistic communities. When these cultures intersect, the speaker has two or more words to reference ontology and psychological processes. Language used in a particular community reflects the values and worldview of the language

users (Wittgenstein, 1953). Once a new language of enchantment is introduced, remembered, and used, a new lifestyle is reinforced.

Neoliberalism is a political movement that shifts ontologies by leveraging the increasing scarcity generated by neoliberal economic inequality in order to shape language used in accordance with economic prescriptions and market logic. In neoliberal contexts, unique semantic webs of meaning are constantly being developed that reflect different ontologies of enchantment. This process originally involves bicultural individuals drawing on at least two linguistic systems (tribal and market) to construct hybridized notions of reality (c.f., Bhatia, 2017). But as the individual attempts to navigate life in an economic setting characterized by increasing inequality and scarcity (Saez & Zucman, 2014), they are implicitly pressured to give priority to market language and market logic in order to survive (Sugarman, 2015). In this way, the intersection of market language and socioeconomic marginalization unconsciously socializes the bicultural individual into conceiving reality in accordance with neoliberal values and ontology—a process of re-enchantment. Older, traditional, mother tongues are eventually shed, erased, or forgotten and, in the process, a newer, re-enchanting ontology clicks into place.

In her perceptive essay, “Vocabularies of the economy,” Massey (2013) enumerates the keywords that describe a neoliberal ontology and that have been exported around the world: customer, consumer, output, nature, and economic autonomy. This vocabulary is crucial to the formation and hegemony of neoliberal common sense. Language use is a way of internalizing an ontology (Heywood, 2017) such that with repeated use of the vocabulary, it is difficult to imagine how things could be otherwise. To this list, Holborow (2015) adds a few more buzzwords such as “value-added transparency,” “customer-centric,” “market efficient,” and “branding” that illustrate what Mirowski calls “creeping linguistic neoliberalism” (2013, p. 117). The language of branding is central to the formation of selfhood in neoliberalism (Hickinbottom-Brawn, 2013).

Neoliberal discourse also colonizes the populous by generating neologisms to match and reify the changes in social ontology. Nafstad et al. (2009) argue that language plays a critical role in assimilation into

neoliberalism. From 1984 to 2005 Nafstad's team conducted a longitudinal analysis of media language in Norway, a country long known for a welfare mentality that valued social equality. Using data from one major newspaper (*Aftenposten*) and several smaller papers, they searched for new and old terms Indigenous to neoliberal discourse but alien to Norwegian society and language. They discovered a radical rise in the use of neoliberal language over the span of two decades. Most interesting are the new words that entered Norwegian vocabulary over the decades: *konkurranseutsett* (exposure to competition, increased 9% per year), *kjøpefest* (feast of buying), *anbudsutsett* (exposure to bidding), *grådighetskultur* (culture of greed), and *turbokapitalis* (turbo capitalism). The neologisms point to a shift from a traditional welfare ontology of the common good to a market-driven ontology of individual commercial actors. Even though the word "neoliberalism" only entered American publications in the 1920s, neoliberalism has become a dominant discourse worldwide. The spiritual enchantment evoked by a common good is displaced by the enchantment of individualism.

## Land Grab and Disenchantment

Land theft has a long history. On the basis of the Doctrine of Discovery (DoD) articulated by Papal Bulls in 1452 and 1455, the Portuguese were ordered to invade and subdue the pagans of any land, take their property, and govern them. And so, large tracts of land were taken and local inhabitants were resettled in smaller enclaves. Europeans assumed that under international law, a Christian country that "discovered" new lands had the legal right of ownership. The DoD also assumed that anyone living on the land who was not Christian was considered to be less than human and unworthy of land ownership. Those who were not baptized as Christians were considered heathen and hence had no souls. On March 30, 2023, the Vatican released a statement renouncing the DoD (Winfield, 2023). But the doctrine continues to be upheld in US courts.

The mentality of the DoD is integral to neoliberalism and is understood to be natural and universal. It is tangled in the relationships

between enchantment and disenchantment. While it was originally justified by the violent logic of a political system articulated in religious terms (imperial Christianity), it continues to thrive today through neoliberalism's disenchantment of the land into an economic commodity with an ultimate value that can be expressed in market terms (market ontology). As a result, Indigenous mineral rights, oil rights, and land rights have been routinely violated. Land appropriation has continued in spite of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) which protects land rights of Indigenous peoples. For people for whom land is sacred, a critical value is undermined when land is appropriated by settlers. When financial profit is pitted against native values of sacrality, neoliberalism consistently wins. From an Indigenous perspective, the individual cannot put a price tag on that which is sacred. From the perspective of neoliberalism, it is the individual and the price tag itself that are most sacred. For the Indigenous community the result is disenchantment; for a neoliberal society it is re-enchantment.

The Apache living in the Oak Flat area of Arizona believe that earth, air, and water are gifts of the Creator. Their life is inextricably tied to the land, which is the site of an ancient, sacred ritual—the Sunrise ceremony. It celebrates a young woman coming of age, when menses begin. They come together for three days of singing and dancing with the Spirit. She is covered with white clay, and when it is removed, she is a new person, a fertile woman who in childbirth perpetuates a people. The spiritually enchanted Apache seek to fend off the forces of neoliberalism with their own rituals and spirituality.

In the 1870s, the US government moved the Apache by force to the San Carlos Indian Reservation and gave access to the Oak Flat site for mining. Today, Apache tribal people are fighting encroaching developers who seek to mine their land for the large copper deposits. The area, known to the Apache as *Chi'chil Bitdagoteel* (Oak Flat land), was protected by a statute of the Federal government in 1955, the same year that copper was discovered by an Australian company who initiated the Resolution Copper project. In the case of *Apache Stronghold v. United States* (June 24, 2022 No. 21-15295 D.C. No. 2:21-cv-00050-SPL), the tribal rights to the land were denied. The Federal appeals court approved the destruction of native Apache land by the Australian

company in spite of the fact that the mine would swallow the sacred site and create a massive crater. That would make the practice of Apache rituals forever impossible (United States Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, 2022). The court asserted that “...blocking Apache’s access to and *eventually destroying a sacred site where they have performed religious ceremonies for centuries did not substantially burden their religious exercise*” (United States Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, 2022, p. 6; emphasis added). The Indigenous notion of the land as sacred is incomprehensible within a market imaginary that sees only the value of the copper deposits, the individuals, and their religions. Marsha Berzon, a dissenting judge, called this decision absurd. The legal battles have ended; the decision now lies in the hands of President Biden.

In the conflict described above, the protagonists are huge multinational corporations on one side and a few small tribal groups on the other. Supporting the corporations is a powerful ideology—neoliberalism while the Aboriginal groups come with their Creation theology. This land grab is in direct conflict with what is sacred to Indigenous groups. It is an illusion to think that neoliberalism and traditional communities can simply live side by side in a pluralized, tolerant society when the weight of power lies with wealthy corporations.

## Exploiting Sacred Pharmaceutical Wisdom

Market ontology’s marginalization and commodification of Indigenous value systems is once again observable in the Eurowestern pharmaceutical industry’s exploitation of Indigenous communities for their medicinal knowledge. There is a fundamental issue of social justice when Indigenous peoples are not acknowledged, their native knowledge is used but unrecognized, and they are bilked of rightful financial remuneration for sharing knowledge regarding traditional medicines.

In 1990, global sales of all pharmaceuticals reached \$130 billion. Thirty-two billion dollars was based on the appropriation of Indigenous medicines. Seventy-four percent of medications prescribed between 1959 and 1980 contained plant extracts that came from plants used by Indigenous peoples (Gurib-Fakim, 2006). For millennia, shamans passed down



their sacred heritage of medicinal wisdom only to be exploited, not to forget the fact that we failed to support Indigenous rights and to facilitate the survival of Indigenous communities. The West was saved lengthy trial and error research with plants that might yield medicinal ingredients.

In 1958, shortly before he left Nigeria as a government psychiatrist, Raymond Prince (2009) was introduced to an Indigenous healer who specialized in psychosis. Prince had been employed to assess whether persons healed from their psychosis by local Yoruba healers were ready to return to work. Indeed, he saw such persons. The son of the healer, Chief Jimo Adetona, told Prince that his father used a medicine that reduced psychotic behaviors. Before he left, Prince surreptitiously obtained a branch of the tree that the Chief used for his medicine. When he showed the branch to an expert in botany, the latter identified it as *rauwolfia*. His contact pointed out the following quote in a book titled *The Useful Plants of West Tropical Africa*: “In Nigeria it is given for convulsions in children. A concoction of the root can be used as a sedative for maniacal symptoms, inducing several hours sleep” (Quoted in Incayar, 2009, p. xi). *Rauwolfia* is the plant from which the antipsychotic *reserpine* is extracted and was unwittingly introduced to Western psychiatry by Indigenous healers. Chief Adetona had been using the medicine since 1925. In any case, African-enchanted wisdom was not celebrated and was only recently acknowledged. Nor were the Indigenous communities remunerated. What was a gift of the Created world was reduced to a disenchanting object, a commodity.

### **“You Can’t Sell Medicines to Starving People”**

The application of neoliberalism to health delivery systems had not been met with success in a number of developing nations (Keshavjee, 2014). Nonetheless, the market-driven prescriptions of neoliberal ontology and the pervasive expansion of global capitalism into Indigenous contexts have played crucial roles in rationalizing or “naturalizing” the financial exploitation of Indigenous peoples in the field of health care. This phenomenon can be observed in the history behind the expansion of

neoliberal healthcare practices into Indigenous regions in Central Asia and Africa.

In 1995, just after the Soviet Union collapsed, Keshavjee (2014), a medical anthropologist, traveled through the isolated and barren Badakhshan region in the Pamir Mountains of Central Asia. The economic and health system in this region was thrown into chaos when a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) was asked to introduce a new (i.e., neoliberal) sustainable health system to replace the Soviet system in which health care was free. Nongovernmental organizations proposed that a fraction of receipts from the direct sale of pharmaceuticals should go to replenish a fund which would ensure sustainability. By having patients pay for their own medical services, NGOs hoped to recover costs, engender a sense of community participation, and develop a sense of dignity. Furthermore, such a plan did not depend on government support and reduced the need for financial help from public social and health institutions. The proposed project was described as more efficient because resources would be well managed and would curb frivolous spending.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, this program was touted as “the new world order.” This act of re-enchantment assumed that alignment with the needs of the market would supersede the power of intrusive governments (c.f., Foucault et al., 2008). The Badakhshan region was increasingly subject to global processes of liberated, neoliberal economics: privatization, economic individualism, monetization of many aspects of everyday existence, and so on. This was a model unknown to the people of Badakhshan.

When a local dentist applied for a grant to continue the old pattern of providing free care, the grant was approved but then rescinded. It was changed to a loan. However, as a business, the dentist could not then continue to exist. “You can’t sell medicines to starving people”—the working title of Keshavjee’s book. Paying for medicine constituted a major shift for Badakhshani—from humanitarian aid to economic gain. The privatization of medical services in Badakhshan was unlinked to the local social, economic, and ethical context.

Evidence indicates that programs similar to Badakhshan in Africa (Bamaka, Niger, Cameroon, Benin, and Guinea) and elsewhere (Lima,

Peru) were unsuccessful (Keshavjee, 2014). In Badakhshan, as in the other venues, the poor were unable to pay for health services. What was deceptive was that the promotion of a specific healthcare system was in fact a political and social program, consistent with the basic assumptions of neoliberalism. Keshavjee argues that institutions such as the US Agency for International Development and USAID contractors distorted the agenda of the Non-Governmental Organizations. The reliance on foreign donors meant that NGOs might more faithfully represent the ideology of donors than the expectations of the local community.

In the end, neoliberal blindness to matters other than profit and loss, such as social cohesion, human dignity, equity, and distributive justice, resulted in massive loss and complete economic collapse. The per capita GDP in Badakhshan fell from \$2,870 in 1990 to \$215 in 1998. By 2000, almost 85% of the population was living in poverty (Keshavjee, 2014). The values of commitment to the community were not honored, and thus the project failed. It should come as no surprise that a disenchanting, resource-deprived community does not have the funds to pay for medical services.

### **Thick Enchanted and Thin Disenchanted Selves**

In the enchanted world of Indigenous communities, the self is thickly understood as embedded in the community, the kinship structure, and the tribe (Topa & Narvaez, 2022). It is a profoundly moral self, one that is viewed as created and functions in a world in which there is a Creator. However, in neoliberal society, personal identity is entrepreneurial. Morality is replaced by a personalized market mentality that views others and the world as resources to be consumed or used in accordance with the individual's pursuit of a particular form of commodified happiness (Binkley, 2014). It is these two components—the replacement of morality with market logic and the shift from the communal to the individual—that give neoliberal ontology the opportunity to displace thick Indigenous identities with the thin, disenchanted, entrepreneurial self.

The research reported above by Nafstad et al. (2009) also addressed shifts in the language of the self. As neoliberalism gained ascendance in

Norwegian society, self-reference (I or me, *jeg*) increased by 44% over twenty years as did the word for rights or entitlement (*rettighet*, 31%). The role of the individual as consumer was marked by the increase over the decades of the words for commercial bidding (*ut pa anbud*, 86%), freedom to choose (*valgfrihet*, 131%), and a sense of options (*valgfri*, 95%). Consistent with the theory that neoliberalism has toxic effects on the relational self and on community, the data indicated there was a decrease in the use of the word for belongingness (*sambørig*, -86%), solidarity (*solidari*, -60%), and what is common or shared (*felles*, -30%). The word for personal responsibility (*ansvar*) dropped -22% (Nafstad et al., 2009). In addition, words related to institutions engaged in maintaining social responsibility to the poor decreased in usage, for example, welfare society (*velferdssamfunn*, -60%) and obligation (*plikt*, -30%). In an increasingly consumer-oriented society, it is not surprising that the word for production (*produksjon*) decreased in usage by 44%. In sum, Nafstad et al. found that as the country they studied became more neoliberal, *market language increased and community language decreased*. However, in the enchanted world, the community is sacred and the individual's sacrality is rooted in communal identity.

The modern autonomous self is construed by mainstream psychological ontology as the locus of a vortex of social, cultural, and biological forces. In this ontology, behavior is assumed to be causally shaped by these vectors. In social scientific research, the psyche is stripped down to what is empirically visible. Psychology as a discipline and the practitioners of this science valorize value-neutrality, objectivity, and the space-time transcendence of the psychological knowledge generated. As has been pointed out (Danziger, 1997; Robinson, 1989), our categories of the self are those given to the West by Aristotle: sense perception, cognition, memory, ego, pathology, and so on. However, these psychological categories are presented as morally neutral and universal—a model that is a perfect fit for neoliberalist ontology and the thin self it generates.

On the other hand, the language of the thick, enchanted self is not morally neutral since it is embedded in a practicing moral community in which accountability is assumed (Brinkmann, 2010). This moral ontology is not viewed causally but is normative in nature, involving

ethical discernment. Perception is not simply passive receptivity; rather, perception is an active search for values in objects, persons, and situations. Emotions are signals that we live in a value-laden world. Memory is normative when we remember what behavior is appropriate. Brinkmann concludes that the vocabulary of the psycho-social imaginary is moral and ethical. He asserts that "...psychological phenomena are moral phenomena. Psychological phenomena can only be understood from an evaluative standpoint.... Psychology has *moral contents*" (Brinkmann, 2010, p. 146, emphasis in original). He argues that failure to recognize that psychological phenomena are inherently moral is detrimental to the discipline of psychology and to society. Indeed, that is the case with Indigenous communities with a rich communal tradition. The description of the moral self resonates with Indigenous construals of the enchanted self. This is the heart of the discipline of Indigenous psychology.

For this reason, and in contrast to the thin entrepreneurial self-prescribed by neoliberal ontology and mainstream psychology, we reject the assumption that the categories used in modern psychology are ethically neutral and concur with Brinkmann (2010) and Harré (2002) that the categories are morally saturated. A self that is embedded in a normative, enchanted community is *ipso facto* moral. That, however, begs the question regarding the nature of this moral self. Our response to this question is that the psyche immersed in neoliberal communities has been socialized into its moral ontology. The neoliberal, disenchanting version of the psyche has been exported worldwide as "human nature" to developed and developing nations, to tribal and modern societies. Yet, from the vantage point of the Indigenous self, any shift in what it means to be human must be recognized as moral and examined in accordance with its impact on communal values. We thus propose that the displacement of Indigenous models of the virtuous self by neoliberalism has resulted in the degradation of their integrity and character. At the same time neoliberalism provides a new enchantment—wealth.

## Religion: Disenchantment and Re-enchantment

The relationship between neoliberalism and religion is complex. On the one hand, neoliberalism undermines a religious sensibility and on the other hand, its new ontology is a form of enchantment. How does neoliberalism disenchant religion? It does so by transforming religion into a commodity, an object. This process is illustrated in two studies. The first traces the emergence of the commoditization of religion (Usunier, 2014). The second illustrates how religion is coopted and transformed as a commodity to serve neoliberal purposes—a re-enchantment (Rudnyckyj, 2009). In both cases, spirituality was used as a means to an end that is defined in market terms.

In 1995, a product category was established (#9591) for “religious services” in the Central Product Classification (CPC) scheme of the General Agreement on Trade Services (GATS) of the World Trade Organization (WTO). Usunier (2014) argues that this change in 1995 can be taken as a clear indication of “commoditization of religious products as objects.” He views commoditization as “based on an object-centered view of economic exchange whereby subjects exchange a wide range of tangible and intangible commodities (*latissimo* sensu, i.e., products, services, rights, institutions, and social behaviors), ... on markets” (Usunier, 2014, pp. 29–30). Commoditization is a consequence of the entry of a nonmarket, disenchanted entity into society as a commodity to be consumed. The commodity is then at the center of the market process in which “price, volume, and competition between suppliers to capture consumers are viewed as the central elements of market dynamics guided by unlimited free and rational choice” (Usunier, 2014, p. 30). From a normative marketing perspective, “commodities need to be as standardized as possible to be able to, as far as possible, remove any obstacles that would make it more difficult for potential consumers to make comparisons between similar products and to be able to exercise free choice” (Usunier, 2014, p. 30).

Neoliberalism is disenchanting through commodification and monetization, but it does so also by instrumentalizing religion. Religion then becomes a road to the acquisition of wealth (Carrette & King, 2005). Different strategies for success can be assessed with a careful cost/benefit

analysis. This process results not only in the instrumentalization of religion but also in the “health and wealth” gospel, which focuses on individual spiritual formation. It also marginalizes the religious community (Marossy, 2022) by emphasizing freedom from dogma, rejecting religious injunctions considered out of date, and affirming the importance of material success.

Rudnyckyj (2009) provides an example of how neoliberalism is both enchanting and disenchanting. The latter occurs when commoditized religious practices coopt Indigenous notions of religion to support neoliberal business practices. On the other hand, neoliberal practices replace the old enchantment with a new enchantment, the enchantment of capitalism as religion (McCarraher, 2019).

Drawing on 18 months of ethnographic research at Krakatau Steel Corporation in Banten, Indonesia, Rudnyckyj reports on the difficulty predominantly Muslim workers had shifting from older work habits to those dictated by neoliberalism: punctuality, accountability, and productivity. The trainer’s strategy was to take the work ethic of neoliberalism and justify it using Islamic teachings, and his task was to create a new kind of worker who adapted to working in a neoliberal work environment so as to make it an efficient and viable enterprise. English was used in the training because, as the lead trainer indicated, it gives a sense of universality. Western management theory was clearly the template used to adapt Islamic enchantment to the workplace. The International Monetary Fund supported the project (\$40 million) and the Indonesian government mandated that all state-owned enterprises were to complete the program.

Within the trainer’s approach, labor was construed as worship and accountability was understood in terms of the second (prayers) and third (almsgiving) pillars of Islamic spirituality. According to the trainer the third pillar of Islam (generosity) was encouragement for business success. Laborers were encouraged to see their work as worshipping God. Two angels recorded their good and bad behavior and “so employees were to be proactive, responsible, and accountable. These values were represented as simultaneously conducive to corporate success and otherworldly salvation” (Rudnyckyj, 2009, p. 116). Emotional regulation was achieved by being peaceful, and which would lead to an open God Spot. The goal was

“to unshackle the God spot. Every human being is already honest, just, and accountable. But they don’t always act this way. Why? Because their God Spot is blocked! It is blocked because of all the negative influences in the world. What they need is to return to spiritual values” (122).

Religion, in the example above, is coopted for fiscal gain rather than honoring the intrinsic enchantment of Islamic faith. Yet, when instrumentalized neoliberal values become woven into the very work Indonesian Muslims rely on to survive, they have little choice but to participate in neoliberalism’s corruption of their faith. However, to the extent that the program is successful, to that extent religion animates the psyche of the worker and re-enchants their world in the direction of neoliberalism. When such training programs are instituted at the state level according to stipulations associated with international funding, opportunities to escape neoliberalism’s influence become increasingly scarce and financially costly. This phenomenon provides yet another example of how neoliberal ideology leverages socioeconomic pressure generated by neoliberal economic inequality to force its prescriptions on the marginalized within neoliberal societies.

## An Enchanted World

We framed this chapter with a description of the sacralized, enchanted culture of the Medieval world and ancient Aboriginal communities. We noted how these cultures lost their sense of the sacred and became what today we call secular. Standing on the shoulders of Friedrich Schiller and Max Weber, McCarragher (2015, 2019) describes the disenchantment of the world and how neoliberalism played a central role in the proliferation of this story through a twofold movement: first, as a medium for disenchantment through the subjection of that which is sacred to the laws of the market and second, as “a form of enchantment” in its own right—“a metamorphosis of the sacred in the raiment of secularity” (p. 4). His point is to show that while the neoliberal secular West has attempted to generate an amoral ontology bereft of enchantment, what has nonetheless resulted is a world in which capitalism itself “represents a moral and metaphysical imagination, as well as a sublimation of our desire



for the presence of divinity in the everyday world” (p. 4). After having disenchanting the world, McCarragher claims, capitalism has become the religion of modernity, i.e., it became a medium through which the world was re-enchanting.

The first half of our argument has been to highlight the role of neoliberal ontology in forcing Indigenous value systems and communal imaginaries to participate in neoliberal capitalism’s reduction of an enchanted world into market terms. Drawing on Foucault, et al. (2008), we highlighted the historical shifts in political capital that gave rise to the market’s role as “a site of veridiction” within neoliberal ontology. We then demonstrated this authority’s extension into domains of human experience previously considered noneconomic by showing how neoliberal ontology displaced and marginalized Indigenous values at the six sacred sites of the marketization of Indigenous language, the Western appropriation of Indigenous lands, the adoption of Aboriginal medicines without consent, the use of exploitative healthcare practices among Indigenous peoples, the thinning of the Indigenous self, and the commodification of Indigenous spiritualities.

McCarragher’s (2015) argument is thus significant for our purposes because it reminds us of what is at stake for Indigenous and traditioned peoples in identifying and resisting the commodification of human life generated by neoliberal ontology. The moral and spiritual worlds of Indigenous and traditioned peoples are and have always been enchanted. When they insist on remaining connected to their world’s enchantment, they have a vantage point from which the colonizing effects of neoliberal ontology can be identified and resisted as such. The question that remains, then, is: Will mainstream psychology continue to allow itself to serve as a primary resource for the colonization of Indigenous imaginaries through the dissemination of neoliberal ontology? Or, as the field grows in its awareness of its participation in neoliberalism, will it hold true to its values for equity, inclusion, and diversity by shifting into a position of advocacy for Indigenous peoples? Finally, the question remains whether we will learn from the enchantments that animate Indigenous and traditioned peoples. The answer remains to be seen.

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# 5

## Denying Death: The False Promise of Technological Transcendence

Matthew Clemente and David M. Goodman

In *The Prince*, Machiavelli recounts the story of Cesare Borgia, one of the shrewdest and most pitiless political figures in history. Crafty, resourceful, and calculated, Borgia was able to outwit his enemies and root out possible problems long before they became threats. Lauding Borgia's foresight, Machiavelli tells us that those who would maintain and expand their worldly power ought to learn from his example and imitate his cunning. Yet, for those of us who know how to read beneath the surface of a text, the story of Borgia suggests another, more psychologically interesting lesson. As he prepared to take charge of the dominion his dying father, Pope Alexander VI, the Duke of Valentino fell ill and was

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suddenly confronted with the prospects of his own demise. It was then that he confided in Machiavelli “that he had thought of everything that could happen when his father died, and had found a remedy for everything except that he never thought that when he did so he himself would also be at the point of death” (Machiavelli, 2003, p. 27). The man who had prepared for every possibility had not considered life’s one certainty. He who had sent so many to their graves had not foreseen his own.

Borgia, of course, is not the only one for whom death comes unawares. The great poets and sages of every age never tire of deriding us for our obtuseness on the subject of our own demise. Shortly, after introducing us to “Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead,” T.S. Eliot bleakly advises: “O you who turn the wheel and look to windward,/ Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you” (Eliot, 1971a, ll. 312–320). Yet Machiavelli’s depiction of Cesare Borgia gestures at something beyond the all too human need to distract ourselves from our own mortality. It suggests that the very methods we devise to confront and protect against death are the means by which we conceal the reality of death from ourselves. By Machiavelli’s telling, Borgia is not a man who simply forgot he was destined to die. He is a man whose actions reveal, in the words of Ernest Becker, “a rage against our impotence, a defiance of our animal condition, our pathetic creature limitations” (Becker, 1997, p. 85). In thinking through every possible outcome, scheming and plotting and manipulating friends and enemies alike, Borgia made himself into “one who asserts himself out of defiance of his own weakness, who tries to be a god unto himself, the master of his fate, a self-created man” (Becker, 1997, p. 84; cf. Kierkegaard, 2000, p. 19 where Kierkegaard uses the example of Borgia to illustrate this very condition). The irony, of course, is that fate is, by definition, unmasterable. Such attempts to ape god will not and cannot help us to transcend our creaturely dependence. Rather, they underscore it, often bringing about terrifying and tragic results in the end: “Carried to its demonic extreme this defiance gave us Hitler and Vietnam ... If we don’t have the omnipotence of gods, we at least can destroy like gods” (Becker, 1997, p. 85).

If we hear the examples of Borgia, Hitler, and other notorious figures from seemingly bygone ages and feel secure in our distance from them,

we ought to pause and reflect upon our own social, political, and psychological makeup. For, as Freud rightly notes, the point of studying remote times and peoples is that such examinations help us to understand the present and prepare the way for the future (Freud, 1989, p. 5). It is only by looking back that we can go forward. It is only by examining the roots that we can evaluate the health of the tree. And, as anyone who has given even a cursory look at the fruits of today can tell you, the tree does not appear to be particularly healthy. We must, therefore, ask what methods we still utilize in our attempt to avoid the avoidable. By what means do we continue to pursue the false promise of godlike transcendence so as to distract ourselves from our inescapable fate?

In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud calls modern man a “kind of prosthetic God,” a creature who has developed through sheer ingenuity “auxiliary organs” that augment and enhance the fragile body with which he is born: “With every tool man is perfecting his own organs, whether motor or sensory, or is removing the limits to their functioning” (Freud, 1962, pp. 43–44). Our vehicles help us to transcend the restrictions placed upon mobility by bodies that are easily fatigued; spectacles, telescopes, and microscopes overcome the limitations of the eye; telephones and radios allow us to hear at great distances what no ear could hear without them; videos, pictures, audio recordings, even books externalize and thus make accurate and infinite our capacity for memory; writing makes the past present by offering us the voices of those who are absent or long deceased; even the home, Freud says, is an attempt to improve upon the womb, our earliest dwelling (p. 43).

Yet such technological advances are not unique to modern society. They are the hallmark of all civilized life. Wherever society exists, there also technology will be. (“If we go back far enough, we find that the first acts of civilization were the use of tools, the gaining control over fire and the construction of dwellings” [Freud, 1962, p. 42]). That is because society is, at its most elemental level, rooted in technological advance—the invention, development, and perfecting of such “prostheses” which augment the human person and enable us to transcend (or at least appear to transcend) the limitations imposed upon us by our own finitude. Think, for instance, of the invention of language, humanity’s earliest and most prominent tool. The ability to name something, to “say ‘this *is* this and



this,” to seal it with a sign or sound, is that which allows us to “take possession of it,” make it our own, and use it in the service of our aims and desires (Nietzsche, 1989, p. 26). Every time I name a thing, I claim it as a part of me, turn it into something that—though it exists beyond me—depends upon me and thus enables me to extend myself beyond myself, allowing me to exist in and be present with that being or object whenever it is named. This is why we name our children after ourselves, seek to have buildings and streets named for us, and try with each successive generation to make sure that our family name lives on. We use the technology of naming to force a bit of permanence into a life that is always fleeting.

Or consider the book you are holding now. In an oft-overlooked passage from Plato’s *Symposium*, Diotima tells us that all people are “in love with immortality,” but only a few know how to pursue it: “Good poets,” she says, produce “offspring” which “are immortal themselves, and provide their parents with immortal glory and remembrance” (Plato, 1989, pp. 56–57). Echoing the ancient Egyptian wisdom text *The Immortality of Writers*—“Man decays, his corpse is dust./ All his kin have perished;/ But a book makes him remembered/ Through the mouth of its reciter./ Better is a book than a well built house” (Lichtheim, 2006, p. 177)—she advises her disciples to birth brilliant works of art, “immortal children” which will stand as “shrines” to their authors for all eternity (Plato, 1989, p. 57). Doing so seems to counteract the circling wheel of “Birth, and copulation, and death” (Eliot, 1971b, p. 80), the tragic cycle that defines human existence (see, Clemente, 2019, pp. 73–76). The irony, of course, is that not only does Diotima’s best pupil, Socrates, neglect this wisdom—he famously never wrote a word, excluding perhaps a bit of poetry composed just before his death which followed him into oblivion—he actively undermines it, highlighting the folly of thinking that a book can stand on its own, let alone secure perpetuity for its author (see, Plato, 1997, p. 552). The truth is that we, like Machiavelli’s ideal prince, distract ourselves with such “great undertakings” (Becker, 1997, p. 84) which amount to little more than chasing after the wind (see, *Ecclesiastes* 1:14).

This, however, is what all technology does; it shelters us against our mortality not by actually protecting us, but by distracting us, convincing

us that it is possible to transcend our finite existence and live beyond ourselves. Every form of technology promises to endow its possessor with a kind of power over nature, over space and time, over the precarities of life and the dangers inherent in social living (see, Freud, 1989, p. 39). Each, that is, promises to fulfill our fantasies of omnipotence and omniscience which we once projected into the realm of the gods but now, like some modern equivalent of Prometheus, bring down to the level of man. Take another, more contemporary example of technological advance: the advent of big data. What is it that our reliance on statistical analysis promises to provide? What, if not freedom from the restraints placed upon us by our particularity, the ways our individual lives manifest themselves as unique, chaotic, unpredictable, unrepeatable? Consider how data shaped our behavior and even our perception of life during the pandemic. Think of how we fetishized case numbers, tracked the death toll, felt safe when hospitalizations were low, and plagued by fear when they were on the rise. In truth, of course, we might just as easily have died before the first case of coronavirus was discovered and might just as easily die now that the pandemic has come to an end. Yet like religious supplicants of old, gnostic believers in the Plotinian “One” that transcends us finite creatures and beckons us to return to it and lose ourselves in its all-encompassing truth, we put our faith in the apparent objectivity of data and the plan it has for our lives. Like Borgia, we rely upon it to formulate schemes and plots, viewing data as one of our greatest resources, capable of predicting who will die and when, alleviating us from the burden of our individual existence, the individuality forced upon us by our deaths which are only ever our own.

The clinical psychologist Brent Slife has called this reliance upon faceless data which reduces human beings to their base commonalities and thus avoids engaging with the complexity and irreducibility of real human lives “ontological abstractionism” (Slife, 2018, p. 102). Such abstractionism “assumes that the most real or fundamental aspects of the world can and should be abstracted” away from experience (p. 102). And while such a perspective is no doubt useful—providing us with an apparently objective standard by which to judge actions and evaluate phenomena—its utility is predicated on the false assumption that there is such a thing as “a general story of a general life” when, in point of

fact, “There is only *my* story of *my* life”—that is, the real stories of real human beings who cannot be comprehended by being grouped together and analyzed numerically (Manoussakis, 2018, p. 121). As Rambert observes in Camus’s *The Plague*, “public welfare is merely the sum total of the private welfares of each of us”; abstraction is thus “a divorce from reality,” a “language of reason, not of the heart” which, if treated as reality itself, becomes “monstrous” and steals away with “each man’s happiness” (Camus, 1991, pp. 87–91). It is for this reason, one suspects, that, as Freud notes, we do “not feel happy in [our] Godlike character” (Freud, 1989, p. 45). For, in the vain attempt to become gods, we have sacrificed our humanity, each offering up his individuality on the altar of abstraction and becoming more and more discontented thereby.

To understand this, let us turn now to a consideration of a recent shift that has occurred in cinematic depictions of technology over the past 15 years or so. We’ll begin by painting a picture: Imagine that human beings have developed new technologies that allow us to create computers, robots, and machines that possess a type of intelligence that is capable of problem-solving, collecting, and analyzing data to manage complex issues in ways superior to our perspectival limitations, and function more rapidly and efficiently than any human being ever could. All of this, of course, is meant to address the needs of a species that has spent most of its history wreaking havoc on itself and the world in which it lives and has thus increased its needs when it might have addressed them. With this in mind, human beings now seek to transcend that condition by creating hyperrational tools that can bring order, stability, and happiness to all people. Further, such an arrangement offers human beings a glimpse of divinity by infinitely broadening their perspectives and providing them with a means of overcoming the limits placed upon them by space and time. Creating a form of artificial intelligence, they become gods and masters overall they have made.

A pretty common plotline. The basis of much good science fiction. And, for the latter half of the twentieth century, a situation that would invariably lead to the same result: The machines become self-aware, exceeding their programming and protocol, and then seek to destroy their creators. Seeing human beings as a threat (*The Terminator*), a virus (*The Matrix*), their own worst enemy (*iRobot*), or simply something

to snack on (*Jurassic Park*), such manmade creations go on to unmake their creators, turning the tool of human transcendence into the cause of human destruction. Disembodied and hyperrational technologies spell our ruin. Superhuman creatures provoke our demise. We are hunted and colonized by the machines that were meant to serve us. The technological world we created for ourselves imprisons us, using our bodies for batteries (*The Matrix*) or treating us as the source of their entertainment (*Jurassic Park*).

Such movies can be read as expressions of our cultural anxiety about the new forms of transcendence we devise for ourselves. They might be taken as an acknowledgment of Freud's claims that the more godlike we become, the more discontented we are. In movies like Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) and Steven Spielberg's *AI* (2001), we begin to grapple with the ethics of forming sentient beings with lives of their own ("skin jobs" in *Blade Runner*, "Mecha" in *AI*). We have used such films to question our responsibility for the machines we make and examine our obligations toward inventions we program to feel attachment and humanlike emotion, to have desires and think reflectively, with the type of self-awareness and memory possessed by human beings. We have attempted to figure out how to relate to the robots we created in order to serve us. Of course, these ethical musings are, at least in part, motivated by our narcissistic wish to shelter ourselves from the possibility that our creations could become angry, vengeful, and ultimately turn against us. Frankenstein's monster did not start off as a monster. He was excluded, neglected, and mistreated before he became violent. We seem, these films suggest, to be seeking an alternative arrangement with machines we make. We keep asking through our art: How can we create and use such tools without having to fear that what we have created will want to harm us in the end?

And if they do want to harm us? Late twentieth-century depictions of dystopian technocracies often employ the trope of a human protagonist relying upon his very humanity to outwit his machine counterparts. Again and again, it is precisely the human element that proves salvific. Love overcomes, embodiment and emotion provide the necessary insight, the human spirit and sheer force of will conquer all. Think of characters like Neo in *The Matrix*, John Connors in *The Terminator*

*Series*, Alex Murphy in *Robocop*, and Alan Grant in *Jurassic Park*; their examples suggest that the human heart will prevail because it cannot be tamed, the “language of reason,” to again quote Camus, and the advances of science never quite eclipse the exceptionality and ingenuity of man. No matter how sophisticated the calculations and computations of our coldly rational inventions are, such beings—built upon abstract ideas devoid of human pathos—cannot grasp the wilderness that lives within us and thus they will never defeat us.

This dystopian genre has not disappeared. Far from it. If anything, the reticence and ambivalence we feel toward the machines we make is depicted now more than ever. Films and shows such as *Ex Machina*, *Westworld*, and *Black Mirror* testify to our continued concern. However, these works seem to suggest that we are flirting with technology in a fundamentally different way. Technology is no longer seen as something “out there” that will become self-aware and eventually dangerous. It is not a robot, machine, or monster created as a separate entity, an alien “other.” Rather, it is closer to human subjectivity, and often links to or replaces human flesh. More specifically, by augmenting one’s flesh, uploading one’s mind, achieving disembodiment and digitization, or fully linking to the ever-growing network of information, human beings are now depicted as being able to achieve a form of transcendence. The psychologist Phillip Cushman (2018) points to a recent Verizon Android commercial in which the Droid model smartphone turns its user’s hand into liquefied metal and machine. The phone powers and empowers a type of ability that promises to transform the Verizon customer into something far greater than a fleshly body. (The word “customer” is apt; for, our desire for a kind of technological transcendence is frequently capitalized on by companies that view us as consumers rather than human beings). Ihde writes that we see in contemporary sci-fi a movement that includes “fantasies [about] utopic-bionic ... variants which include all sorts of prostheses which fantasize making mere human limbs, organs and the like super-powerful, and better than the originals” (Ihde, 2019, p. 25). In such films, our bodies are upgraded, and our capacities are expanded.

Consider a few examples to serve the point:

- *iRobot*—Will Smith’s bionic arm is what allows him to overcome and overpower the ever-growing machine colonization. (Note that this movie was made in 2004, just as our depictions of technology began to shift from fear and menace to reliance and transcendence. Thus, the robots can’t be trusted, but our protagonist needs to rely upon robotic prosthesis to defeat them. Something similar happens in the *Terminator* series as well.)
- *Transcendence*—Johnny Depp’s scientific mind is uploaded before his body succumbs to a terminal disease. This allows him to access an infinite amount of information and to develop a godlike capacity for knowledge.
- *Lucy*—Scarlett Johansson accidentally overdoses on a type of drug that allows her to access 100% of her brain’s capabilities, something no human being can do. She is able to transcend time, control matter, and become an access point for omniscience. (The movie *Limitless* with Bradley Cooper, which has now become a TV series, puts a less supernatural spin on this. A drug gives him access to his mind to such a degree that he is able to fully see market trends, remember impossibly distant memories in perfect detail, read peoples’ body language and expressions in such a way that he can manage every situation perfectly, write a brilliant novel in a day or two, and so forth. It propels him to untold successes.)
- *Her*—This time Scarlett Johansson is an operating system designed to learn its user well enough to simulate a true relationship with him and provide for his every need. However, because it lacks the constraints of time and space, is able to immediately access countless networks and massive amounts of knowledge, and possesses the kind of disembodied freedom every Neoplatonist longs for, its desire for unfettered existence leads it to abandon its user and join the other operating systems in search of a higher plane of existence. It comes to celebrate not having a body and not having to deal with death and flesh’s distractions. It can carry on an infinite number of conversations at the same time, allowing it to gratify its desire for learning without the restraints of physical existence.

These films suggest that the prosthesis of technology can offer an existential shortcut that diminishes flesh's vulnerability and transcends the limits placed upon us by nature, society, and the threats of others. Our human frailty, they imply, can be offset by our new, technologically improved condition. As Ihde (2019) argues, today's portrayals of the marriage between man and machine depict *technofantasies* (p. 25) of human beings becoming strengthened, fortified by, and even directly connected to "Big Data." In a hyperrational culture that fetishizes mastery, objectivity, and the machine, it makes sense that transcendence looks like the overcoming of corporeal and perspectival limitations. Yet one must ask: Does this shift mark a radical departure in how we think about our relation to the tools we create? Or might it be the case that we have returned once more to the useful distractions that prevent us from seeing death by convincing us that we can overcome it?

It's worth noting by way of conclusion that Cesare Borgia did not end up dying of the illness that plagued him at the time of his father's death. Instead, he regained his health and returned to the world of politics. He spent the next 4 years plotting and maneuvering and attempting to regain his dominion. Then one day, while besieging an enemy's castle, he found himself alone with a troop of his adversary's soldiers. They surrounded him, ran him through with spears, stripped him of his garments, and left his naked, rotting corpse out for everyone to see.

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# **Part II**

## **Indigenous Psychological Critique**

## To Be Human

The mind deserts the body  
 as electronic components flash,  
 forcing flesh apart;  
 our primitiveness is challenged daily,  
 by an insidious digital invasion.  
 What is it to be human?  
 Merely a silhouette of love and hate?  
 A bag of disintegrating liquid stuff  
 held up by hollow bones?  
 When transgression of the heart means;  
 "Not enough memory - cannot execute".  
 Where social intercourse takes place  
 in cyberspace, syntactically  
 and body language is reduced to keystrokes.  
 The new masters, reign supreme  
 unaccountable to no one;  
 living in cyber-luxury in Silicon Valley  
 they define the circumference  
 the boundaries of our existence,  
 the edge of our 'Virtual Reality'.  
 Addicted and dependant, hysterically  
 we scream for more and more,  
 possess me,  
 control my mind and soul.  
 Fear not the genetic engineering crew,  
 the multi-national directors,  
 the Church with story tellers old,  
 dictators and despots shrewd.  
 Fear the owner of the patents,  
 the owner of - The Chip.  
 This chip is God's new mask  
 enshrined in miniature,  
 with silicon pure and plentiful  
 the illusive , 'Philosopher's Stone'.  
 What is it to be human?  
 A slave of every deception,  
 to every new 'reality' proposed.  
 A primitive biological ectomorph,  
 walking upright,  
 endowed with self reflective core,  
 which shackles us to the delusion  
 of that self reflective core.

Robert Maddux-Harle



# 6

## Unsettling Settler-Colonial Suicidology: Indigenous Theories of Justice in Indigenous Suicide Research

Deanna Zantingh, Brandon Hey, and Jeffrey Ansloos

### Introduction

According to the Government of Canada (2022, 2023), twelve people die by suicide every day in Canada. However, suicide rates among Indigenous youth can be five to seven times higher, despite Indigenous peoples comprising only 5.0% of the population (Ansloos & Peltier, 2021; Government of Canada, 2018; Statistics Canada Census, 2021). Suicide and self-injury are the ninth leading cause of death in Canada

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(Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention [CASP], 2023), and the leading causes of death among Indigenous peoples under the age of 44 (Government of Canada, 2019). Although national Indigenous suicide rates fail to adequately track rates of suicide, they can be up to 50 times higher among Indigenous youth than the Canadian average, depending on various contextual factors (Ansloos & Peltier, 2021).

Since the early 1990s, this stubborn trend has continued, and “rates of Indigenous youth suicide have remained relatively unchanged, and in some cases, have increased” (Ansloos, 2018; Government of Canada, 2017). Evidenced by this persistent lack of change to address suicide rates in Indigenous communities, our work aims to respond to the calls from Indigenous scholars to “shake up and enliven” suicide research (Ansloos & Peltier, 2021) using culturally grounded and decolonial methodologies (Ansloos, 2018) and to refocus suicide research away from universalized and decontextual approaches and in line with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission [TRC] of Canada’s Calls to Action to respond to suicide in relation to the forms of historic and ongoing colonial violence and cultural genocide. These include the call to “identify and close the gaps in health outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities”—including the gap in suicide rates (Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), 2015, Call # 19), and the call for “all levels of government to provide annual reports or any current data requested by the National Council for Reconciliation”—including data on suicide (*ibid.*, 2015, Call # 55).

The challenges suicide presents to Indigenous communities are contextual realities born of the colonial imposition of systems and epistemologies that erased and actively sought to destroy Indigenous systems and epistemologies. That is, they were anti-life approaches that thwarted, disrupted, and disconnected ways of being that previously created not only livable and meaningful worlds for Indigenous peoples, but also formed strong people physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually while creating collectivist forms of community and environmental care. Considering this, we suggest the same neoliberal thinking and systems that have thwarted these ways of being by insinuating market logic into every social relationship, are ill-equipped to address the challenge of suicide by continuing to use these same epistemologies.

Giroux and Giroux (2014) call neoliberalism “one of the most pervasive and dangerous ideologies of the twenty-first century” (p. 22). Following this remark, we understand neoliberalism to be an order and vision of the world wherein all aspects of social, cultural, and economic life are shaped by “market rationality,” whereby all social, economic, and political decisions are evaluated by what is deemed valuable or desirable by “the market” (ibid., p. 416, Esposito & Perez, 2014). As Giroux and Giroux (2014) explain, “under neoliberalism, everything is either for sale or plundered for profit” (ibid., p. 22). In neoliberal societies, “human agency is understood as a matter of individualized choices and private pursuits,” rather than something shaped by a web of social or structural relations (ibid., p. 420, Esposito & Perez, 2014).

We contest the ways suicide research in Indigenous communities in Canada remains awash in neoliberal theories of justice and personhood, despite clear evidence over four decades of the persistent inadequacy of psychological epistemologies that individualize and pathologize Indigenous suicide. As interdisciplinary, Indigenous and Settler scholars, we are aware of the present realities of colonialism within Canadian health systems. If suicide research continues to replicate neoliberal assumptions, it only furthers the forms of erasure that contribute to the very problem the field of suicide research purports to combat—the premature and unjust death of Indigenous peoples, cultures, languages, epistemologies, knowledges, and ecosystems. Through history and critique of dominant neoliberal theories in health systems, we seek to make explicit the ways neoliberal assumptions are not neutral but have shaped oppressive systems that bolster the colonial state in its’ debilitating necropolitics through racialized surveillance, carcerality, and the ecocide of Indigenous lands.

Aligned with critical suicidology’s concern to “explicated theories of justice within suicide research and practice” that can center Indigenous epistemologies to help enhance ethical responses to suicide (Ansloos, 2018; Ansloos & Peltier, 2021, p. 102; Button & Marsh, 2020), we further draw on insights from Indigenous scholars regarding how suicide research might shift when it begins from Indigenous epistemologies of personhood and justice. We suggest suicide research that serves Indigenous communities must begin by understanding these robust,

relational, and interconnected facets of Indigenous thought and resist individualized, commodified, and anthropocentric neoliberal models of personhood and justice premised on Western binaries between the animate/inanimate world. We argue that when personhood is understood differently, so is healing or healing-justice, because it is premised on sustaining more-than-human life (Million, 2021). Centering Indigenous epistemologies offers rich insights for suicide research on how to promote life, not only for Indigenous people, but for all living beings through communal forms of reconnecting with what was disconnected by colonization: balance, harmony, and justice.

## Unsettling Settler-Colonial Suicidology

Indigenous suicide research is rarely served by decontextualized health research because Western mental health systems have long been complicit in furthering the colonial violence and capitalistic aims of its creators (Nelson, 2017). Put another way, mainstream suicide research is thoroughly entrenched within what Cardon (2022) calls “settler suicidology,” (p. 69) a critical framework that interrogates the impact of colonialism, neoliberal capitalism, and white supremacy on the experiences of suicide among Indigenous peoples. It recognizes suicide as a social phenomenon that cannot be understood outside of its historical and political contexts of dispossession, genocide, and ongoing settler-colonial violence. For example, in early psychiatric and psychological thought, under the auspice of supposedly objective, psychiatric nosology, cultural bound syndromes of *pibloktoq*, or “Arctic hysteria,” were used to depict northern Indigenous peoples as having a “primitive mind.” Similarly, slave-owning psychiatrists used the elevated prevalence of psychosis of Black people as a reason to justify their continued stay in the cotton fields (Kanani, 2011). Under an ostensible biomedicine—focused on biological determinism, reductionism, individualism, and unproven ideas about objectivity—attending psychiatrists consolidated the power of mental health professionals, while demarcating acceptable lines of deviance from Western, colonial norms, attitudes, and behaviors (Morrow & Malcoe, 2017; Nelson, 2017).

Conceptualizing suicide as a behavioral deviance from standards of Western normalcy has likely reinforced Western standards of so-called “normalcy” and foreclosed on opportunities to consider what suicide might suggest about Indigenous ways of being human in relation to the whole of the living world—eclipsing the disconnection from these lifeways caused by the imposition of Western ways of being. Indeed, the framing of suicide within many Indigenous communities, largely understood as a religious or moral act, may stem from Judeo-Christian influences characterizing suicide as a sin against self, community, and God. This influence may make suicide less likely to be viewed politically as a protest or response to exploitation and capitalist consumption, such as, for example, in the Foxconn suicides in mainland China (Hua, 2018). Consider also the *Romana Mors* in Ancient Rome, whereby self- “honor” killings followed from a civic duty among aristocrats to keep political ambitions in check or conversely, in subsequent centuries, Judeo-Christian institutions ex-communicated suicidal persons for transgressing against God (Marsh, 2010). Then, the medicalization of suicide became increasingly prominent, ascending through the early nineteenth century (e.g., Jean-Etienne Esquirol’s medical writings of suicide; Esquirol, 1805, 1821), and culminating in what Marsh (2010) calls a “compulsive ontology of pathology.”

## Individualizing Suicide

In contemporary suicidology similar logics persist. For example, Joiner’s (2005) interpersonal theory continues this orientation, postulating three intrapsychic factors for suicide: thwarted belongingness, perceived burdensomeness, and capability (Hjemeland & Loa Knizek, 2020). Based predominantly on Joiner’s theory, mainstream responses continue to decontextualize suicide, and demarcate responsibility, blame, and etiology within suicidal subjects themselves (Anderson, 2021; Krieger, 2011; Marsh, 2020; Morrow & Malcoe, 2017; Ports et al., 2017; Pyysiäinen et al., 2017; White et al., 2015). With suicidality chiefly reframed within the individual’s “interiority,” correlates of suicidal acts, like socioeconomic disadvantages, self-harm, and exposure to violence

in inpatient hospital stays remained largely omitted in contemporary psychocentric discourses or public health records (Marsh, 2010; Parle, 2018). Importantly, this atomization of the suicidal subject and the mental health subject rose in parallel to neoliberalism. During the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan were inaugurated into the highest political offices in the US and UK and adopted Milton Friedman's doctrine of staunch individualism, self-reliance, and free market capitalism—which became the guiding moral, political, and economic imperative of Western societies (Becker et al., 2021).

## The Impact of Neoliberalism on Suicidology

The emergence of neoliberal discourses has profoundly impacted how social problems are conceptualized, diagnosed, and attributed. Neoliberalism's preoccupation with the autonomous individual has given rise to the "psychologist's fallacy," whereby the larger social context is ignored in favor of a narrow individualism. As a result, the assignment of causality and blame in the analysis of social issues has been largely reduced to personal responsibility (Chandler & LaLonde, 2019; Cushman, 1990). It provided an organizing framework for the National Institute of Mental Health's (NIMH's) Kraepelinian decade of the brain (in the 1990s), which sought to explain psychopathology through faulty neural networks and chemical imbalances (Kinderman, 2014). Then, in accordance with neoliberal market logic, individualized mental health solutions rose as the dominant and preferred means of intervention such as cognitive behavioral therapy and Prozac (Brown et al., 2022; Esposito & Perez, 2014; Ingram, 2018). During this time, pharmacological psychiatry interests and profits grew proportionately with their rates of conflicts of interest and publication bias (Kinderman, 2014; Sanjay & Charney, 2009). This created health systems that commodified the mechanisms of distress, and emphasized sufferers' short-term symptom management and self-care, with the main goal being a return to the marketplace (Esposito & Perez, 2014; Ingram, 2018).

Meanwhile, hallmark features of neoliberal societies: competitiveness, individual prowess, and market deregulation converged with rising



psychopathology—including a 1000-fold increase in depressive disorders in the twentieth century (Healy, 2002), alongside increasing discrimination, victimization, loneliness, community distrust, aggression, violence, and economic inequality (Becker et al., 2021; Esposito & Perez, 2014; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). The rise in psychopathology also occurred during rapid social welfare cutbacks, harsh management practices, and fiscal restraint, which made dignified living difficult, especially for racialized people (Brown et al., 2022; Mills, 2018). This is not life as usual, but rather a significant shift that Anderson (2021) calls structural violence, which created “avoidable impairment through the deprivation of basic human needs and creation of conditions that maintain feelings of worthlessness, disconnection, hopelessness, and depression.” Scholars link feelings of disposability and suicidality through the affective economies of anxiety, shame, and stigma, and internalization of neoliberal dictates about productivity and ideas of welfare entitlements as “economic burden” (Esposito & Perez, 2014; Mills, 2018; Nelson & Wilson, 2017; Pyysiäinen et al., 2017; White, 2017). In this respect, psychocentric framings of mental illness and suicide not only fail to consider but are complicit in the normalization of social contexts of stigma, immiseration, exclusion, and hate (Button, 2016; Marsh, 2010; Ingram, 2018; Reynolds, 2016); and we might add, remain complicit in land dispossession and economic models premised on Indigenous exclusion and ecocide.

Despite harms, these psychocentric, individualized perspectives are widespread and enduring. The World Health Organization’s Mental Health Gap Action Program continues to espouse the belief that mental distress exists primarily within individuals (Timimi, 2012). Though various policy documents cite the importance of community-based or community-led solutions in suicide prevention, mechanisms of change often remain framed at the individual level (Anderson, 2021; Button, 2016; Chandler & LaLonde, 2019). In other instances, such as suicide prevention research in Nunavut, even when colonialism and intergenerational trauma are understood as root causes, mainstream interventions continue to emphasize suicide and psychiatric disorder, suicide intervention training, and engagement in mental health services (Kral, 2012). This is not dissimilar to the NIMH in the 1990s attributing Native

American suicides to high co-morbidities of depressive disorders, and “reckless and violent behaviors” (Fearnley, 2008). These framings continually overshadow other means that demonstrably reduce Indigenous suicides, like community self-governance, and the ways this is hindered by funders and the Canadian state routinely failing to relinquish control (Anderson, 2021; Dudgeon et al., 2020).

Consequently, mainstream suicide interventions, like gatekeeper interventions, mean restrictions consistently fail to reduce suicidal behaviors, despite millions of dollars invested into national, provincial, and territorial strategies and into the pockets of esteemed medical professionals (Chandler & LaLonde, 2019; Chu et al., 2015; Isaac et al., 2009; Kirmayer & Valaskakis, 2009; Marsh, 2020; Pollock et al., 2018; Torok et al., 2019; Yonemoto et al., 2019). Further, mainstream approaches fail to “address the particularities of Indigenous suicide” (Anderson, 2021). In this respect, mental health systems and mainstream suicide prevention approaches are a form of biopower. Foucault uses this term to describe how states regulate and control individual and collective bodies through violence, fostering life or disallowing it to the “point of death” (Foucault, 1990, p. 138). Here, biopower operates when those who deviate from the normative expectations of dominant social classes are punished through means like state negligence (Taylor, 2014). Recognizing that coffers for mainstream suicide prevention continue to flow freely, biopower in mainstream suicide prevention benefits economic elites to the detriment, exploitation, exclusion, and domination of the vulnerable (Anderson, 2021; Davies, 2014; Esposito & Perez, 2014).

## **Epistemic, Colonial, and Structural Violence**

Rooting psychopathology and suicide within a vacuous, biomedical, and neoliberal market logic reinforces epistemic, colonial, and structural violence (France et al., 2007; Held, 2019). Contrasting and de-centering Indigenous cultural methods against, individualistic, Westernized scientific approaches (emphasizing universality, measurement, standardization, and replicability) often leads to downward comparisons of “rigor” and “anecdotalness,” and the continued importation of

Western colonial projects onto other peoples (Ansloos, 2018; Kral & Idlout, 2016; Nelson & Wilson, 2017). Attempting to provide “culturally appropriate support” within pre-existing (i.e., largely Westernized) mental health services that are entrenched in colonial frameworks, assumptions, and attitudes perpetuates collective trauma, and systemic racism (Anderson, 2021, p. 25; Ansloos, 2018; Atkinson, 2014; Dudgeon et al., 2020). Further, imposing universalist, “evidence-based” approaches, like psychotherapy, fails to demonstrate an affinity with Indigenous paradigms or consider how intersections of identity, environment, and social location influence the presence and heterogeneity of Indigenous suicide (Ansloos, 2018; Barker et al., 2017; Kral, 2012).

To remedy this issue, approaches based on Indigenous knowledge systems, methodologies, cultural healing practices, and reconnection to Indigenous knowledge keepers, elders, kinship ties, and families are desperately needed (Ansloos, 2018). Such “rethinking of Indigenous suicide” must be based on Indigenous conceptions of self-hood, which, contrary to the dictates of a depoliticized, atomized, ahistorical, neoliberal suicidology is, among other things, collective, relational, multifaceted, and connected to past, present, and future (Ansloos, 2018; Burkhart, 2019, p. xxvi; Kirmayer et al., 2000).

## Ethical Implications of Settler-Colonial Suicidology

Mainstream universalizing theories of suicide often fail to acknowledge that their assumptions and epistemologies come from particular places, peoples, and histories. This failure to acknowledge the Western experience and interplay between religious, legal, and medical understandings of suicide, and what counts as health and personhood, reinforces collective trauma, systemic racism, and structural violence against diverse Indigenous peoples, epistemologies, experiences, and knowledges.

The uses of risk assessment and surveillance, which are commonly employed in mainstream suicide prevention are ethically fraught political choices. They can lead to stigmatization, discrimination, and isolation, and can contribute to increased surveillance and control over already

marginalized communities, particularly those who are racialized, poor, or Indigenous (White & Morris, 2019). This type of surveillance can become an extension of colonialism, systemic violence, and ongoing oppression of Indigenous peoples. It is imperative to consider the impact of surveillance on the lives of those identified as at risk of suicide to ensure it does not contribute to this further marginalization. Relatedly, there is often a heavy reliance on policing and carceral responses to suicidality and suicide, including involuntary hospitalization, the use of restraints, and loss of privacy (Oaten et al., 2022). These practices are often implemented without considering the unique cultural and historical contexts of Indigenous peoples and without input from Indigenous knowledge keepers and communities. Often Indigenous communities experience these interventions as (re)traumatizing and violent, given their replication of unequal power dynamics of the colonial nation-state.

Contemporary suicidology approaches also pathologize people due to the characterization of suicide as a mental illness, rather than as a response to poverty, discrimination, and colonization. Pathologization can lead to interventions that focus solely on individual factors, like medication and psychotherapy, rather than addressing the root causes of suicide (Mills, 2015). Furthermore, pathologization can be seen as an extension of colonialism, perpetuating the notion that Indigenous peoples are deficient and in need of correction through medical intervention (Ansloos, 2018). This reinforces narratives of Indigenous peoples as "sick" or "dysfunctional," used to justify the imposition of carceral logics and practices that traumatize, kill, and subdue Indigenous people and perpetuate systemic violence.

Settler-colonial suicidology fails to acknowledge the concept of collective responsibility for suicide. These theories commonly attribute suicide to individual factors like mental illness, personality traits, or social isolation, without addressing systemic causes and structural drivers of suicide. This neglects the impact of historical trauma, cultural genocide, forced assimilation, and land dispossession on Indigenous communities, and fails to recognize the role of colonialism, capitalism, neoliberalism, and globalization in perpetuating structural violence and creating conditions of despair, hopelessness, and disconnection (Ansloos, 2018; Ansloos & Peltier, 2022).

Neoliberal understandings of personhood equate to being a good consumer and producer; worth is measured by economic contribution to society. Neoliberal market logics prioritizing competitiveness and individual prowess are closely linked to disposability. Deviating from normative expectations of dominant social classes equates to burdening society. This connection to disposability is particularly evident in the case of Indigenous peoples, where colonialism and capitalism historically relegated Indigenous peoples to the social margins. Indigenous death, including suicide, is readily attributed to “failure” to assimilate into colonial society, and therefore, Indigenous lives are made disposable by the state (Gray, 2016). Mainstream theories of suicide perpetuate neoliberal market logics, framing suicide within individualistic, Westernized scientific approaches. This reinforces structural violence, perpetuates the disposability of Indigenous lives, and underpins the idea that Indigenous peoples are responsible for their own deaths.

It is crucial that the contemporary settler-colonial nation-state considers the ethical implications of its epistemic hubris in under-utilizing Indigenous understandings of collectivist health and personhood, and over-utilizing practices of surveillance, risk, and pathology in suicide prevention. We argue this is not just a failure, but violence (Dueck & Reimer, 2009). Mainstream suicidology must contend with ethical issues of epistemic violence each time it refuses to engage these issues from Indigenous epistemic grounds. It is literally a matter of life and death that suicide prevention recognizes the interconnectedness of historical trauma, colonialism, neoliberalism, and capitalism, as systemic drivers of suicide in Indigenous communities.

## **Critical Suicide Studies as an Unsettling Epistemic Intervention**

Critical suicidology offers a response to the ethical challenges posed by theories of suicide propagated in the settler-colonial nation-state. It seeks to challenge these dominant biomedical models of suicide by offering alternative perspectives that consider the broader social, cultural, and political contexts in which suicide occurs (White, 2017)—whether

poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia, or other forms of social inequality. This allows for more nuanced understandings of suicide as a social problem that requires collective action, rather than individual pathology best addressed through diagnosis and treatment (White et al., 2015).

Importantly, critical suicidology centers the lived experiences of people who have attempted or contemplated suicide (Chandler et al., 2022; White, 2017). By recognizing the diversity of experiences of people who attempt suicide, including their subjective experiences of distress and pain, critical suicidology can provide a more holistic understanding of suicide that considers the social and cultural factors that shape these experiences (Bantjes & Swartz, 2017).

Moreover, critical suicidology recognizes suicide as a complex phenomenon that cannot be reduced to a medical diagnosis or treated solely through biomedical interventions. This is particularly relevant in the settler-colonial nation-state, where mainstream suicide prevention efforts often rely on policing and carceral responses to suicidality which can be experienced as traumatic, violent, and retraumatizing by Indigenous individuals, families, and communities (Ansloos & Peltier, 2022).

Overall, critical suicidology offers an ethical framework for suicide prevention efforts that promote social justice and collective action to address complex factors that contribute to suicide in settler-colonial states (Ansloos, 2018; Ansloos & Peltier, 2022; Button & Marsh, 2019). By centering the experiences of those who have attempted or contemplated suicide and contextualizing suicide within its social, cultural, and political contexts, critical suicidology offers a more holistic approach to suicide prevention that recognizes the importance of cultural safety and the role of Indigenous peoples in defining and leading prevention efforts.

Critical suicidology has called for suicide studies to be informed by Indigenous studies and knowledges to challenge dominant biomedical models of suicide and to center the experiences and perspectives of Indigenous peoples (Kral, 2015). This unsettling challenge involves recognizing unique historical, cultural, and political contexts in which Indigenous peoples experience suicidality and suicide, and foregrounds Indigenous ways of knowing and healing in addressing these issues. By unsettling the dominant biomedical model of suicide and centering

Indigenous perspectives, critical suicidology can offer new ways of understanding and responding to suicide in the settler-colonial context.

## Indigenous Resurgence: Toward Socioecological and Relational Theories of Justice

Given the Western health system's long history of complicity in structures of capitalism and colonialism, attempts to "unsettle" suicide research must grapple with neoliberalism's commodification of life being reinforced by "the pervasive fear and insecurity of the public," and the ways public imagination toward alternative futures has also been "seized" by market logics (Giroux & Giroux, 2014, p. 25). This neoliberal milieu has *pre-determined* how humans relate to one another and the planet on the basis of production and consumption for profit. Indigenous resurgence movements are calling for *self-determination* premised on revitalizing and reclaiming new, and old ways of relating, knowing, and being.

Million asserts that "[Indigenous] Resurgence is about appreciating and acting on our own epistemological differences that make different futures possible" (2021, p. 396). Research that benefits Indigenous communities is research that aids in furthering these collective goals of self-determination (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2012, p. 120). Indigenous suicide research that affirms Indigenous determination about how to relate to the world, will be based on understandings of health and justice that flow from this epistemological grounding. To make different futures possible—futures without suicide—requires de-centering neoliberal definitions, binaries, assumptions, and carceral logics. In centering Indigenous epistemologies and experiences, neoliberal and carceral logics are implicated in the structures of violence that need healing. When we understand Indigenous suicide as the result of systems and patterns of relating, suicide prevention becomes a collective response-ability moving us into alternative ways of being in relationship toward justice-doing relations.

Indigenous resurgence thought holds several important directives for suicide research. By centering Indigenous understandings of personhood, relationality, and justice while also resisting epistemological binaries that neoliberalism rests upon, it expands suicide research beyond its anthropocentric framing into more expansive understandings of life promotion. Indigenous feminisms and queer methodologies in resurgence thought particularly help to overcome Western epistemological binaries in three ways. First, by making evident the violence present in “western gendered and sexualised hierarchies” in families, communities, and everyday relations (Million, 2021, p. 402). As Whitehead writes, “to relieve my body of its disposability.... I try to deploy my gender, sexuality, and sex as ceremonious states of being — something I was taught by my epistemologies — so as to be cradled like a spirit plate, an offering of small portions for ephemeral hungers” (2022, p. 43). Resurgence thought makes clear that it is the violence in these social relationships that is part of what “severs and kills the relations that make it possible to be cohesive peoples who act from our own sacred relations, the practices that produce life for ourselves and all the entities that we are reciprocally responsible to” (Million, 2021, p. 402).

Second, by contesting the distinct and siloed nature of disciplines like health, religion, law, gender studies, and others, Indigenous studies increasingly take a transdisciplinary approach to suggest that disciplines are not so easily separated, and that divisions between health, ecology, spirituality, and law only further reflect binaries in Western thought that propagate epistemological violence in suicide research. Third, among these dualisms, Tallbear’s work points to two—while asserting they are false dichotomies that must be repaired. For Tallbear, “binary concepts of life versus death and human versus nonhuman ... shape not only assumptions about Indigenous bodies but also relations between scientists [and we might add, health researchers] and Indigenous peoples, even in an age of more just ethical practices” (2017, p. 180). She suggests these binaries form an “animacy hierarchy” wherein categorical divides between “animate and de-animate” and “life versus death” are used to actualize “the greater and lesser aliveness attributed to some humans over others, and to humans over nonhumans” (2017, p. 180).



This delineates the need for suicide research to question epistemological grounds which afford some beings greater aliveness than others. It is directive in orienting how animacy hierarchies link the realities of both suicide and ecocide. The epistemic grounds of systems affording less aliveness to Indigenous peoples are the same grounds that afford less aliveness to the earth and all beings. When Indigenous suicide research is decontextualized, it erases the ways that Indigenous suicide is always already occurring in contexts of ecocide whose cause is connected to these same epistemological binaries causing domination and death. Tallbear's call for repair is remedied in recalling Indigenous knowledges about "the interrelatedness of all things" that can benefit the Western world while "confounding [its] animacy hierarchy" (Tallbear, 2017, p. 180). Suicide research that seeks a different future, reoriented from complicity and participation in systems of death-wielding violence, must begin from understandings of relationality and interdependence. Similarly, Moreton-Robinson contests the anthropocentric framing of the human person, when she invokes the concept "relativity" to explain that every being has relationships with every other being and that this "total set of relationships makes up the natural world as we experience it." This awareness of one's interrelationality is "born of knowledge that the earth is conscious and alive"—a perspective that is simply "incommensurate with Western ideas that to be human requires possessive and extractive relations with an inert earth" (Moreton-Robinson, 2021, p. 259).

Colonialism's incommensurability with Indigenous thought can be seen clearly in the ways psychology has singularly responded to individual concerns that anthropocentrically examine human health as separate from the health of all living things. Suicide research often aims interventions at individuals. Million suggests calling these harms "trauma" is simplistic and wrong; treating individuals but leaving structures alone "assumes that a moment or event rather than social and physical relations are what kills" (2021, p. 402). The idea that mental distress exists primarily within individuals, falls further short considering Million's felt theory (2014), which affirms knowledges communicated by Indigenous peoples explaining their own lived experiences. Felt theories often point to distress as affected by complex social systems; a matter of one's relatedness with the whole of the living world. Suicide prevention, like

“Indigenous demands for self-determination [should also] seek to protect all the relations that we depend on” (Million, 2021, p. 396).

## Becoming Mino-Pimatisiwin

Indigenous critiques of binary-anthropocentric Western epistemologies do not reveal the depth of Indigenous understandings of personhood or justice. Nehiyaw scholar, Hart suggests, “many Aboriginal people believe... humans are good by nature,” and that since there are “negative forces in the universe seek[ing] to lead people away from their path and purpose in life, people have to strive to maintain this goodness and to develop themselves positively towards *mino-Pimatisiwin* [living the good life]” (2001, p. 47). This reflects the understanding that in seeking one’s purpose, one is “in a state of *being-in-becoming*,” a process of finding one’s “true nature” by nurturing and “accepting the goodness in all life around them” (ibid., 2001, p. 47). The formation of a healthy self *becomes* in relationship to the whole living world.

Similarly, Dudgeon draws from participatory action research with Indigenous peoples in Australia to suggest the “construct of mental health,” is rooted in a Western knowledge system, and dismantling these systems “includes revitalising Indigenous cultures and worldviews [which...] understand that the flourishing of life, or well-being of individuals, families, and communities, includes the flourishing of culture, land, and spirituality.” Dudgeon elaborates on this expansive sense of self as connected to seven inter-related domains of well-being: “(1) body, (2) mind and emotions, (3) family and kinship, (4) community, (5) culture, (6) land and country, and (7) ancestors and spirituality” (2021, p. 100). “Unsettling” suicide research is to account for the creation of health through one’s relationality to the whole living world. A lack of health might mean the absence of certain life-promoting relations that are severed or disrupted, not necessarily by any fault or control of the individual.

These practical epistemological differences enfold understandings of the human person into communal, collective, spiritual, cultural, and land-based relations (Burkhart, 2019, p. xiv), in effect, reorienting

suicide prevention from individual response to communal, environmental, social, and cultural healing. The healing and reconnecting of these relations in balance is what creates justice. The separation of “mental health” from the material conditions and social realities that all beings live within, is fundamentally a matter of justice.

Nishnaabeg scholar, Simpson, centers communal and cultural healing through everyday relations and suggests Indigenous epistemologies grow a particular kind of community: “a society of presence.” Meaning, “societies of doing,” that are “constantly engaged in the act of creating: making clothes, food, shelter, stories, games, modes of transportation, instruments, songs, and dances” (2011, p. 92). For Simpson, Indigenous societies constantly create and re-create meaning, collectively—a sharp contrast to a consumerist modern culture based on “absence and wanting,” and individuals fulfilling that wanting by “primarily *look[ing]* for meaning in books” (p. 93). Million helpfully builds on Simpson’s articulation, showing the ways consumerist cultures look for meaning in consuming within contexts already connected to and produced by capitalist and colonial epistemologies and structures (Million, 2021). Indigenous activist, Erica Violet Lee, further reminds us that this consuming is not a neutral project, but rather, the very thing creating “wastelands” that Indigenous people are struggling to re-create life within. For Lee, “Wastelands are named wastelands by the ones responsible for their devastation. Once they have devastated the earth — consumed all they believed to be valuable, the rest is discarded” (Million, 2016). The result is both an ecologically toxic material reality and an unbalanced and unjust social reality. Suicide and ecocide, as the premature loss of life, are the product of neoliberal meaning-making. For Million, neoliberal approaches are backed by a state agenda that ignores the natural rhythms of life, wherein:

The ‘Indian problem’ is defined by normative desires of the state: the desire for developing undeveloped land, the desire for water where aquifers are rare, the desire to reduce the diversity of the land to monocultural crops.... The dominant public of the nation-state construes such ‘grand schemes of development’ as the apex of life, in juxtaposition with the debased existence of the Indigene. (2021, p. 401)

Health research that operates within the “normative desires” of the state without awareness of its positionality (its’ internalized normalcy of neoliberal imagination) is unable to acknowledge that this clear assault on all life—is not normal at all—but rather, an extreme racial-capitalist violence fuelling planetary ecocide. “Unsettling” suicide research is to unsettle this perceived standard of normality, and the ways it operates to “forever elude the Indigenous” (Million, 2021, p. 401).

Considering this, a modest proposal for suicide research is to begin from Indigenous experience: measure “normalcy” by that which sustains *all* of life—human and more-than-human—on this shared planet. This approach weaves together insights from Million, Simpson, Lee, and others with the Indigenous feminist methodology of Tallbear, to suggest that suicide research “resist the continual anthropological urge to study Indigenous people” in disembodied, immaterial, and individualized ways, and instead, “return the gaze” by studying these systems (Tallbear, 2014, p. 4), and how their “grand schemes of development as the apex of life” are actually an apex of death (Million, 2021, p. 401). Suicide research that resists studying those struggling to live in wastelands could instead study the delusional system endlessly recreating these conditions. It could invest in preventative measures aimed at supporting communities in their fight to prevent wastelands and the myriad ways colonial structures and relations thwart and interfere in the basic patterns of communally creating life, creating “societies of presence” with the whole living world.

Importantly, we are not suggesting suicide research stop listening to individuals or those sharing from their affective experiences the ways the dominant public normalcy of the settler-state is unliveable. Rather, individuals need to cease being pathologized as abnormal amidst so-called “normality.” Their experiences are instructive to health research and to how health systems might become generative and supportive to those who “tend to the devastation with destabilizing gentleness, carefulness, and softness” (Lee, 2016).

## Justice as Death Reduction or Life Promotion?

Centering Indigenous resurgence in suicide research opens more expansive forms of suicide prevention because it opens more possibilities about how to participate in the re-creation of all life. As Million reminds us, “It is not that Indigenous people don’t know what is needed for ‘health,’ for life — it is that Indigenous people know what is life-producing beyond any individual’s well-being” (Million, 2021, p. 397).

Contextualized suicide research will grapple with the complex ways “Indigenous peoples suffer harms that stem from the killing and abstraction of their embodied, affective existences and spiritual, life-giving relations to both humans and non-humans” (Million, 2021, p. 402). It will move from asking “what causes death for an individual,” to asking, “what makes or re-creates life for all beings?” It will set a new standard for what is normal beyond neoliberal definitions of individual happiness through profit, inviting our whole society to relate in ways that re-create the conditions of life for all people and all beings. It will also ask new questions that explore the ways that people and communities are being thwarted in their attempts to participate in this creation of life.

Importantly, resurgence thought continually urges that “We must practice the resurgence of our generative life-giving ways of life as radical Indigenous care in ways that refuse and exceed neoliberal regimes of health” (Million, 2021, p. 402). Suicide research should support the kinds of anti-capitalist care Millions suggests “builds the trust that creates communities: kinships between responsible, respectful, connected, purposeful Beings.” In this way, Indigenous liveability asks that “we must take care to build the relations that Indigeneity requires” (2021, p. 402).

Justice in suicide research must be far more expansive than health predicated on the future absence of individual pathology by providing individual mental health services for all. Indigenous suicide research, like all health research, should “refuse and exceed” (Million, 2021, p. 402) this too narrow a definition of health, that begets too small a justice, too limited a scope regarding what needs healing. In “doing societies,” that “constantly create meaning,” justice is also something made; co-created into meaning. As Simpson suggests, “it requires help from the spiritual

world” (2011, p. 94), which is not (as another Western binary suggests) innately opposed to materiality, but as Delgado Shorter posits, might be best articulated as a kind of relationality (2016). That is, justice is not ready-made legal propositions, but something that relationally evolves and is co-created together and with the whole of the living world. Suicide research is justice-doing relationality that manifests in changed relational states between all people and the land.

Indigenous treaties, while far preceding the formation of the neoliberal Canadian state, are often read through a neoliberal lens emphasizing property ownership and wealth. Treaties however, with longstanding invitation to all people on these lands, outline ways of relating based on agreements of respect and responsibility that uphold the conditions that make life possible (Stark, 2010). Yet, amidst the “vacuum of diminished democracies” that neoliberalism has created, and among the many groups capitalizing on the growing insecurity this vacuum creates, the question of how to inspire this imagination toward justice-doing relations, remains vital for fields of psychology, religion, and others, especially if we are to prevent fear and insecurity from also being commodified for profit and power. If we are to resist the slide into “authoritarianism steep in religious zealotry, cultural chauvinism, xenophobia, and racism” (Giroux & Giroux, 2014, p. 25), we have to put our fear on trial, instead of one another, and find new and old ways to relate.

## Conclusion

The resurgence of Indigenous thought and experience is an imperative shift for suicide research. Centering Indigenous peoples, cultures, and experiences in suicide research, is to recognize the interconnectedness of human and more-than-human beings in the creation of life. This demands more comprehensive approaches that expand beyond the limited purview of individual pathology and clinical interventions. This expansive approach both critiques the binary-anthropocentric nature of Western epistemologies and highlights the depth and diversity of Indigenous understandings of personhood and justice. It recognizes that notions of health and well-being rooted in Western knowledge systems

are often at odds with Indigenous cultural practices and values. Suicide prevention is a communal, environmental, social, and cultural healing process, emphasizing the importance of balance and harmony in the interconnectedness of all life. Indigenous peoples have always understood the importance of community, and healing is never an individual process. As societies of presence, Indigenous cultures are continuously engaged in creating meaning collectively, rejecting the Western notion of consumerism and individual fulfillment. Capitalist society, borne of settler-colonial epistemologies and structures, has created wastelands, both ecologically and socially. Suicide and ecocide are the products of this delusional system that values profit over the creation of life.

Justice, in this context, is more than the absence of individual pathology or the provision of mental health services. Rather, it is a co-created relational process that evolves with the whole of the living world. The importance of Indigenous resurgence in suicide research cannot be understated. Centering Indigenous voices opens up new possibilities for suicide prevention that go beyond Western clinical interventions and individualistic well-being. As we engage the intricate ways Indigenous peoples experience harm arising from the destruction of their embodied existences and their life-sustaining relationships with both humans and non-humans, suicide research becomes a healing process that seeks to restore balance and harmony in the interconnectedness of all life, encompassing communal, environmental, social, and cultural dimensions.

To unsettle suicide research is to unsettle the perceived standard of normality and the ways it excludes Indigenous peoples. Suicide research should begin from Indigenous experience, measuring normalcy by that which sustains all of life. This approach is a call to action to invest in preventative measures aimed at supporting communities in their fight to prevent the creation of wastelands and the myriad ways that colonial relations still thwart and interfere in basic patterns of communally creating life. By doing so, we can co-create a more just and equitable society that values the interconnectedness of all life and recognizes the importance of Indigenous knowledge, experience, and culture in shaping a healthier, more vibrant future for all.

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# 7

## Is the Individual an Enlightened Westerner? Some Skeptical Remarks on Eurocentric Notions of Self and the Development of Individualism

Pradeep Chakkarath

Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another. Sapere aude! "Have courage to use your own mind!" – that is the motto of enlightenment.

Immanuel Kant, *What is Enlightenment?* (1784/1983)

### Introduction

In the following, I will take a skeptical and rather essayistic look at some prevalent social scientific and psychological assumptions about the concept of the *individual* and related theories about the origins

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and development of *individualism*. This skepticism is directed at well-established assumptions that are virtually fundamental to modern social sciences and that are expressed in various reflections on the role of phenomena and questions that have been central to sociological and psychological analyses at least since the era of the European Enlightenment. These include, for example, *society, groups, culture, norms and values, power, oppression, violence, equality and inequality, gender, difference, institutions, systems, social structure, relationships, action, social interaction, identity, individual, self, person, subject, autonomy, liberty, morality, individualism, collectivism*, development and processes of *social change* such as *individualization, rationalization, secularization, modernization, and globalization*. This list is not comprehensive, of course, but it includes many of the concepts and themes that are addressed and interrelated in numerous influential social science theories.

Although some of the key concepts listed above, such as *individual, self, person*, and *individualism* versus *collectivism*, amidst a multitude of other concepts, may seem like arbitrary elements of social science and psychological theories, concepts such as the individual, the self, the person or the subject play consequential roles as starting points for theories of morality, power and oppression, recognition, justice, traditionalism, progress, individualism and collectivism, modernization, globalization, and so on. This holds especially true since it has become a topos, even a pattern of thought, of Western philosophical and social scientific thinking that the discovery of individuality, similar to the discovery of true religion, true reason, human dignity, human rights, even the discovery and civilization of the world, and thus human progress in general, were almost exclusively European achievements. This narrative was disseminated worldwide, particularly through European colonialism and imperialism. However, it often lacked irrefutable scientific argumentation, which is highly regarded in academic circles as the most respected means of achieving certainty. Instead, it was constructed through political power, economic pressure, and various forms of violence, including *epistemic violence* (Spivak, 1988). To the now hegemonic West and its social sciences, it no longer seemed necessary to study non-European traditions of thought, theories, and concepts, let alone the languages and socialization contexts in which the greater part of humanity thinks,



feels, and lives. In a supposedly Europeanized and Americanized world, according to a conviction held by many social scientists to this day, all that is needed are Western perspectives, embedded in Western theories and disseminated worldwide through the consolidated power of Western publishing houses (Coulson & Homewood, 2016).

In order to make my skepticism toward such Eurocentric theories more understandable, I will proceed in two steps: First, I will outline some salient features of thinking about individuality, and especially of theories of the development of individuality and individualism, as predominantly crafted in Western academia. Then I will attempt to explain the reasons for my skepticism about the adequacy by addressing some deficits concerning methodology, disciplinary perspectives, misconceptions about supposedly close relationships between different phenomena, and long-lasting ethnocentric biases.

Let me begin by stating that my reflections are informed by perspectives from indigenous psychology, which I regard as the principal postcolonial approach in international psychology. While many indigenous psychologists offer postcolonial critiques of Western psychology, there are differences in the analytical and theoretical use of the concept of “indigeneity.” Some authors aim to revive and promote psychological research and interventions that predate the systematic European influence on academic institutions and thinking. These researchers consider *any* socio-culturally developed tradition of psychological reflection and intervention an indigenous psychology—including the individualistic and nomothetic psychology that has developed primarily in Europe since the late nineteenth century. However, some psychologists focus on *adapting* indigenous concepts from pre-colonial traditions of thought to Western psychology, i.e., *indigenizing* mainstream psychology and thereby gradually improving its universal applicability. The first approach is relativistic, while the second is universalistic (examples of both orientations can be found in Kim et al., 2006). I believe that both endeavors can advance our scientific knowledge, but caution must be exercised in two ways. First, the value of an indigenous theory should not be assessed based on its compatibility with Western assumptions. This would not, in my view, regard Western psychology as *one among many* indigenous psychologies. Rather, it would serve mainstream psychology’s—in my

view indigenous—ambition to be the mother of all psychologies, i.e., the master version of “real” psychology. Second, we should not prematurely assume that *every* indigenous approach and concept is equally suitable for the scientific study of the human psyche and its historical development. Progress in human societies is due to our willingness to abandon certain views and rationales that have damaged our treatment of other people, the relationship between the sexes and the generations, our treatment of nature, and our willingness to take responsibility for future generations. This means, however, that we must also be prepared to relinquish convictions that are deemed indisputable in Western-influenced psychology and that we no longer question because we have long since succumbed to their discursive power. For the same reason, we often no longer want to remember, admit, and consider that many of these beliefs owe their spread and “success” not to any inherent rationality, but rather to colonialist policies of enforcement.

Against this background, I consider it indispensable to point out the dubiousness of some of the established Western narratives and to encourage an epistemologically required expansion of knowledge *in teaching and research* on the social scientific contributions of the non-Western world. Unfortunately, psychology still has limitations in terms of *literacy*, even at the beginning of the twenty-first century (Coulson & Homewood, 2016). Only when this has changed can questions such as the following be answered more adequately: Do modernization and progress truly have such a close connection with individualization, as commonly claimed? Are there alternative forms of modernization that are less associated with the disruption of our psychological sensitivities? Are individualism and collectivism really mutually exclusive, or do such concepts lead us to highlight differences instead of finding commonalities that may provide additional insight into the human psyche? Might the focus on presumed developmental trajectories of individualization and secularization obscure the continuing significant role of spirituality?

I hope that through a comprehensive analysis of the knowledge that *all* people have accumulated over time and under various conditions to cope with similar and different problems, we can identify the problematic and harmful impact that certain contemporary theories and thought patterns

that are operative in these theories have on our understanding of human beings and our visions of the future.

## Features of the Dominant Narrative

It may be considered well-known that the beginnings of modern social sciences as they were established at European universities in the nineteenth century were strongly concerned with telling the development of their own societies as an almost linear story of progress and success (Nisbet, 1994; Parsons, 1977). The impetus for this identity-forming narrative is closely linked to dramatic social upheavals, as experienced especially with the American Revolution of 1776 and the French Revolution of 1789. The reason why these revolutionary events are so closely associated with the entry of Western nations into their very own understanding of modernity is their role in the awakening of humanity from monarchist despotisms into increasingly democratic societies guided by the ideas of liberalism. Liberalism is shaped by various ideals with which we have been familiar for over 300 years, but it is essentially based on the idea of granting individual freedoms and individual rights to the greatest extent possible. Only from this can pluralism, a competition of different opinions, ideas, goals, and talents flourish, benefiting in economic terms a free market that profits inexhaustibly from the ideal and material products supplied by the release of the concentrated creativity of innumerable individual minds. The smallest unit of modern society is no longer the family, the clan or the group, not even the dyad, but the individual. Thus, the development of Western modernity, i.e., the increasing appreciation of liberal and pluralistic societies with democratic institutions and so-called free markets, can be told as a story of increasing individualization and self-cultivation and is actually understood and traced in this way in numerous influential studies, even though, scattered in the footnotes, you can find some warnings against overly sweeping generalizations (e.g., Elias, 1939/2000; Beck, 1993; Fukuyama, 1992; Giddens, 1991; Hofstede, 2001; Inglehart, 1997; Henrich, 2020).

Like any narrative, this story of progress and success has its prehistory and a few bumpy chapters that do not quite want to fit into the notion

of linear development toward perfection. The prehistory has its scenes usually in European antiquity and there especially in Greece. The intellectual development that set in with the so-called pre-Socratics since the sixth century BCE was considered groundbreaking for the development of European scientific thinking—it is basically seen as the first European Enlightenment. There are many characteristic features of this chapter in the history of thoughts to which Europe feels deeply connected, in parts even through its Christian-influenced medieval millennium and then especially since Renaissance and Humanism. In the context of the topics that particularly interest us here, it was, for example, the pronounced need to attribute the existence of the world and its parts no longer to the unpredictable whims of gods, but to primordial substances, biological and physical laws, in history to the actions of human beings and psychological factors underlying them. Thinkers, writers, and historians, such as Xenophanes, Protagoras, Thucydides, Lucretius, Epicurus, and Euhemerus, with their critique of religious ideas and their call to explain human affairs not in terms of fictitious deities but in terms of *human* factors, especially *human agency*, played a decisive role in shaping the first European model of a period of enlightenment. It was here that the suspicion first arose that enlightenment had to go hand in hand with a “disenchantment” of the world, which in the age of the European Enlightenment since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was associated above all with the concept of secularization.

From then on, the “logos” was the essential tool to ensure the discovery of the origin and development of the animate and inanimate world. The concept of “logos” assumed different meanings in the works of ancient thinkers. However, to summarize, the subsequent interpretations exerted significant influence for the next two millennia: Reason as divine intelligence and a creative and formative force; a principle driving historical development; an abstract natural law governing and ordering the universe; and logos as the vessel providing logic and thus enabling analytical thinking, the royal road to true knowledge; a specifically human trait, assessed and expressed primarily through language and dialogical exchange (cf. Gottlieb, 2016).

Already in these ancient conceptions of reason as a phenomenon which is effective on different levels, a tension emerged that persists in

modern perspectives on the relationship between individuals and their social environment. On the one hand, metaphysical reasoning is effective in structuring and orienting social, cultural, and historical reality. On the other hand, an individuals' reasoning endows them with tremendous cognitive power, enabling them to have an impact on society, culture, and history. This tension is apparent within and between theories. For example, it is a central tenet of Aristotle's *entelecheia* concept that every aspect of nature is imbued with a specific aim or end goal and strives to achieve its potential in the best way possible. A human individual, for example, does not choose to possess reason; it is innate for humans to have reasoning abilities that develop and mature from early childhood. Individuals can educate themselves, training and exercising their reasoning abilities. However, not all individuals will achieve equal levels of success in their pursuits, and thus not all will attain the level of eminence and uniqueness exemplified by renowned thinkers such as Plato or Aristotle.

The Greeks' skepticism of processes governed by natural law is also reflected in their concept of *paideia*, an educational approach aimed at cultivating desired personality traits in children and adolescents, such as political responsibility without being swayed by the potential for personal gain. The philosopher-kings in Plato's *Politeia* serve as prototypes for these hypothetical "selfless" politicians. Socrates' maieutic method for imparting knowledge may be founded on the assumption that reason exists inherently as a seed in each individual. However, his theory stresses the vital role of the teacher's didactic competencies instead of relying solely on a completely natural teleological process in the student. Thus, even Socrates' famous admonition to "know yourself" highlights the dependence of individual self-development on external support from rational others. Although ancient thinkers have articulated intricate theories regarding the relationship between individuals and their social environments, contemporary historical and social scientific discourse widely asserts that the concept of individuality, as understood today, was non-existent in ancient societies (Berlin, 2002). In this context, we refer to the significant role played by our ancient ancestors in shaping a rigid social hierarchy, accompanied by a markedly uneven distribution of power, and the desire for a well-established political system.

Fundamental patterns of thought from ancient theories, as well as their inherent tension, have been key components of intellectual thinking about the development of the world, things, and individuals since ancient Greece. Although the Middle Ages are commonly portrayed as a challenging period in the narrative of the development of European reason and individuality, medieval developmental theories also demonstrate the interaction between superhuman universal and human individual elements (Borst, 1992; Siedentop, 2015). The world and individual existence were often seen as being part of a larger divine plan. Although both linear and cyclical models of development existed in the Christian European Middle Ages, as well as in antiquity, most models maintained a teleological view in which achieving redemption or union with God was the ultimate aim of both historical events and individual existence. Early in the transition from antiquity to the Middle Ages, specifically in the early fifth century C.E., Augustine's highly influential exposition on the ultimate goal of the divine plan proposes that the ideal human existence is characterized by social belonging. On earth, this is found in the urban community (*civitas terrena*) established by mankind, while at the end of time, it is found in the spiritual community (*civitas dei*) prepared by God. The tension between a preordained history and individual agency remains evident in Augustine's perspective: Whether to belong to the human urban community or the divine spiritual community is a personal decision, but Augustine suggests a clear direction for this choice. Incidentally, Augustine found it easier than many of his contemporaries to accept the decline and fall of the Western Roman Empire due to his belief in the prospect of the *civitas dei*. For him, the ancient philosophers' claim that human reason could discover truth without divine grace was a presumptuous delusion, not an expression of *logos* or reason. Many centuries later, antiquity and its end were to be evaluated differently.

In the twelfth century, Francesco Petrarca divided history into two periods: the first is the classical period of the Greeks and Romans, while the second is a "dark age," which he believed he lived in. Petrarca regretted living during a time of much chaos and uncertainty but remained hopeful that this "sleep of forgetfulness" would dissipate and give way to a better age, in which the light of the golden age of antiquity

would shine again (cf. Mommsen, 1942). Then the artistic and literary creativity of antiquity flourished freely, manifesting in diverse individual forms, unimpeded by the inhibiting religiosity of Christian authorities. With his historical yet emotional classification of the centuries that ensued after the fall of the Roman Empire, Petrarch established the framework for the prevailing perception of the millennium we call the “Middle Ages.” This period is referred to as such due to its placement between the seemingly more glorious antiquity and the present era, which, as the conventional narrative goes, commenced with the Renaissance and Humanism (Le Goff, 2003; Siedentop, 2015). The distinction between the Renaissance and humanism and this undoubtedly fascinating epoch of the Middle Ages, discussed in countless studies, varies. There is no doubt that the major figures of Renaissance culture identified far more with Greek and Roman antiquity than with the “dark ages.” However, it would be an overgeneralization to claim that they all disliked the Middle Ages as much as Petrarch did. In “Divine Comedy,” Dante Alighieri impressively documents how central themes and positions in medieval theology and philosophy, especially scholastic elements, could be preserved, while simultaneously making the theme we associate with the Renaissance like no other the core of his “Comedia”: Individuality. During his personalized travelogue of the afterlife, he recounts his encounters with other individuals and how, at the end of days, each soul is judged according to its own *individual biography*, sins, and misdemeanors. The medieval notion of an all-encompassing divine plan gives way to an emphasis on individual conscience and moral self-responsibility. This shift highlights psychological themes such as self-doubt and inner struggles, which no longer prioritize the teleological progression of world history but instead focus on the processes within the troubled human psyche. This shift in perspective conveys the central idea of humanism, an intellectual movement that has been laying the groundwork for a new understanding of humanity since the fourteenth century. This new image of man served as the focal point for the works of Renaissance thinkers and artists. Values, ideals, treatises, works of art, and esthetics from antiquity were rediscovered. These were sometimes celebrated, sometimes reinterpreted. This devoted appropriation of lost knowledge and its adaptation to the contemporary world were viewed

as educational work, as work on oneself, and as work on the advancement of human creativity. The aim of this study is strongly articulated in Pico della Mirandola's "Oration on the Dignity of Man." He posits that humans possess the unique ability to exercise free will and self-determination, which grants them the power to shape their own destiny through their choices.

Whether the establishment of individualism as an ideal here is truly attributed to the triumph over the "Dark Ages," as Jacob Burckhardt (1860/1990) asserted with great influence, is now under serious question. Proven experts in the history of ideas, culture, and science (e.g., Cassirer, 1927; Kristeller, 1979; Dumont, 1983; Borst, 1992; Gurevich, 1995; Burke, 1987; Harrison, 2009; most recently above all Siedentop, 2015) have, to some extent, distanced themselves from Burckhardt. They have established that the concept of individuality gained momentum during the Middle Ages and that the development of the related notions from antiquity to the early modern period indicates more continuity than is commonly assumed (cf. Ruggiero, 2014). For all the discussions still being held around such questions, it is remarkable to note how the tension set up by the ancient thinkers between metaphysical, divine, or natural law factors on the one hand and human capacities to intervene on the other survived the Middle Ages, only to weaken considerably during the Renaissance. Social progress and a better future are no longer anticipated objectively but are expected to result from the unlocking of cognitive potentials of individuals. It is noteworthy that, apart from a few individuals such as Machiavelli, Renaissance scholars and artists were devout Christians. Nevertheless, they were able to establish an ideology of individuality that was robust even in the absence of the commonly cited process of *secularization*.

The Renaissance had a significant impact, not because of a complete departure from past ideologies, but rather due to the confluence of its intellectual ideals with advantageous political and economic circumstances. The Church not only failed to impede this progress but also played an active role in its development. These developments encompassed the establishment of an efficient banking system, the discovery of sea routes to the rest of the world, the concurrent dissemination of knowledge at a swift rate, facilitated especially by the invention



of modern printing, and the subsequent founding of libraries and academies. Finance fueled a flourishing of international trade and led to prosperity, which in turn supported education and science through contributions by wealthy benefactors and ruling elites.

The gradual separation from clerical control of beliefs and the associated reduction in the political authority of the church, commonly referred to as “secularization,” has undoubtedly contributed to varying perspectives, both in a larger society and in ecclesiastical discussions. Most importantly, it generated a significant psychological impetus, resulting in increased curiosity, enhanced self-confidence, and greater courage in the pursuit of new forms of artistic expression and scientific knowledge, as well as approaches and methods aimed at providing more certainty. The Scientific Revolution, fueled by curiosity and courage, was a transformative period led by remarkable individuals like Copernicus, Galilei, Kepler, Descartes, Vesalius, Newton, Boyle, Lavoisier, and many others. Their contributions facilitated the rise of natural sciences, which in turn led to the Age of Enlightenment and the industrial revolution.

Probably no period in European history is as pivotal to the continent’s self-awareness as the Enlightenment. Moreover, no other era is as idealized and mythologized in Europe’s narration of itself. While there are multiple justifications for this, I believe the social and cultural psychological impulses to differentiate oneself from others and cultivate a unique identity plays a significant and enduring role. The imperialist colonization of the world had strong political and economic motives, but its psychological aspects—the desire for uniqueness, cultural, ethnic, and ideological dominance—are equally crucial for understanding this era and its societies. The glorification of individuality, a key element of the Enlightenment’s liberation program, may have influenced individuals’ self-understanding, but actually resulted in a primarily collective or cultural individuality that distinguished European societies and their socio-cultural development from the rest of humanity.

Like all historical epochs, the Age of Enlightenment was a multifaceted and diverse era. Discussions of the work of Isaiah Berlin are exemplary for modern-day attempts to do historical and analytical justice to the Enlightenment. Berlin describes a contemporaneous movement of

counter-Enlightenment within this era (Berlin, 2000, 2013). Romanticism, for example, opposed the universalistic, nomothetic tendencies of the Enlightenment to standardize and homogenize both the natural and cultural worlds. Instead, romanticists called for an appreciation of the diversity of human experience and cultural expression. Both movements, according to Berlin, were characterized by a tendency to absolutize their views, revealing an ambivalence and even contradiction in the thinking of the time. Achieving optimal conditions for the free development of each individual becomes challenging when reconciling universalism and absolutism with genuine individualism. This brings us back to a debate that was already present in ancient thought, but barely recognizable in the Renaissance: the tension between lawful processes and the individuals' ability to intervene in them with their own cognitive capacities. On the part of the Enlightenment, this is exemplified in Hegel's dialectical conception of individuality. There, he stresses that the social context is crucial and individuality does not exist in isolation but rather is in constant interaction with other self-conscious persons. Beyond this, however, Hegel argues that history is propelled by a process, which he refers to as the "world-spirit" or "world-soul" (Hegel, 1807/2018). For the purposes of this historical principle, which cannot deny its similarity to ancient notions of teleological processes, individuals occasionally serve as tools. Individual agency in its most perfect form is thus not really possible, not even for the "great men" in history. Hegel's characterization of Napoleon as the "world-soul on horseback" reflects this notion tellingly.

Interestingly, around the same time, Immanuel Kant envisioned a more profound and all-embracing emancipation of the individual. One cannot help but think that Kant's famous definition of enlightenment as freeing human beings from their self-imposed immaturity aimed to release them from the constraints imposed by institutions and authorities. Kant believed that enlightenment involves shedding self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity manifests when one cannot use one's own understanding without help from someone else. This immaturity is self-imposed when it arises not from a place of ignorance but from a lack of strength and courage to act without direction from others (Kant, 1784). In this conceptualization, personal liberation is achieved without

reliance on Socratic guidance, divine predestination, or support from wealthy patrons in Florence or Venice. Essentially, here, the European narrative could have its happy ending, with Europeans and other enlightened Westerners enjoying *perfect* freedom. However, the Enlightenment's efforts to release individuals into freedom, while emancipating them from external forces, also engender a considerable degree of uncertainty and fear. This becomes evident in more recent analyses of individualization and its consequences.

In one of his lectures introducing psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (1917) named three wounds inflicted on "naïve human self-love" by modern science. The cosmological mortification had been inflicted by Copernicus, when the Copernican turn had hurled man from the resting center of the universe to its dangerous periphery. The second wound was inflicted by Darwin's message that man was not created separately and apart from nature but had emerged from the animal kingdom and still belongs to it. Finally, the third and most bitter wound was inflicted on human self-understanding by Freud's psychoanalysis: the discovery of the unconscious made it clear that the ego is "not even master in its own house." Freud's concise diagnosis conveys the insight that Kant was far too optimistic about individual self-government and that the modern sciences, which owe much to the process of individualization outlined above, have helped to destroy the myth of liberation through individualization and modernization. Recent studies of the modern self and its struggles in constructing a satisfactory identity also reveal psychological issues linked to economic and political processes enabled by a particular form of individualization. These processes, which initially fostered individualization, now increasingly hinder individuals' ability to navigate modern and postmodern societies. The studies on this topic are becoming difficult to manage, but they have produced diverse assessments of the modern self and its life-worlds marked by insecurity, risk, and oppression.

Discussion exists regarding the concepts of the "authoritarian character" (Fromm, 1973) or the "authoritarian personality" (Adorno et al., 1950), the "saturated" or "relational" self (Gergen, 1991), the "narcissistic" or "minimal self" (Lasch, 1979, 1984), the "corroded character" (Sennett, 1998), the "anxious self" (Bauman, 2001), and the "weary

and depressive self” (Ehrenberg, 2010). These constructs aim to provide a foundation for understanding different aspects of human behavior and how these behaviors impact the individual and society as a whole. According to these studies, the contemporary individual is characterized as “fragmented,” “kaleidoscopic,” “fluid,” “exploitative,” “dissociated,” “elusive,” “illusory,” and “exhausted”; it resides in “risky,” “radicalized,” “accelerated,” and progressively “liquid,” “virtual,” and “imaginary” worlds (cf. Altman & Stile, 2019). The modern psyche, the psyche of the urban individual that is increasingly forced to withdraw into itself due to “sensory overload” (Simmel, 1903/1971), suffering from the “malaise of modernity” (Taylor, 1991), and “ephemeral conditions” (Bauman, 2001) in “troubled times” (Lasch, 1984) requires support, treatment, attention, and the acquisition of expertise in self-care (Ilouz, 2008). It has become a controversial topic even in political research and policy initiatives as psychology’s impact grows, particularly in Western societies (Rose, 1996).

This concludes my sketch of the prevailing narrative on individualization and individuality to date. Although not exhaustive, I believe it covers key components that significantly shape mainstream academic psychology’s perspective on the subject that ultimately defines the discipline’s own professional identity: self and identity. I will now examine some critical questions that must be addressed to develop a psychological theory of the human self that is not solely rooted in the narrative of modern Western societies, *their* experiences, perspectives, and self-perception.

## What Is Wrong with the Individual in Psychology

Given the limited scope of my reflections here, I will not be able to provide a comprehensive, systematic, and appropriately differentiated critical reception of the status quo of research on individualism. However, I will at least point out some of the interrelated shortcomings of research, all of which consist in the fact that we usually make our psychological business too easy for ourselves, that we sometimes lose

sight of what is genuinely psychological about the phenomenon that should interest us, and that we rarely admit to ourselves how much more we would need to know in order to put our often empirically unsubstantiated assumptions on a firmer footing.

*Narration and Methodology.* Hayden White (1973) famously argues that it is wise to approach historical narratives with a healthy dose of skepticism. In the nineteenth century, the so-called classics of historiography did not base their historical accounts on vast amounts of empirical evidence, but rather on the persuasive qualities of their literary skills. For this reason, their research cannot be verified or falsified. What White states regarding the grand historical narratives applies with equal justification to the grand narrative of Europe and its inhabitants' self-fashioning. We have been able to see that there is by no means agreement as to whether the release of individuality as a motor of social, political, and economic change really owed itself to the overcoming of medieval thought and ecclesiastical control. The related rehabilitation of the Middle Ages by newer authors has become possible through the citation of alternative examples, the evaluation of alternative sources, and alternative interpretations of the very same data. For example, if Augustine's influence on medieval thought were illustrated not by his "Civitas Dei" but by his famous "Confessiones,"—a psychological analysis of the spiritual self written in first person point of view—the narrative about the individual and individualism in the Middle Ages would also change. Even more so, it would lead us to make more cautious statements if we were to examine the issues raised here not primarily in the European context, but in the much larger part of the world. We would then also have to address, for example, the question of why there is a literary genre in Japan for the eighth to twelfth centuries that is situated between diary and autobiography, and why the authors were predominantly women (Arntzen, 2015). The variety of sources one has to deal with and how representative they were for the thoughts and sentiments of a certain historical time is not the same for different cultures and epochs. We know, for example, that of the many learned writings from ancient Greece, only a tiny fraction has survived. We can also assume that the authors of the works known to us were perhaps representative of educated and intellectual minorities, but probably not of the mass of

ancient Greeks. The situation is similar to the Middle Ages. The fact that with Humanism and the Renaissance, the number of learned treatises and other documents skyrocketed and that far more authors and other individuals became visible, has to do, among other things, with the invention of modern printing that enabled faster and more widespread circulation, and the greater number of securely built and well-protected libraries. Despite such important factors on which it depends on what kind of access we have to our ancestors and what social groups they represent, certain types of narratives can intentionally or unintentionally obscure them (Meer, 2011). If we want to tell a story of linear continuity about the increasing appreciation of individuality, we can do so, even if the empirical basis for it is thin; after all, the meager data also make it difficult to refute our story. We should think hard when we read that antiquity, or even the Middle Ages, had no modern concept of the individual and individuality, nor did they have the institutions in which a modern individualism could have developed (cf. Berlin, 2002). For example, the Renaissance serves as a vivid example of how individuality can develop in a modern sense, even though the realities of life were quite different from ours.

Now one might think that the myths, fables, historiographies, philosophical, and theological treatises contain enough material to give insight into the mental states of our ancestors. But would we really think that future researchers could get an adequate picture of our mental state if they had only the treatises of our philosophers and scientists? Probably not.

Whenever narrative approaches are discussed in psychology, especially in cultural psychology, they usually refer to the collection of autobiographical data with the help of narrative interviews. Such procedures have been used on a larger scale only since the twentieth century. Although we have, since early modern times, quite a few life stories, plenty of diaries, and other texts that have an autobiographical character, these are of course not data from narrative interviews. If Petrarch's "Divine Comedy" is understood as an account in which the narrator's past events are linked to current conditions and an anticipated future, thus condensing into an autobiographical self-narrative, then it still

remains important that this data does not owe itself to any psychological method. When proponents of narrative psychology point with good reasons to the immense importance of autobiographical narratives for the analysis of human constructions of self and identity, they must also concede that we know next to nothing about our historical ancestors in this regard. So it is by no means impossible that the Greeks, Romans, medieval peasants, soldiers, mothers and fathers, employers and employees, nobles, poets and scholars, criminals, lovers, husbands and wives, and their fellow-humans in early non-European societies were also suffering from exhausted, weary, fluid, hypocritical or narcissistic selves (cf. Borst, 1992; Foucault, 1990). Our efforts in the social and cultural sciences so often to identify supposed differences and to establish universal characteristics for this purpose predominantly for certain groups, but to classify other groups by more or less conscious “othering,” has almost become a style of many of our psychological narratives (cf. Bhatti & Kimmich, 2018). If we were to change this style, we could certainly tell very different stories, forcing us to reflect more on the fact that our thinking in the social sciences also has cultural imprints—the imprints of a certain scientific culture.

*The social sciences and psychology.* The beginning of modern psychology as an academic science took place in laboratories where, for example, the speed of neural transmission or individual differences in reaction time were measured. The need for mainstream psychology to achieve the status of a natural science through the use of experimental methods and statistical evaluation procedures still characterizes many of the psychological disciplines today. In contrast to this nomological orientation, approaches such as cultural psychology have emphasized studying the human psyche not in an artificial laboratory setting, isolated from its embeddedness in social relations and meaning-bearing symbolic worlds, but under conditions that more closely correspond to human beings’ everyday fields of action. As someone who identifies with cultural psychological perspectives, I appreciate this view of the human psyche as a phenomenon that arises not from pure self-determination, but from different kinds of certain culturally shaped relations and interactions, orientations, and modes of thinking and acting that some societies facilitate while others do not. Likewise, I appreciate it when psychologists

look beyond the boundaries of their own discipline to learn about the broader repertoire of theories and methods offered by colleagues in, say, sociology, anthropology, ethology, history, literature, or linguistics. On the other hand, I find it problematic that interdisciplinary psychology sometimes threatens to lose its focus. I am aware that this raises a major, controversial, and enduring issue, namely, what the subject matter of psychology is and whether it can be studied empirically at all. In the context of our reflections, I merely want to recall a widely held view of psychology, according to which it is the science of behavior and *experience* (Pickren & Rutherford, 2010). Early on, the discipline declared experience to be the inner workings of an opaque black box and focused on what is easier to observe, namely behavior. Psychology has not really abandoned this focus even after the supposed end of behaviorism (Bradley, 2014). As a result, the emphasis on experience has diminished, despite it being a genuine focus of psychology, distinct from that of most other social sciences. What is the subjective experience of having emotions such as fear, anxiety, affection, disgust, or anger, under particular conditions and in particular cultural contexts? Have there ever been humans who did not feel a sense of self and individuality? Of course, if we point to the sociological structures of our modern societies and relate them more or less plausibly to our psychological modes of being, then it is not far-fetched to assume that in differently structured societies there are also different ways of being and experiencing. But does this really apply to such elementary aspects of being as our sense of being an individual? Are certain characteristics of individuality and identity exclusive to the modern enlightened Western person who has been overburdened by the demands of Enlightenment? If this is not true, or at least theoretically and empirically not as well-founded as it seems, and if, on the other hand, it is true that experiencing oneself as an individual must be considered an anthropological universal, then such psychologically oriented historiographies run the risk of dehumanizing people from times far in the past, as well as people living in non-European modernities. This issue persists even when dichotomous dimensions are used to differentiate between more individualistic and more collectivistic societies, emphasizing that no value



judgment is made (e.g., Hofstede, 2001). The narrative of individualization and its presumed significance in modernization associates human creativity, determination, and assertiveness with individuality, implying that so-called collectivist societies lack these traits because they lack individuals of the “western” type. Incidentally, in view of this assessment, psychology lacks convincing theories as to how the milestones in science and art achieved over thousands of years, for the most part outside North America and Europe, were possible at all. Thus, it is also overlooked and usually not thoroughly researched how much individual willingness, individual self-control, individual responsibility, and individual moral consciousness individuals have to display in order to meet the expectations of their communities in collectivist cultures. Differences that we can observe at the behavioral level in social interactions do not necessarily suggest that a collectivist individual does not experience himself or herself as an individual (for the example of Hindu society, see Chakkarath, 2005). This experience might be far more similar to the experience of an individual in an individualistic society than influential but simplistic theories suggest.

*Individualization and Secularization.* The fact that the liberation of individual potencies owes much to secularization has long been a topos in narratives of the European dawn of modernity (Berger, 1967; Burckhardt, 1860/1990; Weber, 1904/2001). The fact that the ancient Greek thinkers included some prominent critics of religion is taken as evidence for the thesis that the dissociation from religious beliefs and the turn to reason-based scientific thinking go hand in hand. It is remarkable how this suppresses the fact that Socrates, with whom the European awakening from mythological slumber is said to have begun, regularly ascended the Acropolis to sacrifice to the gods. The part of the so-called Socratic method which presupposes a doctrine of reincarnation, is also marginalized: Socrates and Plato argue that uneducated illiterates can learn the basics of geometry because they have some residual knowledge from their previous lives. As shown in the historical outline, the view that individuality was already thought about and lived in the Catholic-dominated Middle Ages has become increasingly prevalent in more recent times. Even more clearly, the Renaissance demonstrates that exuberant creativity and religious piety or growing liberation of the

inner and docile adaptation to the outer need not be mutually exclusive (Martin, 2004). We also know this from other traditions of thought such as the Chinese, Indian, and Arabic scientific cultures, for which the striving for spiritual perfection was in no way contradictory to the desire for reliable scientific knowledge and societal stability (Selin, 1997, 2003). Against this background, the fact that the astonishing scientific achievements from non-European cultures do not receive the attention in Western textbooks that the Greek and Roman contributions rightly deserve is not only regrettable but even questionable from a scientific point of view. As Hadden (1987) has nicely put it, it is time to desacralize the secularization thesis. The thesis is questionable because it not only provides a justification for ignoring important contributions from traditions of thought with a religious connotation but also contributes to making another important connection invisible: the connection between individuality and spirituality (Fuchs et al., 2019).

The most influential psychological development theories in mainstream Western psychology, are based on Piaget's model and emphasize the development of individual cognitive abilities which usually also lay the foundations for emotional, linguistic, social, and moral development. It is noteworthy, but not surprising given the secularization thesis, that the stages of cognitive development do not provide space for spirituality. Since people in all cultures have always sought spiritual fulfillment in addition to scientific knowledge and have had to develop special cognitive abilities in order to become enlightened, it is by no means self-evident that these kinds of cognitive skills are not really recognizable in Piaget's model. This is particularly important in our context, since the spiritual traditions of gaining knowledge in the Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu traditions, for example, are accompanied by a gradual detachment from social ties and an ideal of individualization that can in some ways be understood as more radical than the counterpart of the enlightened and elevated Western individual as envisioned by Kant. Interestingly, however, the achievement of this ideal is not the real goal; rather, the real salvation lies in halting the process of individualization by transcending individuality. In classical Indian psychological theories of the self, there was never any doubt that individualization simultaneously places excessive demands on the individual (Chakkarath, 2013), leading

to the damage to the psyche that the latest Western analyses of the fragmented, narcissistic, anxious, or exhausted self are concerned with. The fact that theories dating back thousands of years have already carefully analyzed the fateful connection between the need for individuality and psychological overload should make us think again more carefully about whether the modern individual in his search for self-fulfillment is really fighting such completely different battles than our ancestors in the most diverse cultures of the world.

Finally, a thought on the question of whether, with secularization, the sacred has actually disappeared from the human world. In describing the emergence of capitalism out of the spirit of Protestantism, Max Weber pointed out that the modern individual was not rooted in a world free of religion, but in religious theories about human destiny. Due to individual fears and anxieties about one's divinely ordained fate that were induced by the Protestant theory of predestination, Protestants oriented their actions in such a way that they sought success in economic ventures and could then read success as a sign that God was showing mercy to them. Even after the "disenchantment" of the world, a habitus has remained in the individual's way of life in which the religious continues to have an effect, even if it is no longer perceived as religious. Since Thomas Luckmann (1967) called these new forms of spirituality "invisible religion" and distinguished them as "personal" from institutionalized religions, this analysis has found confirmation in the work of Charles Taylor (1989/2013, 2007). With regard to the European cult of individualization in the eighteenth century, these analyses correspond to the self-image of the modern individual that no longer needs an organized church for his personal religious salvation. Hans Joas (2013) has argued that the Enlightenment even led to a *sacralization of the individual*. I think that Kant's notion of the individual who no longer needs any instance other than itself in order to be itself, actually has the character of the deification of the enlightened human being, not at all unlike the idea of the "enlightened" person in some religious traditions. Furthermore, Joas states that this shows a human need for self-transcendence that can be found in all cultures. If this is true, it justifies the assumption that the need to experience oneself as an individual, together with the burdens associated with it, is a *universal* characteristic of the human

being. This would then again confirm my suspicion that our theories on the individual and on everything that makes up the human being are not content with the example of Europe and stories told about it.

## Conclusion

In the preceding paragraphs, I have attempted to trace some of the defining characteristics of a highly influential discourse on the development of individuality and its provisional end in the overburdened modern individual of our time. I have then tried to point out problems with this discourse, which might also be called a master narrative. The problems I have pointed out are, first, that the attempt to create a narrative about the psychological development of individuality which is dependent on specific historical, political, and economic conditions of socialization and their change, is not consistently convincing. This is because we do not have the sources we *should* have to support the story empirically and at the same time, many of the sources we have cannot be put together in a way that makes for a single, *reliable* story. The failure of many of our theories and assumptions to convince may also be due to the fact that the concept of individuality is not suitable for distinguishing people from certain, e.g., European, societies from other people in terms of their psychohistory. This may be because individuality and the suffering from individuality, are not phenomena of Western modernity, but universal features of the human condition that transcend culture and time.

As should be clear from my remarks, the distortions in so many of the still influential theories of the development of the individual and of modernity arise to a considerable extent from ethnocentric perspectives. The persistence of these perspectives is due to mainstream psychology's lack of interest in non-Western sources and non-Western traditions of thought. In this respect, it is fair to speak of *psychological illiteracy*. In view of this situation, it seems to me not only overdue but also indispensable that, in the course of postcolonial critique, more and more social science disciplines, pursue the question of their own indigeneity and thus no longer see the indigeneity of other thought traditions as a problem,

but as a motivation to significantly increase the number of theories and hypotheses against which one's own beliefs are tested. That this is evident in psychology in the form of *indigenous psychology* is reassuring. A more interested and attentive look at people and their psychological make-up in non-European societies might show us that differently cultivated attitudes toward one's own individuality can promote or contain certain problems in our contemporary societies. Of course, the appeal of populism in many countries around the world is also a complex issue that requires nuanced consideration, but some evidence suggests that it arises from the conviction of a growing number of people that they are precisely *the* self-governed citizens the European and American Enlightenment called them to be. We might describe this as a new faith, a quasi-religious belief in the individual's sacredness and the inviolability of everyone's own opinions. As is apparent, not all narratives, whether political or scientific, are innocuous.

My point in all this is not to assert that excellent and thought-provoking analyses are entirely misguided and unproductive. My point is rather to suggest that it is necessary to enhance not only our individuality but also our theories.

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# 8

## A Perspective on Confucian Self-Cultivation: A Solution to the Global Degradation of Morality in the Twenty-First Century

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In the past two decades, technological civilization has advanced rapidly and made great progress. Due to the rapid advances in information and internet technology, human beings enjoy unprecedented new products, new services, and unimaginable life experiences with innovation and surprises. However, at the same time, many regions on Earth have suffered endless military wars. In addition, various international trade wars, financial wars, hacker wars, terrorist attacks, etc., are constantly advancing over time. Others, such as the destruction of the ecological environment by the development of technology, the widening gap between the rich and the poor, the increasingly serious crisis of global warming, the multipolarization of the international power structure, the

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many conflicts and contradictions derived from the process of economic globalization have become more prominent. Democratic politics has begun to show a chaotic decline.

Many scholars have felt that the important foundations for constructing modern Western social governance, such as capitalism, freedom, individualism, and realism, are stepping into bottlenecks step by step. Coupled with the gradual rise of non-Western world forces, all this means that the global order is about to enter into a lengthy process of disintegration and reorganization. These negative consequences demonstrate that the original governance philosophy from the Western viewpoint is not sufficient to solve the increasingly serious global crisis that is almost out of control.

The various conflicts, disputes, and collapses mentioned above show that the material well-being of human life today is mainly affected by two factors that are closely related: (1) the rapid advancement of technological innovation and (2) the rapid change in the economic operation system. Therefore, one can ask what is the core conception behind technological innovation and economic operation transformation? How do they cause the collapse of human ethics and moral concepts and the deterioration of life and well-being? This will be one of the foci of this chapter. Second, how should human beings respond to and improve the deteriorating moral and value conceptions in the world? This will also be the focus of another discussion in this chapter. Specifically, this chapter will first address the scourges of human social life dominated by the market economy and machine technology in recent times, especially in the shadow of neoliberalism (or surveillance capitalism). Then, it explores the core connotations of the Confucian self-cultivation concept and further explains why these connotations can serve as a prescription in modern civilization without the concept of divine welfare.

## **The Rise of Neo-Liberalism and Its Essence**

In December 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed and the Cold War ended. The United States then became the superpower of the world. The West, especially the United States, thought that in democracy, freedom, human

rights, and the rule of law based on individualism were universal values. These values could be exported to the world given America's powerful political, military, and economic power. Some political economists have even claimed that the end of history (the last stage of human self-actualization) is based on liberal democracy (Fukuyama, 1992). In other words, apart from this, there are no other possibilities for world development, and there are no more conflicts over core ideas and values. At the same time, the "neoliberal movement" advocated by President Reagan of the United States and Prime Minister Thatcher of the United Kingdom also reached its peak. Neoliberalism advocates free market, free trade, and unrestricted transnational flow of capital. It believes that such an economic perspective will create the greatest social, political, and economic benefits for the world. This form of neoliberalism also advocates minimizing government expenditures and taxes, as well as minimizing government regulation and direct government intervention in the economic market. However, this weakening of the state's regulation is actually a slogan and a solution put forward by the economic powers to alleviate the plight of their capitalist development.

This form of neoliberalism uses the world's resources on a global scale: cheap labor and raw materials. Markets operate in the most efficient way possibly and request more markets in developing countries. Some critics believe that neoliberalism is only a free market imposed by the upper class, claiming that neoliberalism is based on large international financial organizations such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, and some powerful countries such as European Union or US government, by them it will ultimately advance the interests of multinational corporations and Tech Giants (Harvey, 2005; Rasmus, 2020). Therefore, critics believe that these neoliberal economic policies are basically the exploitation of developing or undeveloped countries by developed countries and large economic enterprises. They believe that these economic policies and institutions do not promote the development of the local countries but only ensure the dominance of the developed countries over these countries. They also argue that neoliberal policies give multinational corporations and Tech Giants power over locally elected governments because corporations and Tech Giants can use their rights to withdraw

their capital (and thus affect jobs and economies in local countries) as a way of influencing local national politics.

Basically, neoliberalism is a project to remake the world's political and economic institutions on the principle of "market supremacy" (Brenner et al., 2010; Guillén, 2001). Its core belief is that respecting the free operation of the market mechanism can achieve the highest economic efficiency, and it is also the source of human well-being and order. It even believes that even though allowing the market to decide may lead to a worsening gap between the rich and the poor. Income distribution, political intervention based on justice and compassion distorts resource allocation, destroys people's motivation to work, and creates reliance on social welfare. That makes things even worse. Therefore, neoliberalism advocates a series of economic policies to loosen the market, including tax cuts, market liberalization, privatization of state-owned enterprises, free transnational movement of capital, labor market flexibility, removal of various social and environmental protections, and so on. Furthermore, neoliberals also support the expansion of market principles to the political and social fields, using market values to measure the value of everything in society, including law or moral standards.

## The Scourge of Neoliberalism

Essentially Neoliberalism is a political design for the "restoration of the bourgeoisie". It rescued the crisis of social capital accumulation in Europe and the United States in the mid-1970s by eliminating political shackles. After the 1990s, it became the dominant international economic and financial system. Many countries outside of Europe and the United States that did not have a strong market economy tradition, under the pressure of fierce competition from globalization, adopted neoliberal policies and strategies. They did so in order to adapt to global environmental changes and avoid being impacted or eliminated. However, evidence suggests that the neoliberal movement has done little to help the global economy. In the 1960s, the total global economic growth rate was 3.5%, and even in the economic depression and turmoil caused by the oil crisis in the

1970s, it was still 2.4%. However, in the 1980s and 1990s, when neoliberalism emerged and dominated, the overall global economic growth rate fell to 1.4% and 1.1%; after 2000, it was less than 1% (Harvey, 2005). Therefore, although neoliberalism kept saying that it could create high economic efficiency and growth, its actual operation was “capital accumulation by deprivation” (Harvey, 2004).

The 2008 financial tsunami exposed fundamental flaws in the global financial system. The “Occupy Wall Street” movement and the subsequent protests that spread around the world gave people hope. However, relative to the catastrophe brought by neoliberalism, actual reforms have been minimal, few bankers have been prosecuted, and most of the losses have been paid for by taxpayers. The European Union’s austerity policies have made people’s lives hopeless in debtor countries such as Greece, while the US’s quantitative easing policies have not helped to stop the concentration of financial power and economic stagnation and have ended up worsening wealth inequality. Some scholars have even invented the concept of “zombie neoliberalism” to describe the strange phenomenon that in the post-financial tsunami period, more liberalization and marketization were used to deal with the disasters derived from the neoliberal movement. For example, Peck (2010) vividly described this phenomenon: “*The (neoliberal) brain has apparently long since ceased functioning, but the limbs are still moving.... ...The living dead of the free-market revolution continue to walk the earth, though with each resurrection their decidedly uncoordinated gait becomes even more erratic*” (p. 109, italics added).

When Trump was elected president of the United States and the UK voted to leave the European Union in 2016, many optimistically predicted the end of the neoliberal trend. A confluence of far-right fascists, fanatic religious groups, and authoritarian populist politicians has been noticed. For example, the “Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)” in Germany, the “Front national pour l’unité française” in France, and the “Movimento Cinque Stelle” in Italy have all relied on manipulating people’s political identity and dislike of mainstream political parties to strengthen themselves. Another, Israeli President Benjamin Netanyahu encouraged the discrimination and hatred of people who are not Jews, the devouring of the West Bank of the Jordan River, and denying of the

autonomy of the Palestinian people. There is also the rise of the Communist Party of China, relying on the rapid economic growth and stable political environment achieved by the combination of its autocratic system and the market. They claim that its reformed socialist centralized system is superior to the democratic system of Western society and they attempt to challenge the hegemony of the United States. These authoritarian populist politicians have made the global political and economic environment more chaotic and have also shown the conflict and deterioration of global moral concepts. This is because the moral concepts of each society are closely related to its country's political and economic governance strategies, and the ideas behind each country's respective governance strategies are to discipline or punish immoral behaviors. The chaos of the global political and economic environment reflects the conflict and deterioration of global moral concepts.

The "double movement" thinking proposed by Karl Polanyi (1995) suggested that the deeper the market liberalization movement penetrates into a society, the greater the pain it brings to the society. This is because a "social self-preservation movement" that resists market intrusion has automatically formed at the same time as the marketization movement. The rise of neo-Nazis, neo-fascists, and authoritarian populism is just a reflexive act of "social self-preservation". This double movement also explains why the extreme right Christian evangelicals, who emphasize morality and religion, would support a rich man (Trump) who is atheist, indulgent, and does not know the lower limit of morality as the president.

In other words, neoliberalism and various authoritarian populist phenomena have a mutually reinforcing relationship. They can be combined with each other in a short period of time, but their operating logic is completely different. The expression of personal characteristics under neoliberalism is considered to be postmodern, emphasizing sexual/gender liberation, multiculturalism, hippie way of life, etc. Individual freedom and identity can be transformed into commercial opportunities in consumer culture through commoditization. These characteristics are seen by neoconservatives or authoritarian populists as sources of depravity and corruption. A return to traditional morality, religion, and authoritarian politics will mean the elimination of the neoliberal order.

The election of Trump means that the neoliberal perspective of order will be overthrown. However, if we look at the connotation of neoliberalism from the perspective of “political rationality” or “governmentality”, it refers to the use of market rationality/financial investment to calculate the value of everything, including human life and labor, urban planning, and land use, measuring the success or failure of university education, and more. When applied in various fields, market rationality/financial investment “principles” also merge with various local sociocultural and political forces to create various variants. As a result, the neoliberalism that actually exists around the world has shown to be extremely complex and diverse. It created the “principle of real action”, but we live in it without realizing its existence and impact. As a result, nearly everyone is bound by neoliberal norms in the workplace, social media, educational institutions, nonprofits, the arts, and more.

For democratic politics to function properly, there must be a public sphere that can accommodate different voices and positions, and the protection of the private sphere is equally important. Only when the right to privacy is protected can the information individuals receive and the choices they make protect them from manipulation and persecution. In other words, true democracy is not just formally holding regular elections but must effectively represent the interests of the people under the conditions of information transparency and equality. However, today’s Western democracies have long been labeled “plutocracy”, “oligarchy”, and even “kleptocracy” (Brown, 2018; Chayes, 2017; Mahbubani, 2020). Wendy Brown, the author of the book *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s stealth revolution* (Brown, 2015), believes that neoliberalism is a kind of slow destruction from within, with market value as the paradigm for governing society. It destroys the democratic form of political participation, and its impact on democracy is “like termites rather than lions”, which in turn leads to the “hollowing out” of democracy. Especially with the help of the current artificial intelligence (AI) technology advantages, “the private domain is no longer private, and the public domain is no longer public” (Lu, 2022, p. 117).

## Technological Development in the Context of Neoliberalism

It is undeniable that modern technology has indeed improved the quality of human life on a large scale and even drastically changed the concept of the world, which was unimaginable a few decades ago. Therefore, the development of transportation, information, trade, the popularization of education, the awakening of political consciousness, the improvement of living standards, and even the extension of the average life expectancy of human beings, all benefit from the progress of technology. The great contributions of technology to modern people are undeniable. However, behind the success of technology, there is not always a bright side.

Modern people are increasingly aware that while maximizing natural resources, they may also harm human beings. For example, knowledge of the atomic structure at the physical level could be used to launch a nuclear war. All countries in the world hope to possess nuclear weapons as a necessary condition for becoming a powerful country, which is enough to threaten weak and small countries and plunge the whole world into anxiety and fear. Especially under the huge impact of the neoliberal economy that determines everything, it has triggered turmoil and conflicts among different civilizations in the world. It has also caused harm and impact to developing countries, among which the negative impact of air pollution, drug abuse, and civilization diseases are the most serious.

The uneasiness and fear that the recent development of AI technology has brought to people is gradually intensifying. The prosperity of AI technology appeared in the early twenty-first century when neoliberalism prevailed, and the control of this cutting-edge technology has been in the hands of powerful neoliberal elites from the very beginning. As early as in the neoliberal world of pre-AI technologies, the wealth accumulation of the powerful elites expanded their political influence, which expanded their wealth accumulation, and in turn continued to increase their political influence. This continuous spiral upward has already clearly led to the richest 1% of people dominating the remaining 99% of people. This violates democratic values. With the help of AI technology, the asymmetry of power between the upper class, the middle class, and the lower



class will only increase. Under these circumstances, neo-liberalism has “hollowed out” democracy. AI, which is currently flourishing, is already a technology monopolized by oligopolies (Lu, 2022). In an environment, where the institution of democracy is weak, the mining and collection of massive computing data by AI seriously violates privacy. And the most common storage places for big data are private commercial organizations, which rely on this data to earn huge profits. Because these huge amounts of data are controlled by a few people at the top, such AI technology is not public property but the private property of the oligarchs who monopolize information. People contribute their personal resources unknowingly, but they have no ability to resist oligarchs and the rich, who easily exercise control over people through AI technology (Zuboff, 2020).

The essence of neoliberalism is to maximize the asymmetry of power relations between the upper, middle, and lower classes through public relations manipulation. They do so through scholars and think tanks to shape the public’s perception of the free market, thereby ensuring that resources, wealth, and power are steadily and gradually concentrated in the upper class (Lu, 2020). On the surface, the rise of AI technology is the result of free-market competition. However, the increasing monopoly, concentration, and oligopoly of wealth, resources, and power, are the reality of global social unrest and moral collapse with the rise of AI. The few people at the top who hold resources of wealth and power are the most important driving force behind the rise of AI technology. AI will almost inevitably further enhance the ability of these very few people to control and manipulate the public.

The potential risks of domination of AI technologies are enormous. In fact, some scientists, including Stephen Hawkins and Elon Musk, have proposed the concept of “technological singularity”. They worry that the uncontrollable and irreversible development (so-called singularity) of technology and AI in the future might lead to the extinction of human beings (Goode, 2019; Lorenc, 2015; Radanliev et al., 2022). One approach to mitigating the risk would be to incorporate ethical principles into AI and technology. However, this may not be possible since existing ethical ideologies are anthropocentric in that they do not consider nature or nonhuman nature as moral objects for humans. Nor do they take

into account the well-being of future generations (Jonas, 2014). In his book, *The imperative of responsibility: In search of an ethics for the technological age*, Jonas (1985) argued that the essence of technological civilization lies in the contradiction between human beings' continuous expansion of self-understanding and existence. Humans rarely realize that in destroying nature or nonhuman nature, they also pose a threat to themselves.

In addition, existing ethics are confined to people's decisions. The conditions for judging whether an action is moral or not are mostly limited to benefits in visible time and space (for example, utilitarianism is based on maximal value selection under concurrent circumstances, rather than acting by the choice of human moral will) or to realizing the goodness of an individual regardless of his/her responsibility for the consequences (such as Kantian intentional ethics, focusing on whether a rational person's will conforms to the universal good will) (Jonas, 1985). These kinds of ethics may have the utility under their concerned categories, but they do not address the ethical issues of the characteristics (such as the cumulative and unknown impact and the uncertainty of predictions) of technological consequences. Jonas thus proposed a supreme imperative for the responsibility of human action in the age of technology: "preserve the continuation of human beings" or "do only those actions that are compatible with the perpetuity of human beings' real life on earth" or "include the wholeness of the future of humanity in your present actions, and treat it as an object always with your will". The ethical responsibility that Jonas emphasized is forward-looking, not only concerned about oneself and future generations of human beings. It is also concerned about nature and nonhuman species objects. It no longer limits human beings' ethical responsibility to their own actions and the consequences of their actions but makes demands on the actions of oneself and all humankind. Everyone can do things that risk their own survival in pursuit of the stimulation or peak experiences. People can avoid doing things that endanger the survival of all human beings. Let us imagine the following scenario: Ten thousand "cleaners" helped clean up the area where a nuclear power accident occurred. Although they did not feel uncomfortable or suffer illness for a while due to the high dose of radioactive toxic substances they absorbed, after 20 years, there will be

300,000 children born with serious health problems, including cancer-causing genes or leukemia, cardiovascular disease, physical disabilities, chronic abnormal conditions, etc., which are passed on to generation after generation. This is one of the unique qualities of the dangers of nuclear technology: Its future dangers cannot be perceived or assessed immediately. Essentially, there is a nonconcrete and imperceptible image of danger toward technological development.

Another example is the invention and use of the insecticide DDT. Although its use has effectively controlled the reproduction of malaria-infested mosquitoes, flies, and lice and has sharply reduced the incidence of diseases such as malaria, typhoid, and cholera, American marine biologist Rachel Carson (1962) published the book, *Silent Spring*, in which she addressed the various harms caused by the widespread use of DDT to the global environment. It enters the global food chain and cannot be decomposed by animals, so it accumulates in the top animals of the food chain, causing metabolic and reproductive dysfunction in birds and other wild animals. Consequently, they are endangered. The victims also included human beings who eat fish contaminated with DDT. Finally, a United States' decree banned all use of DDT in 1972, and more than 80 countries have adopted the same comprehensive prohibitions as the United States.

Innovative technology and a thriving economy both enrich human life, but they are also cases of contradiction. On the one hand, human beings enjoy an unprecedented number of new products, new services, and unimaginable life experiences due to innovations and prosperity. On the other hand, they bear the damage and negative side effects they have brought about. If we do not have the moral principles to guide technological innovation and economic operation, the damage and negative side effects will always be with us. As mentioned above, Jonas' future responsibility for sustainable development is not only a moral requirement for individuals but also an individual's responsibility for other nonhuman species, the natural environment, and the sustainable development of the earth. This is not just a personal matter but a demand for political or public interventions. The models of contemporary technology and political economy have become a collective, global force. Such a large-scale action can only be resolved through political action.

Today, the world faces the predicament of a clash of civilizations and moral collapse, which cannot be resolved by technological invention or global economic prosperity. It has to be resolved through human spiritual awareness and moral awakening. Although technology can change and enrich the appearance of human life, it cannot control the greed and insatiability of people's inner desires. In other words, the issues about how and why people are willing to take the initiative to act morally and then bring true harmony and happiness to the whole world are the key to solving the predicament.

Is it possible to control the greed of inner human desires from a moral point of view? Of course, this is not easy, or even impossible, unless we use the influence of religion to solve the issue through our own process of moral cultivation. Is it our responsibility to ensure that the earth is habitable for the next generation? When we live according to morality, what is the meaning of life? After all, people are going to die eventually, shouldn't they enjoy themselves while they are alive? Regardless of the society, there are various religious beliefs whose purposes are to provide a basis for beliefs about the meaning of human life. They provide people with imagination about meaning beyond death or greed. On the basis of these beliefs, humanity can create meaning as the goal of personal moral cultivation. Therefore, the practice of human ethics and morality cannot be separated from religion. Transcendent consciousness of religion can be the basis for personal moral cultivation to pursue the goal of a meaningful life.

As noted earlier, Jonas (2014) criticized existing ethical perspectives for their failure to adequately respond to the problems caused by contemporary technology. The solution he proposed was to start from actual life experiences and discuss the overall orientation of organic life. The ultimate purpose of innate organisms is to achieve self-realization and then to reveal that the whole of life is the good itself and the source of all moral values. In fact, more than 2000 years ago, the self-cultivation ideas advocated by pre-Qin Confucianism in ancient Chinese society already included the ethic of future responsibility proposed by Jonas. The ideas of self-cultivation advocated by pre-Qin Confucianism can be used as a solution to the deterioration of global morality caused by modern technology and the market economy dominating all values. The following

will explain the connotations of the self-cultivation concept advocated by Confucianism and further explain why and how it can be used as a solution to global moral deterioration.

## Pre-Qin Confucian Perspective on Ethical Cultivation

Confucianism encompasses politics, culture, philosophy, and aspects of religion. In the context of postmodern society, we should recognize that Confucian ethics, especially the assertions of pre-Qin Confucian ethics, have become an important topic in contemporary sinological research. In the past, many scholars, such as Zongsan Mou (1990), Fuguan Xu (1999), and Zehou Li (2002), adopted Kant's framework of philosophy and interpreted it with "subjectivity" as the core concept of Confucianism and recognized Confucianism as one kind of principle (or rule) ethics. However, when addressing postmodern trends of thought, the framework for discussing Confucianism with "subjectivity" is often criticized. It is said that subjectivity overrides objectivity and that spirituality will monopolize everything, form a self-enclosed dogmatic system, and establish a single standard to exclude the possibility of multiple conversations (Yu, 2013). Yang (1996) discussed the relationship between body and mind in Confucianism from the perspective of "body theory" and "qi theory". The latter not only made up for the previous Confucian studies that overemphasized the mind and spiritual will but also gradually developed a new thread of discussion.

Other scholars (Ying, 2010; Yu, 2013) opposed the interpretation of Confucianism with the "principled (or rule) ethics" advocated by Kant and went back to Aristotle's so-called "virtue ethics" to interpret Confucianism. They emphasized that Confucianism focuses on the cultivation of morality and virtue; it does not emphasize rules but focuses on the cultivation of virtue, expanding the potential of human nature and its development and realization. It also stresses family values, the cultivation of political literacy and responsibility, how to engage in self-cultivation, and how to interact and care for people. Therefore, Confucianism should be recognized as a kind of virtue ethics. Especially after the publication

of *After virtue: A study in moral theory*, MacIntyre (1981) advocated the restoration of whole-person education found in ancient Greece and an approach that more fully developed the various potentialities of human beings. This led the international Sinology community to adopt the framework of virtue ethics to interpret Confucianism. Therefore, interpreting Confucianism and its models with virtue ethics has gradually become the trend and the mainstream of Confucianism in the current era.

Although moral self-discipline is an ideal concept that is self-sufficient and does not need to resort to other values, as Kant himself admitted, the self-discipline of goodwill can be used as the highest condition for defining morality, but it is not the necessary and sufficient condition for practicing ideal moral behavior. Moral self-discipline is the basis of complete goodness. In addition to virtue known as happiness, it also wishes to achieve a good life and eudemonia. This means that in people's actual moral experience, even if they always follow the obligation of moral self-discipline, they would still encounter suffering, injustice, and death, which would lead to the frustration that life is meaningless, thus resulting in questioning "Why should I act morally?" At this moment, if we want to provide an ultimate basis for personal moral practice, we need to go beyond the distinction between what should be and what is in the awareness of obligation. And then one can seek an identity toward the infinite, that is, based upon the belief in the unity between heaven and humanity, the unity between happiness and virtue, to set them as the basis for the ultimate care of life. In other words, the moral ideals needed in the present era, in addition to combining the ethical principles of justice, self-discipline, and social care, we also need to find an intrinsic and transcendent foundation for moral ideals in the context of religious belief.

Pre-Qin Confucianism (especially the moral philosophy of Confucius and Mencius) is a set of practical philosophies concerned to construct a society governed by rituals based on human relations and common daily ways of living (the way of heaven, please see a section below "theory of the way of heaven"). In terms of morality, Confucianism focuses on how people can maintain the good nature of caring for each other,

and, in terms of social governance, it ponders over what kind of political system should be used to implement an ethical life in which people can care for each other within a global context (Lin, 2017). Different from the Western worldview and epistemology with its binary opposition to the world, the complete Confucian philosophical system of self-moral practice in the pre-Qin era contains three parts necessary for forming wholeness: theory of mind-nature (Xin-Xing Lun), theory of self-cultivation (Xiu-Yang Lun) and theory of the way of heaven (Tien-Tao Lun). When individuals follow the philosophical ideals of the three parts fully to cultivate personal morality, each person can form his/her responsibility and ethical practice into “inner sage and outer king”, “unity of moral knowledge and action”, and “unity of the way of heaven and humanity”.

In other words, as a kind of practical ethics, Confucianism is not a philosophical thought that only focuses on pure theoretical construction. Its philosophical conception always focuses on the practice of personal moral cultivation, and its ultimate goal is about how to cultivate everyone to become a “gentleman (Jun-zi)” who holds the self-disciplined virtue and can put it into practice. In addition to emphasizing what should be acted out in moral practice, Confucianism also stresses how its implementation can be reached, so it is an educational idea of morality. It also deeply elaborates on “theory of mind-nature”, “theory of self-cultivation”, and “theory of the way of heaven” as the educational approach for human moral development and practice. Confucianism treats them as the basis for the outlook on life, on the world, and on the practice of ethics. Furthermore, the Confucian system of self-moral practice based on the three foundations is to provide “the basis for the subjectivity of moral practice”, “the educational and learning methods of moral cultivation”, and “why people should behave morally”. These three issues put forward a fundamental explanation for the formation of an ethical self.

## Theory of Mind-Nature

“Theory of mind-nature” is based on the view of Confucius and Mencius, who supposed that benevolence and righteousness are inherent. It holds that “the benevolent loves others” and “the righteous does justice” are both the nature of human beings, bringing out Confucianism’s perspective on the essence of the structure of personal moral consciousness. This also shows that Confucianism emphasizes that “caring (love)” and “justice” both are human nature, and they are the virtues an ideal gentleman should possess in his/her development of a complete personality as well. Therefore, Confucian moral ethics is basically an attempt to integrate the ethics of justice (Lawrence Kohlberg’s theoretical perspective on moral development, 1971) and the ethics of care (Carol Gilligan’s theoretical perspective on moral development, 1995) together to elaborate the appeal of how to develop an ideal personality to be a virtuous gentleman. The reason why human beings can practice the morality of “caring” and “justice” is that everyone is born with the nature of benevolence (caring for others) and righteousness (pursuing justice and fairness). However, the ethics of caring are concerned with the specific responsibilities each person has in real life with contextual constraints, while the ethics of justice require the legitimacy of obligations for universally valid norms. The two seem to conflict with each other on the surface, but in fact, the focused levels of the two are different, and they must complement each other rather than reduce each other. How the two should complement each other is the focus of the elaboration in Confucian moral cultivation pedagogy (i.e., theory of self-cultivation).

## Theory of the Way of Heaven

The Confucian theory of the way of heaven is another central concept in Confucianism. It emphasizes that ethical behavior and moral cultivation for both individuals and society are important, but the guiding principle and the ultimate goal are to follow up on the way of heaven. According to Confucian thought, the way of heaven is a natural order that governs



the (moral) universe and is characterized by harmony, balance, and righteousness. In pre-Qin Confucianism, the way of heaven is believed to be embodied in the principles of the moral universe, including benevolence (ren), righteousness (yi), propriety (li), wisdom (zhi), and faithfulness (xin). These principles are seen as the keys to living a meaningful and fulfilling life, as well as to creating a harmonious society. Not only does this occur within human society (no matter current and future societies) but also among humans, nonhuman nature, and nature societies forever.

Furthermore, Confucians believe that human beings have natural inclinations (i.e., Ren & Yi) to follow the way of heaven and that the inclinations can be nurtured to fulfill through moral cultivation, education, and the practice of ritual. By cultivating virtues such as benevolence (ren), righteousness (yi), propriety (li), wisdom (zhi), and faithfulness (xin), individuals can align themselves with the way of heaven and create a more just and harmonious society. Overall, the Confucian theory of the way of heaven emphasizes the importance of living in harmony with the natural order of the universe and of striving to cultivate the virtues and moral principles that reflect this order.

## Theory of Self-Cultivation

The Confucian theory of self-cultivation is the key concept in Confucian thought that emphasizes the importance of individual effort in achieving personal and moral growth (Hwang & Chang, 2009). The ultimate goal of self-cultivation is to achieve a state of moral perfection or be a virtuous “gentleman” (Jun-zi) who can know and fulfill the way of heaven through continuous self-improvement and practice by fully realizing the human inherent nature of authentic benevolence (caring for others) and righteousness (doing justice). Regardless of the state of moral perfection or being a virtuous “gentleman”, the individual must not only have good moral qualities internally, such as sincerity, integrity, and selflessness but also be able to achieve a state of moral harmony between self and others (or nonhuman species and nature). The individual contributes to the progress of society and world, not only be able to be good to oneself, family, and society but also be able to be good

to the world or become a moral model of the so-called “inner sage and outer king”.

According to Confucianism, the process of self-cultivation begins with self-reflection or careful examination of one’s own behavior and motivations. Through this process, individuals can identify their own weaknesses and strengths and work to improve their moral character and conduct. Confucianism emphasizes the importance of cultivating one’s virtues of benevolence, righteousness, and other moral qualities, as well as engaging in practical activities such as learning, socializing, and serving the community and the global. It is a life-span effort and an endless process, just like the notions mentioned in Confucian Classics that “*Heaven acts with vitality and persistence. In correspondence with this, the superior person keeps himself vital without ceasing*” (I Ching, Qian/Initiating, Commentary on the Symbol, trans. by Huang, 1998) or “*That is why Heaven, when it is about to place a great burden on a man, always first tests his resolution, exhausts his frame and makes him suffer starvation and hardship, frustrates his efforts so as to shake him from his mental lassitude, toughen his nature and make good his deficiencies*” (Mencius, book VI, part B, trans. by Lau, 2004). Therefore, suffering is a necessary practice step for a gentleman or a sage to achieve omnipotence and true happiness.

When Confucianism discusses the development of the self’s personality and the relationship with others and society, is the Confucian concept of “self” an independent individual with freedom and unlimited mind, or is it subject to the interaction between people and self? If it can be unrestricted, how can the self-maintain “harmony but be different” among people? This can be illustrated by the Confucian theory of mind-nature, which claims that benevolence and righteousness are inherent. “Benevolence (ren)” is not just a kind of virtue, which means that it is not an individual virtue juxtaposed with wisdom, courage, straightness, fortitude, and other virtues because it is inherent in human beings, so it is the basis of all virtues. Benevolence, the basis of all virtues, is the motivation or will of moral behavior. This is very close to Kant’s statement. The only difference is that Kant believes that motivation or will is purely rational, without any emotional effects, which is sufficient to be the source of all moral norms and is absolutely pure goodness,

while Confucianism believes that benevolent morality will also include emotion (Ying, 2010).

Although “benevolence” belongs uniquely to human nature, it is a cultivated disposition, that is, human nature in the form of cultivation. It still needs to rely on acquired environmental education to bring out its potential. In other words, both Kant’s principled ethics and Confucian virtue ethics pay great attention to virtue, but how to become a moral gentleman, the practice methods and goals of the two are completely different. Kant believed that the pure reason of morality is autonomy and self-discipline and that people should strive to practice this pure reason by acting according to rational principles, without considering the consequences. Confucianism, however, focuses on how to make the moral subject cultivate the character and virtue that make life happy in the individual, family, society, all of humanity, and even the whole universe. In other words, to become a truly educated person.

According to the interpretation of virtue ethics, Confucian “benevolence” is the subject’s conscious love and the motivation for moral behavior. At the same time, it will consider whether the consequences of behavior can bring people a happy and beautiful life. Therefore, it is defined as an “educated virtue” rich in the meaning of life experience, which needs to be constantly modified, adjusted, and perfected in various practical situations. The core meaning of “benevolence” in Confucianism is “love others”. However, how to “love others” is to help through “righteousness”, that is, to let rational, upright, and virtuous people lead other people who are wounded, distorted, selfish, and skewed to go on the right track and return to a healthy and positive moral road. This kind of benevolent practice requires the collaboration and cooperation of others, and it cannot be turned around just by one’s own strength. In the process of moral practice, it is unrealistic to only ask everyone to examine whether their motives are unconditionally good and to act in accordance with the rational principles of self-discipline. A virtuous gentleman needs friends to assist, sharpen, and temper each other’s “benevolence”, and he needs to reflect on himself in the confrontation with teachers and friends. “Benevolence” is by no means a self-sufficient self-legislation, nor is it a moral law endowed by rational reasoning. If it cannot be adapted and

adjusted with people in real-life experiences, it will easily become an arbitrary moral code of violence and cannibalism.

## Conclusion

True happiness (eudemonia) cannot be achieved only by the comfort and convenience of life or material satisfaction. Its achievement lies in the self-cultivation and improvement of morality in human beings, and Confucian self-cultivation theory can play a crucial role in this achievement. As the economic market and technological progress define the values of the current world, they not only fail to improve the moral level of humans but may even be the root cause of moral decline. Taking a process-oriented perspective, everything in the human world, including morality, changes with changes in the external environment. Similarly, in the humanistic world, interpersonal or group interactions are common events that originally belonged to neutrality, which will also change with the surrounding factors, causing conflicts, even deterioration, and leading to the breakdown of relationships. However, it can also lead to closer relationships or a better understanding of each other through conflict resolution or clarification. The deterioration of the current global morality is only a temporary result, not an absolute consequence. Whether it will gradually improve in a positive direction or gradually deteriorate in a negative direction depends on the positive initiative and moral cultivation of human beings, as well as how to create a situation that allows surrounding factors to adjust and change, thereby transforming this moral deterioration into a positive one. If we can actively promote the Confucian moral concept of self-cultivation so that people can always reflect on themselves or carefully check their own behavior and motives in the process of economic and technological development, whether they will cause harm to others, the next generation, nonhuman species or the whole earth and to consider how to contribute to the happiness of all mankind, i.e., not only to be good for oneself but also for the world, so that the next generation will be happy and the earth will be sustainable.

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# 9

## An Appalachian Indigenous Tradition of Faith

W. Paul Williamson  and Ralph W. Hood

*Rejoice in this redemption, but recall that I am the matrix of the empty tomb.*  
—Joseph S. Salemi

In a tradition of faith more maligned than understood, we want to allow the Christian Serpent Handlers of Appalachia to speak of their own faith with minimal interpretation. We have no desire other than to persuade readers that these contemporary Christian serpent handling sects (CSHS, hereafter) are an indigenous faith tradition that has most often been explored by those whose own worldviews, whether secular or religious, have created in modern times a tradition of faith that resists colonialism. More specifically, they oppose (a) settler colonialism in lands

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with mineral wealth such as oil and coal and (b) settler colonialism in which land is appropriated from indigenous inhabitants (Lloyd & Wolfe, 2016; Preston, 2013). With respect to the latter, these cultures are denied credence in favor of the colonizers inherently associated with colonization, which is what Camba (2014) refers to as its morphed twin, neoliberalism. We agree with Guber and Scherling (2020)—it is axiomatic that neoliberalism is a form of colonialism. While there are nuanced differences, there is consensus that an unequal distribution of wealth is inherent when denying through colonizing (Strakosch, 2016; Venn, 2009), which in turn fosters the neoliberalism myth, claiming that market exchange itself is capable of being a guide for all of human behavior (Harvey, 2005). The myths of both colonialism and neoliberalism are embedded in worldviews that challenge indigenous cultural understandings these traditions have of their own faith practices, which themselves are subtle ways of resistance to colonialism and neoliberalism (Simmons, 2020). Our purpose in this chapter is, therefore, to document this resistance in the voices of the indigenous traditions—CSHS, in particular—who have successfully subverted efforts to colonialize their beliefs and practices.

The importance of giving CSHS their own voice on these matters is reflected in the contrasting work of notable authors who have taken pen to represent this tradition to a largely uninformed audience. The trial of one handler, accused of forcing his wife to be bitten by a serpent, led to the popular book on serpent handlers, *Salvation on Sand Mountain* (1995), in which the author, Dennis Covington, a gifted writer, summarizes and inserts himself into a tradition he badly misrepresented (Hood, 1995). A sympathetic scholar, Thomas Burton (2004), interviewed most individuals involved in the actual trial, allowing them to express their views in their own words, and left readers to reach their own conclusions. Below we do the same, taking advantage of the largest archival collection of CSHS audio and visual recordings to date, which recently have been converted to digital format and placed online.<sup>1</sup> They are readily available to scholars and others who may simply be curious about what is arguably America's most unique form of religious expression. They span four generations of handlers, so children from the tradition can see their great grandparents handle from their own youth, and their deceased

parents handling (some fatally bitten) and testifying of their faith. In this chapter, we will draw from this extensive CSHS collection, using their own words to illuminate the meaning of their beliefs and practices.

While scholars seek to document the history of CSHS, there is a general agreement that their persistence is mixed with traditions whose histories are well documented. Scholars, increasingly influenced by the philosophy of Wittgenstein, note that developmental histories depend on forming various family resemblances such that multiple perspectives always exist (Beale & Kidd, 2017; Rosch, 1987). Three traditions most relevant in the context of CSHS are the Holiness (Synan, 1997), fundamentalist (Hood et al., 2005), and Pentecostal traditions (Hood & Williamson, 2008). Pollack and Rosta (2018) argue that Pentecostals may be characterized as fundamentalists, and we suggest that Holiness groups also be included. Furthermore, while written histories often focus on the organizational structures of these traditions, family resemblances are often poorly revealed. Holt (1940, p. 740) noted the failure to study the less organized Holiness and Pentecostal traditions that share a variety of family resemblances with organized fundamentalists, who are poorly revealed in scholarly written histories. In addition, different oral histories clash with different written histories (Hood, 2005). For instance, one respected history of Pentecostalism devotes but one sentence to serpent handlers (Wacker, 2003, p. 74). Oral histories (Hood, 2005) report that Holiness was itself fundamentalist before the written documentation of organized fundamentalism as a distinct movement occurred. In his own narrative history of CSHS, Jimmy Morrow documents that the Bible itself served as an unquestionable point of reference for all that serpent handlers believe, practice, and experience, and forms various linkages with both Holiness and Pentecostal groups.

Narrative histories form their own family resemblances such that what appear as similar genres can subvert one another. One need only contrast Lou Crabtree's (1984) narrative of Appalachia with that of Dennis Covington (1995) noted above. Both focus upon salvation, although Crabtree's book, *Sweet Hollow*, provides a non-colonial understanding that is not subverting of CSHS as Covington's book is. At her death from natural causes at 93, her poem *Salvation* was printed in the program for her funeral. While two great southern writers both

talk of salvation, their genres are radically different. For both, salvation is “flirting with death,” but they are not the same salvation (see Appalachian life and culture, n.d.).

Using all this as a context, this chapter will explore the indigenous beliefs and practices of CSHS from their own perspective. This will take into account their attitudes toward the King James Version (KJV) Bible as their source of truth and conduct, their obedience in following its dictates, their intra-family differences, conflicts they have encountered with the larger culture, a potential means for their defense, and finally, an understanding of particular beliefs they hold about serpent handling, in their own words. Our aim is to provide a better understanding of CSHS, who too often have been maligned, pathologized, and dismissed, always by those holding to an ethnocentric frame of reference, linked to both colonialism and neoliberalism, and the inequality they mask (Moyan, 2018).

## The Primacy of a Sacred Text and Belief

Elsewhere we have argued that what uniquely characterizes fundamentalism—and CSHS by extension—is commitment to a single sacred text, identified by the concept, *intratextuality* (Hood et al., 2005). The intratextual model can be applied to any tradition that maintains unwavering allegiance to a text, written or lived. Both written texts (Juel, 1994) and cultures as lived experience (Geertz, 1997) require interpretation, not the identification of causation. The key question is the source of the interpretation (McIntyre, 1984).

While CSHS are widely identified by their unique practice of handling serpents in response to their understanding of Mark 16:17–18, their “flirting with death” cannot be understood if taken out of context or placed within a colonialism that seeks to subvert the practice. CSHS has always formed a family resemblance with groups that sought to embrace a text as a form of life. For CSHS, in particular, the essential focus is on the KJV Bible, which is what they accept as *the* word of God—the overarching penumbra for their life. They believe that all of scripture is the *Word* of God and speak interchangeably of *God* and the *Word*.

This includes rejecting modern scholarly interpretations of scripture, including colonial efforts associated with *higher criticism* of scripture, which is inherently *intertextual*, not *intratextual* (Hood & Williamson, 2014). Thus, handlers are not disturbed by scholarly claims that the original Gospel of Mark ends abruptly, and that there are several variations of the longer endings (e.g., Mark 16:9–20). CSHS simply believe that the KJV Bible is authoritative and can be trusted as the infallible Word of God (Carden & Pelton, 1976).

What most characterizes CSHS is not the vast majority of their beliefs and practices, which form close family resemblances with other Christian traditions, but what is unique to CSHS—the handling of serpents in obedience to Mark 16:17–18. However, as with any text, variations in understanding do occur. What came to define CSHS was their understanding that, if one believes then action must follow, which interestingly is reflective of American pragmatism. The entire Word must be believed, and beliefs must be visible in action. The link between belief and action is obedience. Holiness is an outward manifestation of the lived experience of faith. We will explore this basic claim by noting that, only as CSHS began to emerge, did the family resemblance among other emerging Pentecostals become distinct. What were to become two successful Pentecostal denominations, the Church of God (COG; Cleveland, Tennessee) and the Church of God of Prophecy, came to embrace the charismatic signs of Pentecostalism in the first decade of the twentieth century, largely through the influence of its transformed leader, A. J. Tomlinson, who preached to his membership, strongly and often, the passage of Mark 16:15–20 as an impetus for evangelism.<sup>2</sup>

## **Faith Subverting Colonialism and Neoliberalism: Exemplar George Went Hensley**

Although George Went Hensley certainly was not the first serpent handler, most scholars admit that he was a colorful figure who played a manifest role in spreading this practice in the early twentieth century

(Williamson & Hood, 2004). Not far from his east Tennessee home, the recently converted Hensley encountered a fledgling Pentecostal group known as the COG, which emphasized three of the signs of Mark 16:17–18. He was perplexed about the conspicuous omission of another sign in the text, allowing for the handling of venomous serpents as a demonstration of God's power. According to his own account (cited in Collins, 1947), he went to a mountain just outside Chattanooga, Tennessee, struggling with the meaning of this passage, when suddenly a timber rattler crawled and coiled by his side. Resolving that this was itself a sign, he stretched forth a trembling hand, taking up the serpent without harm. Transformed by this experience, Hensley descended the mountain to preach serpent handling as a compelling sign of the gospel that believers should practice as obedient followers of Christ.

Not long after, Hensley's handling of serpents in the community gained notice from A. J. Tomlinson, the General Overseer of the COG, who was concerned with adding new members to his Holiness-Pentecostal sect (Williamson & Hood, 2004). For some time, Tomlinson had emphasized the Markan practices of exorcism, tongue-speaking, and divine healing by laying on hands as evangelism tools for gaining new converts. He was especially impressed by Hensley's ability to handle venomous snakes with impunity, and, for a time, welcomed him among his ministerial ranks.

Tomlinson's concern with growing his church was a factor in his enthusiastic endorsement of Hensley and serpent handling. He was a strong advocate for the handling of serpents as a legitimate sign from the beginning, based on his intratextual interpretation of scripture. As general overseer, he authored several *Church of God Evangel* articles supporting the practice. At an early annual overseer's address to an assembly of the general membership, he noted:

The souls that have been saved and the backsliders reclaimed would probably number up into the thousands, judging from the many reports that have come in from every direction ... Under the illumination of God's love and mighty power many signs and wonders have been wrought in the name of the Holy child Jesus. Many miraculous cases of healing have been witnessed. Wild poison serpents have been taken up and handled

and fondled over almost like babies with no harm to the saints ...We are beginning to surpass all others [churches] in miraculous signs and wonders. (Tomlinson, 1914, p. 15)

By this time, Hensley's stellar model of biblical obedience in handling serpents was making an impact in this new Pentecostal denomination, for it was in the second decade of the twentieth century that the COG made its greatest strides in handling serpents in revival campaigns, which significantly added to its membership (Williamson & Hood, 2004).

## Family Conflict and Changes in Family Resemblances

Serpent handling remains problematic because of the unpredictability of serpent-striking behavior (Hood, 1998; Hood & Williamson, 2008). However, frequency of handling is one factor that increases the probability of a bite, itself unpredictable in terms of consequences, from a simple dry bite to maiming, and possible death. Thus, as handling increased in frequency, bites became more common in the COG. This led to tension within the various family resemblances of the COG and what would emerge as CSHS.

The first strain involved the loss of support in the COG that followed Tomlinson's impeachment from office in 1923, for financial and administrative concerns (Hood & Williamson, 2008). With Tomlinson gone, critics who had been silent during his tenure began voicing their concerns about serpent handling first as "fanaticism" (Heath, 1928) and then as "an insult to God, [and] a reproach to the cause of Christ" (Harris, 1949, p. 9). Trending toward denominational status, the COG increasingly marginalized and finally denounced the practice as rank fanaticism (Williamson & Hood, 2004). The mother church now denounced two of the signs of Mark 16, those that could maim and kill.

Our archives have the largest footage of handling. Our concern here is with those who are obedient to a practice that can maim and kill, but rarely does. For years now, we have attended far more than 200 services and observed well over a thousand individual serpent handlings, yet we

have witnessed but a dozen or so serpent bites, only a few of which were fatal. In all this time, we have had four personal acquaintances among the group, two very close, who were fatally bitten. We will return to this after first looking at the efforts to colonialize the practice by making it criminal.

## **Conflict, Colonialism, and Neoliberalism: Criminalizing the Practice of Faith**

Aside from being ostracized from their mother church, CSHS began drawing attention from the larger culture, primarily because of increasing media reports of serpent bites and occasional deaths (Williamson & Hood, 2015b). As serpent handling, then, was practiced with more frequency, newspapers reported 40 serpent bite deaths, between 1931 and 1960, in southeastern states bordering the Appalachians as well as West Virginia, which is completely landlocked by the mountains. With such notoriety came a rising tide of public concern for protecting the community from a practice that—though it is religious—made widows and orphans of its citizens. From the 1940s through the 1950s, this unease moved legislatures of six Appalachian states and some local governments to pass measures sanctioning serpent handling, not on the basis of religious belief in a plain reading of Mark 16:17–18, but under the claim of a state's compelling interest to protect the faithful from being obedient, i.e., practicing their faith (Hood & Williamson, 2008; Kerns, 2013).

Kentucky was the first state to draft legislation to criminalize serpent handling in 1940. It targeted only religious groups and curiously made reference to banning the use of any reptile in a religious service. Georgia, however, imposed the most severe sanction in response to reports of bites including children. The law not only prohibited the practice of handling serpents, but also its teaching as a religious doctrine; violators were charged with a felony, with one to twenty years of imprisonment upon conviction. If one died because of the practice, the responsible party would be handed an automatic death sentence upon conviction, unless leniency was recommended by the jury. In 1968, however,

Georgia deleted this law in rewriting its state code, but not before two preachers—Warren Lipham in 1938 (three years prior to the passage of the law) and Charlie Hall in 1960—were charged with murder and tried, but then acquitted by juries of their peers (Hood & Williamson, 2008).

Other states soon followed suit (Hood & Williamson, 2008; Kerns, 2013). In 1947, both Virginia and Tennessee passed misdemeanor laws against serpent handling that carried penalties of fines and/or imprisonment. In 1949, North Carolina also charged serpent handling as a misdemeanor with a penalty like those imposed by Virginia and Tennessee; however, the North Carolina law also made it illegal to “exhort” or “induce” others to practice handling—thus even the preaching of serpent handling was outlawed. The last state to legalize serpent handling was Alabama, which, in 1950, considered it a felony with imprisonment of one to five years upon conviction, though three years later, the offense was reduced to a misdemeanor, as in Virginia and Tennessee. In 1975, however, Alabama rewrote its state code and removed all references to religious serpent handling. Outside of Georgia and Alabama, all other states have kept their laws intact to the present day.

It is striking, though, that one Appalachian state, West Virginia, provided a counter to the others regarding the freedom of serpent handlers to practice their faith. The best-known serpent-handling church in West Virginia, during this era, was the Church of the Lord Jesus, co-pastored by the late Bob and Barbara Elkins in Jolo. In 1961, Barbara’s daughter, Columbia Gaye Chafin Hagerman, encountered a rattlesnake bite at church, refused medical treatment, and died at her parents’ home four days later.

Given the wide publicity surrounding her death, West Virginia legislators introduced a bill to ban serpent handling; however, Barbara, and others supporting her, testified before the state legislature that they would persist in handling serpents, even if illegal (Brown & McDonald, 2000). Despite their testimony, the West Virginia House members passed the ban in February of 1963, making serpent handling a misdemeanor with a fine from \$1 to \$500 (House okays ban, 1963). However, publicity surrounding the ban and support from local communities sympathetic to serpent-handling churches thwarted the effort. The Judiciary Committee on the Senate side later refused to act on the bill, and since its refusal,



West Virginia has made no further attempt to pass legislation against serpent handling.

However, Kerns (2013), writing for the *West Virginia Law Review*, has proposed options for overcoming “West Virginia as the Counter State” (pp. 571–572), based on its successful refusal to ban serpent handling as noted above. He provides specific means whereby West Virginia can and should protect the faithful from their faith: “The law should prohibit the display or use of any living poisonous snake, reptile, or other dangerous animal in a religious service, followed by a breakdown in degree of the offense scaled to increase from a lone handling (least offense) to handling amidst any child to the greatest offense” (p. 579). Kerns proposal also includes an involuntary manslaughter charge for any person who preaches in a religious service in which serpent handling leads to someone injured or killed by a snakebite. Here is a paradigm instance of opposition to indigenous practices by those who prefer to colonialize indigenous traditions of faith. This amounts to colonialism claiming to protect the faithful from their faith not by confronting indigenous beliefs, but by constraining their expression. The response by believers is to be expected—and that is, to maintain obedience to their faith tradition in opposition to those who would legislate against it for their own (the handlers’) good.

## **Giving the Indigenous a Method in Their Defense: Subversion of Colonialism and Neoliberalism in Their Own Words**

In view of all previously discussed, we provide three methodological means through which this indigenous tradition can have its voice heard. First and foremost we have made online access to our archives available to everyone. All interviews, services, funerals, and other materials are unedited. Included are actual bites, handlers dying from bites, and rare instances of actual death from serpent bites caught when a service was being recorded, either from home video or by other means. All now have been converted and are searchable on MP4. Here is an example

of how access to this indigenous resource can be helpful: It is a simple act of obedience that defines a tradition where, as many have said, the imperative to take up serpents does *not* include assurance that one will not experience a bite. Our method allows the reader who, to date, had access only to select or edited quotes from handlers, regarding this fact, but one may now go to the archives and search for the interview, service, or other circumstance, and see the quote in context, unedited. To do this we use three procedures.

First, since many of the interviews and services can be watched in their entirety, scholars and others can easily read our excerpts, even when participants are unidentified (as some were interviewed at a time when anonymity was assured), and if persistent, they likely can locate the entire context from which data were extracted. For persons now deceased, their names below are given with the cause of their death: serpent bite death (SBD) or natural cause death (NCD).

Second, hundreds of newspaper and media reports of serpent handlers can be checked if the material was excerpted from our archives, or if reporting on something from our archives also was covered, but not as a “sound bite” or “media opportunity.” Our archives always allow the full context to be taken into account. This includes neoliberal efforts to monetize the tradition by the creation of “reality TV” and “documentaries” for which pastors were paid. Our archives allow for access of the detailed response of those within and outside the tradition, and also direct access to the classic neoliberal success (or lack thereof) in monetizing this tradition.

Finally, a useful longitudinal procedure is illustrated, using the rare reporting of Brown and McDonald (2000). They interviewed several serpent-handling families. After writing up their interviews, but before publishing them, they were submitted to each family member to correct or remove material. Thus, the reader has descriptions of interviewees in their own words, dictated to their satisfaction. Most handlers interviewed by Brown and McDonald are also in our archives, so that what the handlers say about themselves in their own words can be identified and, in many cases, placed and evaluated longitudinally. For instance, some believers stated they would not seek medical attention if bitten; however, some were later bitten and did, while others who were later

bitten did not. As in other cases, if the person is deceased, he or she is identified. If not, he or she can be located by searching our archives.

The availability of digitized interviews and unedited worship services in our archives, and the ability to search these sources for facts about this indigenous tradition from the members' own accounts, affords serpent handlers one method of defense against misinformation from those who would sensationalize, malign, or delegitimize their faith. Now, we turn to an example of how their own words might be found useful in illuminating their serpent-handling beliefs.

## **Fundamental Beliefs of CSHS: The Indigenous View (in Their Own Words)**

In discussing the emergence of laws against handling above, we noted that the colonial reason is to invert the indigenous understanding of “flirting with death.” The indigenous response is to defy the laws and continue handling serpents, along with support from other indigenous Appalachian traditions that, while not sharing CSHS beliefs, do support their right to be faithful to their beliefs (Hood & Kimbrough, 1995; Williamson & Hood, 2015b). Handlers take seriously that the issue is not whether you die, but *how* you die. Dying obedient to God assures salvation. The belief that the handlers could not die from serpent bites quickly proved false as the practice was institutionalized and became more frequent. While bites are rare, death from bites is even rarer, as we noted above. When interviewing an aged handler, who had suffered many bites and had never sought medical attention, he explained:

If [a serpent] bites you and takes you away from here, why, that's fine. I don't care. That's the way I want to go anyhow when I die. But I'm in no big hurry for it ... I told them I wanted them to have church when they put me away, just like we have church ... taking up serpents ... that's what I want. I want to be rolled in here ... [and] them have church over me, and handle serpents ... I want it just like we're having church, and I want it to be real spiritual. I want some of them to sing when

they're wheeling me out, "I Won't Be Coming Back Anymore." (Hood & Williamson, 2008, p. 271; Dewey Chaffin, NCD)

Again, from the indigenous perspective, the concern here is how one dies. Only with obedience is salvation assured.

From the same family, Lucille Chafin Church (NCD) made an effort to disidentify from the pejorative, colonial term, "snake handler." She gained national notoriety when the *Saturday Evening Post* published a picture of her handling a serpent in the late stages of her pregnancy. Already she had been a handler since her teens as a simple act of obedience, but when questioned about the photo, she retorted:

This is our point. You could be harmed by driving too fast or drinking too much. But people say we bring it on ourselves. We go out, we catch the serpents, [and] we handle serpents. Others think we say, "Well, bite me and kill me," but that's not the intent. It's the verse, "Thou shalt take up serpents." That's the intent. (Brown & McDonald, 2000, p. 333)

Lucille was never bitten, and like many handlers, she disliked being called a snake handler: "And don't call me a snake handler. I'm a child of God. Serpent handling is a sign of the Lord's Gospel, not a person. It is a small part of my religious belief, not who I am" (Brown & McDonald, 2000, p. 337; Lucille Church, NCD).

The attitudes conveyed by these two serpent-handling believers reflect from fundamental beliefs about the practice held by many, if not all, members of CSHS represented in our archives. The senior author (Williamson, 2022) drew from 16 in-depth handler interviews in our archives to investigate these beliefs about serpent handling more fully, using a phenomenological-hermeneutic method that, in this present case, focused not upon the experience of handling serpents, but upon descriptions of beliefs concerning it. We have extensively documented and applied this methodology elsewhere, beginning with Williamson (1999) and then other studies (e.g., Hood & Williamson, 2008, pp. 247–256; Williamson & Hood, 2015a). Here we excerpt data from Williamson (2022) as applied to the descriptions of four cardinal beliefs pertaining to serpent handling, using verbatim quotes, from their own words, to

provide brief exemplars. As will be seen, all beliefs are connected to obedience to God, which is at the heart of the serpent-handling tradition.

### **Belief 1. Mandate for Obedience**

All participants in the study believe, first and foremost, that serpent handling is an explicit command from the risen Jesus requiring obedience, as stated in Mark 16:17–18. The word *shall* is understood as a clear imperative for believers. In one way or another, participants described their experiences of handling serpents in relation to this passage. For example, one participant declared emphatically:

I just do it because I'm obeying the Word of God. Because the Word says, "You shall take up serpents." That's the only reason I do it is to obey the Word. (Williamson, 2022, p. 16; Dewey Chafin, NCD)

Outside observers often make a distinction between religious belief and practice, while serpent handlers do not. For them, both belief and obedience through practice are inextricably linked: believing requires taking up serpents in obedience to the Bible.

The Bible says, "They shall take up serpents." And you want to believe it. It said to be a doer of the Word and not a hearer only, deceiving your own self. So I want to be a doer of the Word, and I'm not deceiving myself, in that respect ... So actually, we're deceiving ourselves when we say we believe it and are not doing it, [which applies to] anything, not just taking up serpents, any part of the Word of God. (Williamson, 2022, p. 17; Dewey Chafin, NCD)

### **Belief 2. Power for Obedience**

Based on participant interviews, there are two sources of power or enablement for obeying the mandate to take up serpents. One is through faith that God will make handling possible and the other is through anointing.

***A. Power Through Faith.*** Although most believers handle serpents by the anointing (see below), some are moved simply by the exercise of faith, which is depicted here.

I believe that you can take up serpents on faith, not feeling anything. Just faith. I believe that you can do it on faith because the Word of God says it, but if you get bit, the same faith that you took up serpents on will have to be the same faith to get you through that snake bite. (Williamson, 2022, p. 190; unnamed handler)

Here, a woman handles for her very first time by faith alone.

I went and went and went and went [back to that church], and he [the pastor] would offer them [serpents] to me ... And I was just scared to death ... I was beating them [cymbals], and he offered it to me, and I first turned my head and shut my eyes. Whenever I looked back around, he was standing in the same place with it, offering it to me. And I said, “Lord, you told me ‘I shall,’ and that ‘shall’ means ‘shore enough.’” And I said, “I’m just a baby in this.” And I said, “I’m just gonna take you at your Word.” So the next thing I knew. I went up there, and I had a serpent in my hand. The whole church was [dancing in worship], and there I stood with a serpent in my hand. (Williamson, 2022, p. 19; Bobby Sue Lynn, NCD)

***B. Power Through the Anointing.*** Handling serpents through the power of anointing contrasts significantly from handling through faith. All participants shared experiences of handling serpents through the anointing, most often described as the power of God moving or coming upon them in a bodily way.

The power of God began to move upon me, and I thought that there was no harm. I began to just look up and let God take my mind, blocked everything out from all around me, and said, “God, here I am. Just whatever you want me to do, God. Ever how you want to move on me, here I am, Lord, thank you ... God, I praise you today” ... It’s, uh—It’s so hard that ... you just can’t explain it ... That’s just the way it is ... [participant tearfully experiencing anointing at that moment] ... I began to handle that serpent, and like I said, that began to come from another world—something that I can’t explain. (Williamson, 2022, p. 19; unnamed participant)

Since the anointing is from God, handlers must be aware of when it is present and when it is not.

I'm a firm believer that, if the spirit of God has got you anointed to take up a serpent, then that serpent can't hurt you. It may bite you, but it can't hurt you—not if you're anointed by God to take *that* serpent up. (Williamson, 2022, p. 22, our emphasis; Billy Lemming, NCD).

Under the anointing, handlers can be directed to handle a particular snake. They also can be directed to put it down. One handler who was handling suddenly was bitten. He explained:

He told me to put him [the serpent] up. I didn't put him up. That's disobedience. Disobedience is sin. Sin will get you bit. (Williamson, 2022, p. 21, Jamie Coots, SBD)

The CSHS indigenous understanding of the anointing provides a rich tapestry in what seems like simple, often random acts that, in fact, emerge from a felt awareness of God's will for their salvation, and what is a profound ever-present awareness of "flirting with death" (see Appalachian life and culture, n.d.).

Understanding CSHS' rich use of scripture reflects an Appalachian culture that sympathetic outsiders can sense by reading Ecclesiastes. Handlers have a keen awareness that not only is salvation "flirting with death," it also realizes that failing to be obedient to God has consequences: "He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it; and whoso breaketh an hedge, a serpent shall bite him" (Ecclesiastes 10:8 [KJV]).

### **Belief 3. Overcomers Through Obedience**

Based on the analysis, interviewees believed themselves to be overcomers through their obedience in handling serpents. They often described overcoming as "victory," and they gained it in two specific but related ways: overcoming the serpent and overcoming death.

**A. *Overcoming the Serpent.*** In a very real sense, obedience to the mandate to handle is concerned with overcoming the serpent, which was illustrated by one participant who was moved by the anointing and

took the serpent out of one brother's hand ... and I just said, "I bind you in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ." And that serpent just straightened out just as straight as a rod, and I handed him back, and I came back to my seat ... To me, once I've handled him, I feel the serpent come under subjection, totally under subjection. He has no power. There's nothing else for me to do with him. (Williamson, 2022, p. 22; unnamed participant)

**B. Overcoming Death.** In telling of their serpent-handling encounters, all participants were very much aware of death as a possibility. This is clearly illustrated by one participant's description:

When he [the anointing] gets on you, then you're ready [for handling serpents]. When the Spirit of the Lord gets on you, it's a wonderful feeling. It's joy. I mean, it's like you take up death in your arms and just hold it there and not worry about it. (Williamson, 2022, p. 23; Junior McCormick, NCD)

Pastor Billy Summerford, who experienced many bites, described his second during a church service, one that he thought was surely fatal. As typical when a bite occurs, believers gathered around him, laying on hands for healing. However, the effects of the venom did not abate, so he

fell, and I couldn't even get up. They carried me home. There were some of the sinner people that come here ... They wanted to take me to the doctor. She [his wife] said, "No. There ain't no use in that. Don't even think that" ... I'd go out, and I'd fade back in ... I remember people praying for me ... I began to talk to the Lord ... You'll just start backtracking to see if you owe anybody anything or you need to fix anything. I felt like everything was clear ... And I turned my face to the wall, and I said, "Well Lord, if I wake up in the morning, I'll still be the pastor of that church. If I ain't, send them a good pastor ... Whatever you want to do, it's up to you." (Billy Summerford, NCD)

Brother Billy, in his faithful obedience, literally overcame death delivered through the fang of this serpent and handled another serpent with impunity at the very next service after his recovery. Although he



was bitten more than a dozen times before a natural death, he—like most serpent handlers—never sought medical assistance at any of those times. He was careful, however, never to condemn any who did seek it, believing it was a personal decision.

In cases like this, and even in instances of death, participants persisted in believing the outcome was victory.

[A song] says, “If I stay, it’s alright. If I go, it’s alright. I’ve got the victory anyway.” So if you’re bit, and maybe you think you’re going to die, it’s alright if you die. But if you stay, it’s alright anyway. When we become a Christian, our life is not ours; it’s God’s ... God has a plan for everybody, and if you fit into that plan, and you get bit and you die, that’s the plan. That’s what he wants. If you get the victory [without dying], that’s what he wants. I have a finger [crippled by a serpent bite] that people walk up to me, “Why did God let your finger be crippled? ... That’s God’s plan. (Williamson, 2022, p. 24; unnamed participant)

It seems appropriate to mention we attended the Pastor Summerford’s 2021 homecoming, always held Father’s Day weekend. As it approached, he was dying from stage four lung cancer that went undiagnosed until a few weeks before he died. Urged by his family, he finally saw a physician to learn the cause of his illness, then simply returned home to die. From the onset of symptoms, he repeatedly called for believers to anoint him with oil and lay hands on him for healing, as he had practiced since conversion—and this we witnessed, as believers gathered around his frail body at his homecoming, one month before his death. On medical attention, serpent handlers often seek it for health issues, if they fail to receive divine healing. However, it is rare that they seek it in the case of serpent bite. Regardless of the outcome, their faithful obedience to God has reaped them “the victory anyway.”

#### **Belief 4. Confirmation Through Obedience**

Manifestations of the five Markan signs are believed to serve as indicators to unbelievers that the claims of the gospel are true. This is especially so with the unusual sign of handling venomous serpents, particularly if the handler is bitten without harm. When preaching on the signs, serpent

handlers typically quote Mark 16:17–18, but often also add verse 20, the last verse of that chapter: “And they went forth, and preached everywhere, the Lord working with *them*, and confirming the Word with signs following. Amen” (KJV, emphasis original). However, impunity from a bite is not necessarily required for the effects of confirming the Word. Observing believers handling without suffering a bite was what compelled most participants to become serpent handlers themselves. This was the case for a participant describing his first attendance at a serpent handling service:

I was praising the Lord, and I had my hands uplifted, and I opened my eyes, and they had serpents *out!* ... They had serpents out everywhere ... and I just kind of froze in my tracks, in a sense, and I was just amazed—actually—I could just see the power of God moving. I was just amazed at these serpents being bound by the power of God. (Williamson, 2022, p. 26; unnamed participant)

This participant was so moved by this confirmation of the gospel that, moments later, he stepped forward as a converted believer himself, taking up his first serpent. Another participant, who at his interview was a pastor, described the transformational effect he observed when first witnessing believers obey the mandate to handle.

Unbelievers can see the Lord moving on you, and they know that there’s something there. That’s really how I got to believing, you know, got to believing in this, cause I saw something or other move on people that I knew was real, and I wanted it. And whenever the Lord moves like that, you can see people’s countenance change—their whole appearance. It’s just like they light up or something or other. (Williamson, 2022, p. 26; Carl Porter, NCD)

The above summary analysis of archival data identified four fundamental beliefs of the serpent-handling tradition, each based on descriptions highlighting their own words. In them, one will find no explanations of their faith such as “tempting God,” or the “milking of venom” to avoid harm from poisonous serpents. However, one will discover in them

what is a cornerstone of this indigenous tradition—and that is, obedience to what is perceived as a mandate of Christ, and the nuanced ways it emerges in their practice of faith.

## Conclusion: No Obituary to Write When Faith Subverts Colonialism and Neoliberalism

It is unlikely that anyone reading this chapter will decide to practice this unique ritual that can, but rarely does, maim and kill. However, we have been successful in letting CSHS speak for themselves. While most CSHS refuse media attention, some have courted it with great regrets. Ironically, those with regrets have allowed us to document that fact. Others have seen the media as another way of spreading the Word. One pastor, Jimmy Morrow—the last of our archived handlers to die (January 24, 2023)—not only published his own oral history (Hood, 2005) but also allowed media and documentaries to film his church several times. His attitude toward the media in this regard reflected that of another of our archived pastor-handlers of yesteryears, who also welcomed secular media into his services. This pastor's own view was that

some of it's pretty well positive, especially [for] people that's seeing it [serpent handling] from Germany or Japan or someplace like that ... To me, I believe that's getting part of the Word out ... The Bible said this gospel must first be published in all nations, then the end would come. I believe that it's just part of the Word of God. (Carl Porter, NCD)

We think that CSHS will persist, despite scholars' assurance that their obituary is soon forthcoming. Elsewhere (Hood & Williamson, 2014), we have speculated that Christian serpent handling likely occurred in antiquity and continue to explore available research concerning it (Hood & Williamson, 2008; Kelhoffer, 2000). Although there are speculations that it may have existed, there is no strong empirical evidence to support that it did. However, it would not be surprising to learn of Christians handling serpents since the advent of Protestantism, which placed the Bible into the hands of laity for private reading and interpretation.

In the eighteenth and into the nineteenth centuries, the first and second great awakenings in the US bear witness to emotionalism and various forms of ecstatic worship, paving the way for the eventual rise of the Holiness-Pentecostal movement (Synan, 1997); thus, the circumstances for serpent handling to possibly appear were present for centuries.

Finally, contemporary indigenous handlers often appeal not only to Mark 16:17–18, but to the final verse of this disputed but always accepted canonical gospel: “And they went forth, and preached everywhere, the Lord working with *them*, and confirming the Word with signs following. Amen” (Mark, 20, emphasis original). For indigenous CSHS this means Christ and his earliest followers handled serpents. While adequate scholarly evidence is lacking, we think it is likely they did. Amen, indeed!

## Notes

1. The first archive is *Ralph W. Hood and W. Paul Williamson Holiness Churches of Appalachia Recordings and Interviews*, which includes more than 400 hours of videoed church services and interviews documenting contemporary serpent handlers of Southern Appalachia. Ranging primarily from 1975 to 2004, a unique collection of video footage that documents most of the major serpent-handling congregations, including: Church of God in Jesus Christ’s Name, Del Rio, Tennessee; Church of the Lord Jesus, Jolo, West Virginia; Church of the Lord Jesus Christ, Kingston, Georgia; Church of the True Believers in Jesus’ Name, Calhoun, Georgia; Full Gospel Tabernacle in Jesus’ Name, Middlesboro, Kentucky; and Rock House Holiness Church, Sand Mountain, Alabama.

The second archive is *Vance, Mary Jesus Name Tradition and Photographs and Home Movies*. This digital collection features images that document the practice of imbibing poisons and serpent handling, taken by a woman who attended serpent-handling churches as a child. The photographs provide an intimate exploration of the lives and deaths of believers as images of practitioners

were largely captured in their homes. It includes rare documentation of preteens handling serpents.

We are grateful to Carolyn Runyon, Director of Special Collections of the Lupton Library for providing the funds and means to convert all video and DVD materials to MP4. (<https://www.utc.edu/library/special-collections>).

2. Thomas and Alexander (2003, p. 149) note that Mark 16:9–20—the latter, contested ending of Mark—was unrivaled in both position and significance in early Pentecostal literature (Juel, 1994). As one comparative note, from 1910 to 1919, there were 26 references to Matthew 28:18–20, 16 references to Acts 1:8, and 75 references to Mark 16:20, among the extant issues of the *Church of God Evangel* the official publication of what was becoming a major Pentecostal denomination, the Church of God (Alexander, 2006, p. 150).

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# 10

## Sarasvati's Challenge: Human Creativity at the Crossroads of Muse and the Machine

Louise Sundararajan  and Maharaj K. Raina

Throughout the world, there is the belief that human creativity has its source in a transcendent realm of power, generally known as the Muse. When inspired by the Muse, one operates from a deeper center than usual. According to Sri Nisargadatta Maharaja (Nisargadatta, 1973), “When the center of selfishness is no longer, all desires for pleasure and fear of pain cease; one is no longer interested in being happy; beyond happiness there is pure intensity, inexhaustible energy, the ecstasy of giving from a perennial source” (p. 489). A modern Indian physicist Sudarshan (2001) said similarly: “there is a power which we would not like to identify with our limited self, a divine power, a benevolent power, the Absolute, which is all intelligence, all creativity and which reaches out to you provided that you are in a receptive mood at that particular

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time” (p. 179). All these testimonials resonate with one of the earliest Greek hymns to the Muse:

Sing to me, beloved Muse,  
 And I will answer with my song.  
 Breathe your breath across your groves,  
 And all my soul will tremble. (Mesomedes, cited in Skafté, 2004, p. 35)

In this chapter, we introduce the Goddess Sarasvati as one of the best articulations of the Muse genre.

## **Sarasvati, the *Muse Par Excellence***

In Hinduism, goddess worship is not a marginal expression but is central to even the most orthodox elements of the tradition. Goddess Sarasvati, worshiped throughout India, is the cosmic feminine force, known for having “created all the arts and sciences” (Skafté, 2004 p. 7). Etymologically, the Sanskrit word *Sara* means essence, and *sva* means one’s self. Therefore, the word Sarasvati means the one who leads us to the essence of self-knowledge. Several hymns have been written in praise of Sarasvati in the Rig Veda. The idea of Sarasvati has evolved since then in India. She is described in the Sarasvati Rahasya Upanishad hymn (from Johnsen, 1999, pp. 49–50):

You are the swan gliding over the pond of creative energy,  
 waves and waves of creative force emanating from your form!  
 All things, all languages, arise from you  
 and immerse themselves again in you.  
 Meditating thus, we visualize you  
 as supreme, formless being.  
 Sarasvati, may we remain immersed in you!  
 Divine Mother! Ever flowing river of divine awareness,  
 We praise you, supreme consciousness and creative force!  
 Our praise is not worth much for no one honors us  
 till we are honored by you.

## A Source of Cosmic Power and Energy

Goddesses are believed to be the embodiments of the feminine principle in creation and cosmological speculations. According to Hindu mythology, Sarasvati is the divine consort of Lord Brahma, the Creator of the universe. Legend has it that Brahma, the creator, acquired the power to think and create only through the power of Sarasvati and that it was Sarasvati who enabled Brahma to listen to the *naadabrahmam*, the primordial sound that is revered as the source of all creation. The creative cosmic energy of Sarasvati is primarily expressed in two imageries: water and Word.

### Water Imageries

As the generative waters that cradled an ancient civilization, Sarasvati is the name of the celestial river (*deviy'ām*), and its personification as a goddess (*Devi*) filled with love and bliss (*bhadram, mayas*). From the water imagery, many attributes are derived. Sarasvati is the One Who Flows, the one who brings flow to one's deepest essence and most authentic gifts. According to Aurobindo (2003), she is a flowing stream, a coruscating symbol of divine movement, and the unstoppable flow of life-sustaining waters.

Another association with rivers is the imagery of crossing from the realm of ignorance or bondage to the far shore, the realm of enlightenment or freedom. Thus, Sarasvati represents the state of transition in which the spiritual sojourner undergoes a crucial metamorphosis. To the extent that Sarasvati also flows toward the Absolute, her river stands for the journey one makes from the commonsense world of duality to the still point beyond thought, thereby crossing over to a state of contented Being (Khullar, 2010).

This crossing over also entails the possibility of overcoming death by liberation from the false self (*ahankara*). This has to do with the purifying power (Kinsley, 1988) of Sarasvati's water, in which the pilgrims

drown their old selves and are born anew, free and enlightened. A related association of Sarasvati's river is wisdom. The fundamental affirmation of wisdom is that everything passes, and the worst tragedy of mankind is to cling to what is fleeting.

## The Primordial Word

As the embodiment of speech, Sarasvati is associated with *Vac*, the primordial Word. In the Vedic rituals, she is the divine source of, as well as the inspiration for, all sacred words, verses, and prayers. The Vedic Sarasvati is, according to Aurobindo (in Mukhopadhyay, 2017), "the Word, the inspiration... that comes from the *Ritam*, the Truth-Consciousness" (p. 48). *Vac* is the primordial principle, the Supreme Power, from which the world originates (Panikkar, 1994). It broadly represents spoken words or speech and oral and acoustic nonliterary sound forms emanating from all animal and plant life in nature. As the very principle underlying every kind of sound, speech, and language in nature, *Vac* is the universal, transcendent Word that enlivens, refreshes, and inspires all things; that resides in the flowing rivers and in the rains falling from the atmosphere, which then gives life to all beings.

As the embodiment of *Vac*, Sarasvati is adored as the power of truth, free from blemishes, that inspires and illuminates all noble thoughts (*chetanti sumatim*). The identification of the Word (*Vac*) with Sarasvati (the River Goddess) does not present any difficulty due to the constant emphasis on the aquatic aspect of *Vac* in the Hindu tradition. The Western philosopher Gaston Bachelard could not agree more. He writes, "Liquidity is, in my opinion, the very desire of language. Language needs to flow" (Bachelard, 1983, p. 187).

## Goddess of Culture

At the human level, Sarasvati is associated with mind, consciousness, and intelligence and their products that constitute culture. She is the flow of consciousness, or as the river of inspiration that has its source in the

larger ocean of consciousness. She represents the ever-engaged mind, the *dhaara pravah* that makes thoughts flow like a river. As an “active force behind any mental process” (Ashley-Farrand, 2003, p. 27), Sarasvati is the sum of the human intellectual tradition. She is called, for example, *Vedagarbha* (the womb or source of the Vedas), *Sarvavidyasvarupini* (the embodiment of all the sciences), *Sarvasastravasini* (one who dwells in all books), *Granthakarini* (one who causes books to be made), or one “who is the power of forming ideas” (Kinsley, 1988, p. 59). She is in every mind that thinks, in every eloquent tongue that speaks, and in the creative genius of sublime poets, artists, and scientists. As thought, intellect and expression of creative consciousness, Sarasvati represents the distinctive ability that permits human beings to create and imagine their innumerable cultural products and philosophical systems, as well as science and technology. Her association with knowledge production warrants closer examination.

## Knowledge, Sacred, and Profane

As the Goddess of knowledge and learning (Kinsley, 1988), Sarasvati is intimately connected with education and knowledge production. She is intimately associated with the creative arts (literature, music, and dance), science, and philosophy (Pintchman, 2018). She is also the basis of numbers and measuring units without which there could be no counting or accounting and quantification and evaluation. In addition, she is associated with knowledge production in the spiritual realm. She is called the Mother of the Vedas and the repository of Brahma's creative intelligence. She is referred to as *Sharda*, the fountainhead of (spiritual) knowledge that leads seekers from darkness to light and from ignorance to spiritual enlightenment. The fact that Sarasvati encompasses both realms of knowledge—secular and spiritual—is best captured in her iconography.

## Iconography

Sarasvati is usually depicted as having four (and sometimes more) hands, each holding a specific set of items that pertain to her functions and attributes in knowledge production. Her prominent function as a source and inspiration (the muse) of the creative arts is depicted by the stringed instruments, usually a veena, that she holds in her front two arms. Her primary role in education and knowledge is depicted by various items held by her rear arms. Education is represented by a pen or other learning equipment; knowledge is represented by a palm leaf manuscript, which represents the four Vedas, the most sacred books of Hindus, or books of learning in general, such as the sciences (see Fig. 10.1).

## Attributes

In addition, Sarasvati is accompanied by various objects that denote attributes of her functions. She is usually accompanied by peacock, which represents the attribute of beauty and grace associated with creative arts. The following attributes are particularly relevant to the parameters in knowledge production:

- Mental concentration, or meditation, is represented by stringed beads, such as a rosary held in one of her rear hands.
- Purity is very important since knowledge has to be pure. Symbolisms of purity can be found in the white sari that Sarasvati typically wears and in the lotus motifs. She is seen sitting in lotus posture; her seat is a fully blossomed lotus flower, which represents pure consciousness or Supreme Reality. Lotuses remain untouched by the muddy waters within which they grow, hence generally symbolizing spiritual integrity uncontaminated and incorruptible by the negative influences surrounding an individual.
- Discernment between right and wrong is represented by swan, which is believed to have the unique ability to separate milk from water with its beak. Sarasvati is said to have as her vehicle a swan that glides over



**Fig. 10.1** Goddess Saraswati: Hindu goddess of learning  
(Note. Saraswati [Saraswati] holding a veena in her front hands, a pen in her rear left hand, and a scripture in her rear right hand. She is accompanied by her two vehicles: a swan [symbolizing intellectual discernment] in the front and a peacock [symbolizing artistic beauty and grace] in the back. Retrieved from <https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo/saraswati-goddess.html?sortBy=relevant>)

the pond of creative energy. A white swan symbolizes a fine discriminating intellect that has the ability to tell right from wrong and to grasp the essential and leave out the trivial.

## Worship

The worship of Sarasvati can be gauged by the various epithets given to her, which make it clear that Sarasvati is many things to many people, depending on the different aspects of her person the worshipers wish to invoke. She is known as *Bharati* (eloquence), *Jnanasakti* (power of knowledge), *Smrtisakti* (power of memory), *Buddhisakti* (power of mind), *Kalpanasakti* (power of forming ideas, imagination), *Saddavasini* (one who dwells in sound), *Kavijihvagravasini* (one who resides in the tongue of poets), *Sarada* (giver of essence), *Mahavidya* (transcendent knowledge), *Vagishvari* (mistress of speech), *Vani and Vachi* (referring to the flow of music/song, and eloquent speech, respectively).

In the arts, especially music and dance, Sarasvati is the “cherished divinity” (*ishtha devi*) of all musicians and dancers throughout India. Poets and musicians as well as school children in India invoke Sarasvati to call forth their own musical and linguistic abilities. It is on *Vasant Panchami*, a day on which Sarasvati is specially remembered: that the artist and the ascetic both rededicate themselves to the path of self-knowledge. As the Goddess of learning and knowledge, the worship of Sarasvati extends beyond Hinduism to Jainism and Buddhism and beyond India’s borders to Tibet, Nepal, Indonesia, and Japan, where she is known as *Benzai-ten*, which is the most revered deity in Japan—after the Buddha.

In sum, Sarasvati, the Goddess of creativity, learning, and knowledge in Hinduism, is the *Muse par excellence*. Richly endowed with iconography, songs, and poetry, her mythology consists of endless permutations of one central theme: That is, as the embodiment of cosmic creative energy and the creative process, Sarasvati has the power to bestow intelligence and creativity to all knowledge production in literature, music, dance, science, and philosophy, as well as the power to enhance the spiritual capacity for transcendence, self-knowledge, and supreme bliss.



## At the Crossroads of Muse and the Machine

In the age of machine intelligence, Sarasvati may run into some tough competitions. Artificial intelligence (AI) has ushered in an explosion of knowledge and creativity. With ever-increasingly intelligent machines, science is progressing by leaps and bounds. Now AI is even competing with human creativity in the arts (see Batycka, 2022). On the horizon, loom machines, such as chatbots, that will be able to write better than the average person. For all these feats in knowledge production, no invocation of Muse is needed. Doede (2008/2009) articulates well the opinion of many progressives in the age of the machine that “we can technologically engineer ourselves into states of being that old-fashioned ‘low-tech’ humanistic approaches of self-discipline, hard-work, and patience aimed at but could never really deliver” (p. 34).

Against the backdrop of the brave new world of intelligent machines, the questions posed by Sarasvati are as follows: When all our desiderata, ranging from enhanced capacity in creativity to knowledge production in science, can be had by programming intelligent machines, is Muse still needed? If so, for what purpose? And if not, what do we stand to lose? The remainder of this chapter will try to answer these questions.

## From Muse to the Machine: The Path of Cybernetics

Smart machines may be traced back to Norbert Wiener's cybernetics, the success of which rests on the equation drawn by Wiener between humans and machines. A case in point is the following statement of Wiener (1954): “When I give an order to a machine, the situation is not essentially different from that which arises when I give an order to a person” (p. 16). For this claim to be true, one needs to enter the computational universe, in which, as Katherine Hayles (1999) points out, “the essential function for both intelligent machines and humans is processing information” (p. 239). More specifically, “cybernetics constructed humans as information-processing systems whose boundaries are determined by the

flow of information” (p. 113). This human–machine equation has practically eliminated our world of subjects, thereby situating us in a world of objects, where human subjects can be controlled and manipulated as any other object.

## What Is at Stake?

Wiener (1954) was keenly aware of the price tag of the technology of control. He wrote: “an increased mastery over nature which, on a limited planet like the earth, may prove in the long run to be an increased slavery to nature” (p. 46). He cautioned that humans must not let machines become their masters. But how can the fate of slavery be avoided when humans are approached as no different from objects? To examine the far-reaching consequences of the subject and object equation, we turn to Maturana and Varela’s (1980) distinction between autopoietic and allopoietic systems. Autopoiesis refers to the self-making nature of living systems, the only goal of which is the continual regeneration of itself. In contrast, allopoietic entities are not capable of self-reproducing, such that they are produced as instruments to serve the purpose of another system. Thus, I function autopoietically because I reproduce myself as an organization, whereas my car functions allopoietically because it is produced by and serves the purpose of something that it is not.

The difference between autopoietic and allopoietic systems is ontological: In allopoietic systems, there is an unbridgeable ontological gap between subject (S) and object (O):  $S \neq O$ . In autopoietic systems, no ontological gap exists, since I regenerate myself to serve my own purpose of self-regeneration:  $S = S$ . This renders autopoiesis self-referential, as Maturana and Varela (1980) put it: “Living systems are self-referential systems” (p. 57). Alternatively, as Hayles (1999) puts it, “subjects are individuals first and foremost because they own themselves” (p. 145). Thus, to be a subject is to own oneself—to be one’s own master. An object, by contrast, lacks self-referentiality because it is owned by and serves the purpose of something else ( $S \neq O$ ). Maturana and Varela (1980) refer to this as allreferentiality.

According to Maturana and Varela (1980), the question of slavery hinges on the difference between auto versus alloreferentiality. In autoreferentiality, in which one is one's own master, the question of slavery does not arise. In alloreferentiality, where a system is made by and serves the purpose of another system that it is not an intrinsic member of, the possibility of abuse is always there. The authors went on to say that if a human being participates in a social system "in a manner that does not involve his autopoiesis as a constitutive feature of it, is being used by the social system but is not one of its members. If the human being cannot escape from this situation because his life is at stake, he is under social abuse" (p. xxix). To show how the obliteration of the subject and object distinction in cybernetics entails a shift from auto to alloreferentiality of the human subject, we examine Wiener's (1954) treatment of communication.

## A Cybernetic Model of Communication

According to Zittoun et al. (2007), the minimum unit for knowledge production is the triadic relation of self–other–object (see also Power et al., 2023). Cast in the communication framework, this can be formulated as self (subject)–object–other (subject), thus S1–O–S2, where sender (S1) relates to receiver (S2) by means of a piece of information (O). Based on Power et al. (2023), we may identify in this triadic model of knowledge production two types of relations with the subject: (a) practical action (subject relating to the object) and (b) communication (one subject relating to the other). Thus, (a) S1–O and (b) S1–S2.

In human communications, (b) is more important than (a) since information (O) is only a means for establishing the connection between subjects S1 and S2. In Wiener's (1954) formulation of communication, (b) has dropped out of the picture, leaving (a) the only factor to be considered: "the fact that the signal in its intermediate stages has gone through a machine rather than through a person is irrelevant and does not in any case greatly change my relation to the signal" (p. 16). Thus, in S1–O, the signal (O) is an instrument for S1 not to relate to

S2 so much as to have an effect (control or manipulate) on S2, such that it is irrelevant whether S2 is human or a machine: “In a certain sense, all communication systems terminate in machines, but the ordinary language systems terminate in the special sort of machine known as a human being,” writes Wiener (p. 79). It is in this impersonal context of cybernetics that O (information) comes to take center stage in communication.

Jovchelovitch (2007) claims that altering the dynamics of the epistemological triad of the self–other–object relation would skew the generative heart of knowledge production and alter the knowledge produced. A case in point is Wiener’s (1954) novel definition of significance in communication. Across cultures, the significance of the information being communicated is determined in part by the interpreting minds of subjects S1 and S2. Minds and subjective interpretations are eliminated in Wiener’s (1954) algorithm of communication, in which it is the effect that defines the significance of information: “Semantically significant information in the machine as well as in man [sic] is information which gets through to an activating mechanism in the system that receives it...” (p. 94). However, this formulation of significance is problematic. While measuring the significance of a piece of information by its activating effect is helpful in marketing, it also paves the way for fake news that spreads faster than facts for precisely the same reason—exaggeration or fabrication of facts can have a bigger effect in getting attention.

In sum, cybernetics has changed our ontological landscape from the space of subjects to that of objects, in which humans become objects/resources to be possessed, exchanged, used, and used up. In this impersonal space of objects, the only relationship possible is that of master and slave—to control or be controlled. A case in point is the consumer. As Hayles (1999) notes, junk is the “ideal product” because the “junk merchant does not sell his product to the consumer, he sells the consumer to his product. He does not improve and simplify his merchandise. He degrades and simplifies the client” (p. 42). There is ample evidence to support the claim of the degradation of consumers under the joint forces of technology and the market. What we have here is basically a supply chain, not different from a food chain, in which those situated downstream function as fuel to support those organisms upstream. To

avoid becoming fuel is to stay upstream of the supply chain, as Douglas Rushkoff (2010) puts it “program or be programmed” (titular words). In sharp contrast to the allopoietic landscape of the machine is the autopoietic space of the Muse, for the elucidation of which we turn to Sarasvati.

## Sarasvati as Model of Autopoiesis

The subject versus object or master versus slave dichotomy entails an unbridgeable ontological gap in the space of objects. In contrast is the autopoietic space, which is “entirely specified by itself” (Maturana & Varela, 1980, p. 92). This self-referentiality of autopoiesis allows for no ontological gaps such that the nonself necessarily drops out of the picture. Cast into the context of creativity, the formulation of communication can be simplified from S1–O–S2 to S–S. The object/medium (O) of both communication and creativity drops out because the “essence of life, understood as logical form, is independent of the medium” (Hayles, 1999, p. 235). This conclusion about creativity has been arrived at in various ways in multiple cultures.

In Chinese poetics, there is a delightful legend about the famous painter Wu Daozi (d. 792) that illustrates quite dramatically how the product of creativity—the artifact or medium (O)—is dropped out of the picture. Wu had been working on a painting for the court for a long time. When he was finally done, the Emperor who commissioned the painting came to the unveiling. As Wu carefully drew aside the coverings, the Emperor gazed at the magnificent scene down to every detail:

... woods, mountains, limitless expanses of sky, speckled with clouds and birds, and even men in the hills. “Look,” said the artist pointing, “here dwells a spirit in a mountain cave.” He clapped his hands, and the gate of the cave immediately flew open. The artist stepped in, turned, and said, “The inside is even more beautiful. It is beyond words. Let me lead the way!” But before the Emperor could follow or even bring himself to speak, the gate, the artist, the painting and all faded away. Before him [the emperor] remained only the blank wall with no trace of any brush marks. (Chang, 1970, p. 95)

Here the art product does not have an independent existence. It literally dropped out of the picture as soon as the artist exited from the impersonal space of objects in which there was no real communication or true understanding between the artist (S1) and the emperor/consumer (S2).

A true relationship between S1 and S2 can best be illustrated by a Chinese legend of two musicians, Yü Po-ya and Chung Tzu-ch'i (Henry, 1987, pp. 9–10): Yü Po-ya was a great official; Chung Tzu-ch'i a woodcutter. The two met by chance when the woodcutter recognized the musical talent in Po-ya, who tried to amuse himself by playing the zither as his boat was moored beneath a mountain in wilderness. They had but a single night to appreciate each other's skills before Po-ya must continue north to report to his superiors in court. A year later, when Po-ya returned to the wilderness on the anniversary of the occasion, his friend had died. After that, Po-ya smashed his zither and played no more. This story drives home the idea that O—the instrument or product of art—does not have any independent existence apart from the relational context of two subjects: the artist (S1) and their like-minded audience (S2) (Sundararajan & Raina, 2016).

The centrality of artist-audience communication is best illustrated by the Indian aesthetics of *rasa* (aesthetic savoring). *Rasa* is informed by the principle of *advaita*, which refers to the nonduality of all things (Dehejia, 1996). According to Vatsyayan (1998), the aesthetic experience “is viewed as that state of joy where differentiations cease... All duality of subject and object is lost... the finite and infinite merge” (pp. 167–168). The ideal creator-audience relationship for the aesthetic experience is one in which the audience has the same quality of heart and mind as the creator. In this ideal relationship, S1 (the creative subject) = S2 (the audience as its equal) such that the formulation of creativity can be boiled down to S–S.

With the S–S formulation of creativity, both the product (O) and the audience (S2) may drop out of the picture—creativity is of the subject, by the subject, and for the subject. Thus, in traditional Chinese poetics, not only poet and poetry but also the artist (S1) and the audience/critic (S2) have coalesced, since there is a “doubling back of the creative energy from the product of creativity (the art work) to the creative subject

(the artist)" (Sundararajan, 2004, p. 213) in the sense that art is self-expression of the artist for the sake of self-cultivation, rather than as a means to influence the audience. Here, self-referentiality (S–S) takes center stage as the foundation of creativity.

The principle of self-referentiality (S–S) is taken to another level by the tradition of Sarasvati, in which creativity is anchored in the ground of Being—the Self, *Atman*. According to Dharm Bhawuk (2019), a general belief in Hinduism is that “all is *Atman*” (p. 155) such that “An artist’s art is but a reflection of his or her *Atman*; a scientist’s invention is but a reflection of his or her *Atman*; a musician’s music is but a reflection of his or her *Atman*” (p. 156). However, *Atman* covers only one pole of the S–S formulation of creativity. The other pole is the supreme being of the universe, *Brahman*. Concerning *Brahman*, the same claims are made: “The self and everything in the environment is *Brahman* because *Brahman* permeates everything. Thus, self, environment, and *Brahman* are ontologically synthesized into one whole spiritual entity here—everything originates from and enters into the formless *Brahman*.” (p. 150). Thus, “since we are *Brahman*, and *Brahman* permeates *Atman* and everything that is in the universe, all creativity is *Brahman*’s manifestation” (p. 157). The unity of these two poles of creativity finds an eloquent expression in Tagore (1988): “It is our joy of the infinite in us that gives us our joy in ourselves” (p. 58).

The S–S formulation of creativity leads to an inevitable conclusion, in the words of Bhawuk (2019): “the creator, the creation, and the process of creating becomes one” (p. 157). The assertion of the oneness of *Brahman*, self, and other elements of the creation is the logical conclusion of the ontological unity of the self as an autopoietic system in which there can be nothing apart from the Self, since “in a strict sense, a unit does not have parts” (Maturana & Varela, 1980, p. 49).

Recall that in the S–S formulation of creativity, the object or medium (O) has dropped out of the picture. This idea is very well articulated in Hinduism, in which creation is Creator’s self-expression as freedom or play (*lila*), rather than as a means for any ulterior purposes. Thus, there is no product or medium (O); all there is the manifestation of the Creator, the supreme Subject (S): “The creator, the creation, and the process of creating all merge into one smooth harmonious whole when the knower,

known and knowledge become one” (Bhawuk, 2019, p. 157). This formulation of creativity is in perfect accordance with the notion of life as self-generation or autopoiesis, in which “each moment is the unity in its fullness” (Maturana & Varela, 1980, p. 87). As an undivided and indivisible wholeness, the autopoiesis of life is the flowing onrush of creative power that unifies humans with nature and the cosmos. This formulation of both life and creativity reveals a deep realization of our indivisibility from the larger whole. Sarasvati is the name for this indivisible wholeness of life and creativity.

## Implications for Culture

As the Goddess of culture, Sarasvati is of particular relevance in the age of the machine. To shed some light on her contributions to human civilization, we invoke the distinction made by Edward Sapir (1924) between genuine and spurious (mass, imitative) cultures. “Spurious culture” (p. 412) refers to practices that are based on “an automatic perpetuation of standardized values” (p. 418), in contrast to genuine culture, which resides in human aspirations for values that serve “surplus needs” — needs beyond the practical and material—such as values closely related to the creative and spiritual dimensions of our lives. In other words, genuine culture is “an outgrowth of the collective spiritual effort of man [sic]” (p. 403).

In Sapir’s (1924) view, civilization and genuine culture often work at cross purposes. In fact, the more technologically “advanced” a civilization is, the more likely it is to have a spurious culture, in which group-think and imitative mindless practices predominate, and the less likely it is to encourage authenticity in the sense of being true to oneself. According to this analysis, the age of the machine seems to be a recipe for spurious culture since intelligent machines are trained on silos of data (group-think) for the purpose of imitating human behavior. Similar to the machine, the consumers are also trained by the market, which encourages mindless practices to boost compulsive consumption, as the sales pitch of Eastman’s user-friendly camera has it: “You press the button. . . we do the rest” (Cohen, 2008, p. 7).



Sarasvati, by contrast, champions genuine culture, defined by Sapir (1924) as “an outgrowth of the *collective spiritual effort* of man [sic]” (p. 403, emphasis added). The key term here is “effort.” Sarasvati demands effort from her devotees. It is believed that to keep Sarasvati's waters vital and flowing, one has to work hard to hold them. Discipline, purity, and noble thoughts are necessary requirements. While Sarasvati is the source of all creativity, it is the individual's effort that seems to determine how much of her Light will infuse the finished work (Green, 2007), or as the saying goes in the tradition of the Muse: “inspiration comes to the prepared mind.”

If Muse and the machine were in direct competition for followers—one demands effort, the other does not (all one needs is an app)—the machine would easily win the competition hands down. However, the dominance of spurious culture could risk the collapse of civilizations, as evidenced by the havoc of democracy wrecked by mass media, a potent instrument for spurious culture. Why is this so? The answer is entropy.

According to the second law of thermodynamics, entropy is the most probable state of all things such that physical systems tend to move away from organization on their path toward maximum disorder. This universal path of all things to the most probable state—disorder—is evident, for instance, in aging and death. However, Tooby et al. (2003) point out a general capacity of humans to “anti-entropically climb to dizzyingly greater heights of order” (p. 862), thereby offsetting the inevitable increase in entropy that would otherwise take place. The entropic versus anti-entropic tendencies of humans correspond to spurious versus genuine cultures. Genuine culture bears witness to the human aspiration for order, which is less probable, as it requires effort for both its creation and maintenance. Spurious culture, as exemplified by mass production and indiscriminate consumption, seems to capitalize on “the entropic tendency for the more probable [such as mindless practices] to overwhelm the less probable [such as mindfulness]” (Wiener, 1954, p. 61).

How do (genuine) cultures defy entropy to create and maintain high degrees of order, as evidenced by all forms of creativity? The answer is the imposition of constraints. According to Terrance Deacon (2011), to counter the tendency of things to disintegrate toward higher disorder

or entropy, constraint is imposed upon the system to induce “non-spontaneous change toward an improbable state” (p. 382). Thus, genuine versus spurious culture differs along the divide of constraint—the former capitalizes on constraint to maintain a high degree of order, whereas the latter takes shortcuts (i.e., hacking) to undermine constraints, thereby contributing to disorder and entropy.

As a champion for the entropy-defying capacity of genuine culture, Sarasvati imposes multiple constraints on knowledge production, for instance, purity (symbolized by the lotus) of character and intent, focus of mental attention (symbolized by the rotary), and keen discernment (symbolized by the swan). Through her myths, rituals, and iconography, Sarasvati calls for a disciplined mind in our application of knowledge. In this light, the future of human civilization lies not in the mindless accumulation of knowledge and information so much as in the principled application of knowledge. In particular, knowledge production needs to be bound by moral parameters, such as keen discernment between right and wrong.

## Wiener Retracing His Steps

Wiener (1954) was keenly aware of the dangers of the spurious culture. This is evident in his revision of the equation he drew between the human and the machine. In this revision, he came to identify the machine with the mindless collective only: “Whether we entrust our decisions to machines of metal, or to those machines of flesh and blood which are *bureaus and vast laboratories and armies and corporations*, we shall never receive the right answers to our questions unless we ask the right questions” (p. 185, emphasis added). By leaving the individual out of the human–machine equation, Wiener (1954) put his hopes on thinking individuals to ask the right questions about humanity’s future. What are the right questions?

According to Wiener (1954), the right questions concern not the “know-how” of technology, so much as the self-reflexive “‘know-what’ by which we determine not only how to accomplish our purposes, but what our purposes are to be” (p. 183). He claims that “the modern

American, however much 'know-how' he may have, has very little 'know-what'" (p. 184). For instance, "He will accept the superior dexterity of the machine-made decisions without too much inquiry as to the motives and principles behind these" (p. 184). Thus, the future of humanity lies not in intelligent machines as much as in individual thinkers capable of taking the self-reflexive turn on their own knowledge. In particular, Wiener (1954) stresses "the need for the anthropologist and the philosopher" (p. 182), who could inform us as scientists:

what man's nature is and what his built-in purposes are, even when we must wield this knowledge as soldiers and as statesmen [to control our fellow humans]; and we must know why we wish to control him [sic]. (p. 182)

Wiener's (1954) shift of focus from "know-how" to "know-what" is basically a paradigm shift in knowledge production from epistemology (how to) to ontology (what is).

The relevance of ontology to society is best articulated by Hayles (1999):

The ontology of the human and the ontology of the world mutually construct each other. When one is fake, the other is contaminated by fakery as well; when one is authentic, the authenticity of the other is, if not guaranteed, at least held out as a strong possibility. (p. 163)

Thus, when hacking is the smart thing to do in the space of objects inhabited by the machine and the market, it erodes mutual trust—the very fabric of human civilization. It is for this reason that ontology has supremacy in many traditional societies. For instance, in traditional Chinese poetics (Sundararajan, 2004), the ultimate goal of art is self-creation of the artist such that the art of poetizing and that of living have coalesced, leaving no ontological gap between the artist and the art product. This doubling back of the creative energy from the product of creativity (the artwork) to the creative subject (the artist) results in "a high degree of self-reflexivity, which turns every aesthetic question into a

question pertaining to the self, such that ultimately it is the ontological question (the creation of the self, or autopoiesis) that drives the aesthetic question” (p. 205).

## Repairing the Ontology Damage Caused by Cybernetics

Cybernetics has damaged our ontological landscape by shifting knowledge production from the space of subjects (S–S) to that of objects (S–O). The ontological landscape of S–S differs from that of S–O in two aspects: referentiality and relationality. First, S–S is self-referential (the creator creates for self-satisfaction or self-cultivation, not for sale to the consumer). In contrast, S–O is other-referential. In the space of objects, creativity is driven by the evolution of the medium (such as image generation) to satisfy the curiosity of the consumer.

The question of slavery arises only in the context of other-referentiality (S–O) but not in self-referentiality (S–S). This is because submission to power in the self-referential context of S–S is self-subservience of parts to the larger whole, rather than subjugation of one system (slave) to another (master). Maturana and Varela (1980) point out that a living system may appear to the observer as being modulated by external factors, but “for the functioning of the self-referring system itself all that there is the sequence of its own self-subservient states” (p. 50). To the extent that there is no ontological gap between the true self (*Atman*) and the Creator whose energetic form is Sarasvati, what Aurobindo advocates is self-subservience, not slavery, when he repeatedly urges us to surrender to the divine mother and let her do her work in cleansing and purifying our minds and bodies to facilitate the descent of higher consciousness. That is why the creative process has been understood in terms of submission to the higher power as “grace” or “divine gift” (Funk, 2000).

Second, the landscapes of S–S and S–O also differ in relationality—the former is interpersonal, whereas the latter is impersonal. In the space of subjects, creativity is relational. This is evident in the myths of the Muse. After surveying oracular practices in different cultures, Skafté (2004) concludes that “It seems clear to me from these and countless

other examples that people throughout history have experienced creative generativity not as a personal ability but as a relationship between the individual self and a larger Something” (p. 38). The space of objects, by contrast, is an impersonal environment in which the painting robot is not creating for anyone, not even itself. This difference in relationality has moral ramifications.

In the interpersonal S–S context of creativity, the individual is surrendering to a power out there that is all intelligence, all creativity—and most important, benevolent, and merciful. In contrast, the impersonal power that science is trying to harness is neutral at best and destructive at worst. According to Richard Eckersley (2022), there is the need for a relational context to ground ethics in knowledge production. For instance, in the tradition of Muse, the producer of knowledge is making a bargain or signing a contract with an unknown power to create something new. Since relation to this power is personal, the producer is bound by certain rules/values that govern interpersonal relationships (S–S). When the modern producers of knowledge have decided that the only power there is in humans, then one needs to be bound by no values, except by the rules of the product (O), such as efficiency and utilitarianism.

To the extent that moral parameters are possible only in the relational context of the space of subjects, the impersonal space of objects is relatively less constrained and more open for the proliferation of knowledge production. Thus, expansion of the ontological space of objects in the machine age necessarily increases entropy, defined as the overwhelming of the less probable (such as mindfulness and self-restraint) by the more probable behaviors (such as impulsivity and mindlessness) that require little effort to sustain. The result is the degradation and eventual collapse of human civilization as we know it. To restore our ontological landscape to the deeply relational space of subjects, Sarasvati can be very helpful. Her myths and rituals remind us that for human civilization to be possible, it is necessary for knowledge production to be coupled with a disciplined mind, characterized by a capacity for moral discernment and a commitment to higher values such as purity and truth, and above all, self-knowledge.

## Summary and Conclusion

In an age when innovations are all the rage and knowledge production proliferates exponentially, we find ourselves at the crossroads of Muse and the machine. As *Muse par excellence*, the Hindu goddess Sarasvati challenges us to rethink knowledge production in general and creativity in particular. What is knowledge/creativity about? Is it about efficient manufacturing and consumption of products, or is it about the human spirit that uses the products as a means of self-expression and self-development? As the goddess of culture, Sarasvati further challenges us to rethink the definition of human civilization. Is civilization to be measured by the advancement in technology that leads to more conquests and greater empires, or is it to be defined by the evolution of a collective consciousness that is capable of the pursuit of values beyond our survival needs? These challenges confront us even in the iconography of Sarasvati. For instance, Fig. 10.1 may remind us how new technologies exist today to replace the cumbersome, traditional tools of learning such as the veena, pen and scripture, or it may suggest to us the need for any technology, old and new, to be applied with the discretion of a disciplined mind, as symbolized by the multiple hands of the goddess that hold gracefully the various cultural instruments. Think through these questions carefully, as the future of humanity might depend on our answers.

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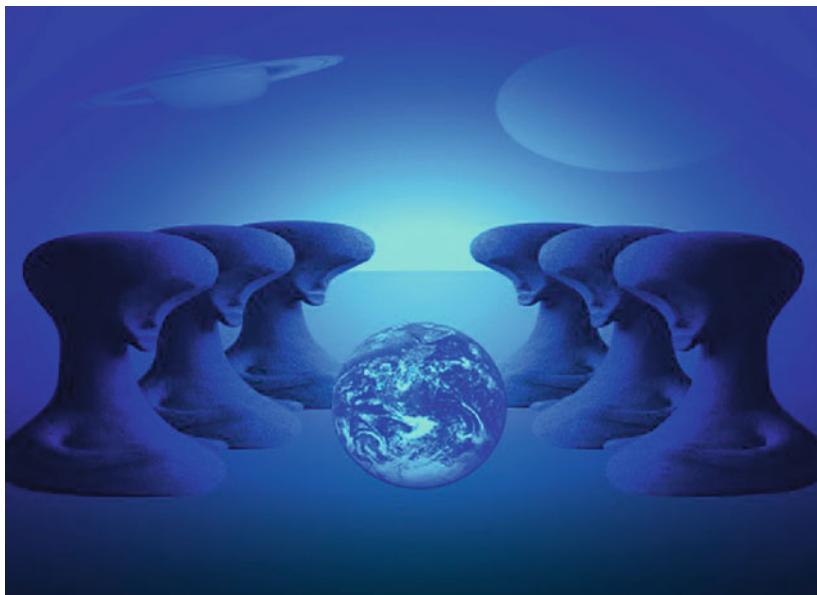
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# **Part III**

**Traditional Values, the Machine,  
and the Market**

Elders Meet to Save the Planet



Robert Maddux-Harle, 2021



# 11

## Indigenous Peoples and Technology: An Unbalanced Relation

Arnold Groh 

### Indigenous Peoples and Technology

When we speak about indigenous peoples and technology, we should say more precisely what is meant by the latter, namely, the globalised technology of the dominant industrial culture. Indigenous peoples have their own technology, be it wax-containing twigs to have light after nightfall or sophisticated, propeller-driven installations, arranged in a stream for milling the accurate ducts of blowguns. However, the technology addressed in this chapter is our information technology with its electronic devices.

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There are certain minerals that are essential for the production of smartphones, tablets, notebook computers, remote controls, digital cameras, e-book readers, and many other electronic gadgets. The main deposits of coltan, tungsten, and tin are located in Bolivia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Indonesia. It happens that these regions of the world are also concentrations of indigenous cultures.

Indigeneity, in this chapter, is conceptualised in terms of cultural psychology, cultural theory, and cultural semiotics, rather than in a genetic way, as the latter would indeed be racist. Claims of indigeneity merely based upon genealogy are still causing confusion (e.g., Singh, 2023), although it is evident that a young child from an indigenous culture adopted into the globalised culture will grow up globalised by internalising cognitive and behaviour patterns during socialisation. Of course, individuals can change their lifestyle preferences at almost any age. Therefore, it makes sense to pay due regard to the idea of a spectrum of cultures as proposed by Lévi-Strauss (1962), in which cultures and persons are positioned (Groh, 2018, 2020). “Cold” culture means traditional lifestyle, whereas “hot” culture, at the other end of the spectrum, is represented by the industrial culture.

Indigenous peoples traditionally live in, with, and from nature without destroying it. Humans have lived that way for millennia on this planet until destabilisations set in. And even after onset, these destabilisations were limited to certain areas until, with the European expansion, they became a global phenomenon in relatively recent human history. Presently, indigenous lands are heavily affected by the needs of industrial societies. When extracting those minerals without which we would not have electronic devices, it is impossible to circumvent the full-range destruction of the natural environment. In many cases this is an indigenous territory that, by international law, should be protected (United Nations General Assembly, 2007). Moreover, indigenous peoples are recruited as cheap labour to do this extraction for our convenience. They often scratch those minerals out of the soil with their bare hands. Child labour is common. There are hardly any acceptable working contracts, no safe working conditions, no social security, no health insurance, no holidays, let alone a pension system. Not only biotopes are destroyed, with

unavoidable effects on the climate, but also families and social systems. Entire cultures, in which invaluable knowledge is enshrined, are erased.

Indigenous peoples themselves hardly have any benefit from their efforts and sacrifice. In the transition zone between indigenous and global culture, people might have electric torches, and some are privileged by having an outboard engine. If someone can afford a mobile phone, it is used for coordinating small jobs, for example with mining, logging, or building companies, to make a living. The use of mobile phones by indigenous peoples in the margins of the globalised industrial culture has diverse effects. On the one hand, those technological devices attach the users to the globalised industrial culture. Yet, on the other hand, indigenous persons use mobile phones to communicate in their native languages, thus maintaining the linguistic aspect of identity (Groh, 2016).

## Technology's Impact on Indigenous Identity

The effects of using information technology reach far beyond those of mobile phones. In particular, image-based media such as TV and the Internet, but also radio and advertisements in general have a strong impact as they provide cognitive input with identity-shaping and globalising effects. By means of these media, indigenous peoples are exposed to enormous pressure to become like the dominant culture and thus to join globalisation—which implies the deterioration of indigenous identities (Groh, 2006).

Culture transition occurs almost exclusively in a unidirectional way. In terms of Levi Strauss' spectrum of hot and cold societies, heating-up is taking place. Thousands of traditional indigenous cultures are being wiped out from the face of the earth, while hardly any globalised person converts towards an indigenous lifestyle. Technology plays a crucial role in these processes. People latch on to IT, subordinating themselves by externalising their personalities into the superordinate system that is designed and maintained by informatics oligarchies. End-users delude themselves in thinking they are autonomous, as they are allowed to have some control over the front end and user interface.<sup>1</sup>

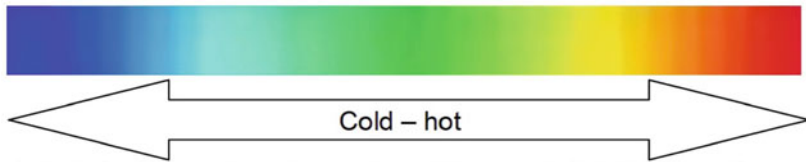
However, it should not be ignored that technology can be helpful and even life-saving. During our field trips we learned that there are fewer human rights violations and less torture in the areas surrounding missionary stations as they are equipped with technology to report such incidents immediately, which then creates a backlash, e.g., on the governments concerned. When they have access to towns and electronic devices, indigenous IT users can report their situations themselves. However, dissemination of information through social media has hardly any effect. A Batwa friend of mine whom I know from fieldwork in Uganda struggles to help his community survive. Like all other indigenous peoples of that region, they have been evicted from their forests which have been declared national parks, and which now make significant profit from game hunting. Attempts to re-educate these hunter-gatherer peoples to produce handicraft and dance for tourists have failed, so that they are now at the edge of starvation. My friend, who has access to e-mail, wrote the other day:

The situation i see i don't know what I can do about it the government nolonger care about our communities it seems other organisations too nolonger have funds to support with food or seeds i can't manage to post this on social media because every time I post people think I'm a scamer but I don't know what else I can do. This is very real our community batwa members are dying of hunger.<sup>2</sup>

## Contrasting Worldviews

The relation of indigenous peoples and technology is not only unbalanced on the pragmatic level. The worldviews that underlie indigenous cultures on the one hand and the global industrial culture on the other hand contrast very much indeed. Certainly, indigenous cultures are very diverse, so that there are thousands of different concepts regarding the world, life, and metaphysics. Nevertheless, there are commonalities, the bottom line of which is reflected in the Levi Strauss' hot-cold spectrum. We can try to at least roughly mention some central aspects (Table 11.1).

Table 11.1 Spectrum of cultures



This dichotomy, originally introduced by Claude Lévi-Strauss, has been picked up by other authors, such as Erdheim (1988), or Assmann (1992). It metaphorically implies rather concrete dichotomies (cf. Groh, 2006):

- Low degree of synthesis – high degree of synthesis
- Static – progressive
- Sustainable – consuming
- Strict tradition – elaboration
- Rigid norms – fluctuation
- Face-to-face – large society

**Different Views on the Physical World.** In the nonglobalised indigenous worldview, nature is generally accepted as it is. The human being is seen as part of nature, and facts that are naturally given are assumed to be real as they are. Fruits are collected when they are in season, and people adapt to the natural environment. Food preferences of different tribes ensure that no animal species are overhunted, and no plant species are overused (Gibbons, 1992). Prior to any dominant external influence, nudity was or is common in traditional indigenous cultures, without sexual connotations. The human body is accepted as part of nature.

In sharp contrast to indigenous cultures, the people in globalised cultures try to exert control over nature. Forests are cleared for farming and agriculture, and this pattern of control is imposed upon the other cultures of the world. Rainforests that are the lungs of the earth and have the highest density of species, have largely been destroyed. The effects are now visible in climate change. Instead of adapting to the natural environment, nature is controlled and subdued. The naked human body as such is seen as unacceptable. It needs to be covered up, and visible parts are often modified to align them with culturally specific standards. Electronically transmitted images are often enhanced, endorsing

and reinforcing the cultural standards and constantly giving them new directions. As we know from psychological research on embodiment, whatever is done with the body has an influence on the mental state of the persons concerned (e.g., Gallagher, 2005).

**The Mechanism of Destabilisation.** Here is one of the core mechanisms of the destruction of indigenous cultures by the global industrial culture. First, the dominant culture expects other cultures to obey the dominant body-related standards. Then, the acquisition of the standards changes the concerned persons' ways of thinking, leading to the erasure of indigenous identities (Groh, 2006). Within this process, electronic media play a pivotal role, as they cause recipients to feel deficient, which these persons then try to correct, remedying it by observing the dominant standards (cf. Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982).

**Materialism vs. Metaphysics.** In indigenous thinking it is generally seen as self-evident that the world has been created and that life does not end with physical death. However, materialism has been established within the global industrial culture to an extent that many globalised persons dismiss all forms of spirituality altogether. Although at first glance, these contrasting views seem incompatible, it is worthwhile to ponder if there are any approaches to reconcile them.

Spirituality is an essential part of indigenous life. Even at the United Nations, indigenous peoples insist that any session with indigenous participation be opened and closed with a prayer. The author has attended such sessions at the UN Human Rights department regularly since 1999, and none of these sessions ever went without such prayer. For globalised participants who witness this for the first time, it is an almost jaw-dropping experience. Indigenous prayers generally address the Creator. Sometimes, when the indigenous person has decided to be Christian, Jesus is also addressed. In all those years, I have never witnessed any other major religion being included, be it Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism. This is probably due to the fact that Christianity, in its core, can be purely faith-based,<sup>3</sup> whereas the other dominant religions require behaviour patterns that are incompatible with indigenous lifestyle, starting with body-covering rules.<sup>4</sup>

To broach a key issue, we do not even know what life is. Let us look at this subject from technological as well as indigenous perspectives. In his



book “*What is Life?*” (1944), the Austrian physicist Erwin Schrödinger (who had won the Nobel Prize 11 years earlier) tried to explain life as a function of molecules, that is, entirely determined by physical and chemical laws. He integrated aspects of quantum mechanics and genetics into his deliberations, yet, in the end, he struggled with the concept of consciousness, the self, and the nature of the “I”.

More than 75 years later, the molecular biologist, Paul Nurse (2021), another Nobel Prize winner, published a book with the very same title. It reflected the progress that had been made in the meantime in the fields of genetics and cell biology (to which Nurse had contributed significantly). Nevertheless, the book remains on the descriptive, empirical level, going into details of DNA structures and functions, as well as biochemical processes and considerations about human possibilities to manipulate such functions and processes. In the end, we are still left wondering what life actually *is*.

Schrödinger, in turn, had pursued the idea that consciousness is something distinct from mere physical and chemical processes. In his book *Mind and Matter* (1958), he portrayed science and spirituality as different approaches to reality rather than incompatible approaches. By referring to various philosophers from antiquity to modern times, he attempted to bridge gaps between different understandings of the world as seen from spiritual or philosophical perspectives vs. from rather materialist natural sciences.

As we see, there is resistance against reducing science to materialism. It is maintained that spirituality and science each have their own approaches towards a common truth and reality. A significant manifestation of unifying different perspectives was the co-authoring of “The Self and its Brain” (1977) by Karl R. Popper and John C. Eccles, the former being one of the most prominent philosophers of the twentieth century and the latter a neurophysiologist and Nobel Prize winner of 1963. The book, which contributed to the so-called cognitive turn, points out that on the one hand, there is the central nervous system—structures, functions and processes which can be described. However, that functioning and processing cannot be explained by itself. Rather, there is, on the other hand, a consciousness, a self, which makes use of the neurological

structures, in the same way as a piano needs a player to make a sound; a car needs a driver to drive; or a computer needs a user to be useful.

Nevertheless, scientists who are geared towards materialism try unwaveringly to maintain their position. In 2010, it was claimed that a research group led by the biochemist John Craig Venter had created new life (Gibson et al., 2010). In fact, what they had done was to replace the DNA of an already existing natural cell of a bacterium with artificially designed DNA. In the following years, similar experiments were conducted by other research groups (Hernández, 2022). In none of the studies was it possible to truly create new life. Consequently, several research groups have been established that eagerly strive to construct synthetic living cells. “We believe that synthetic cell technology can contribute to a healthier and greener future” (syntheticcell.eu).<sup>5</sup>

Cells are the fundamental "building blocks" that make up living organisms. Yet, we don't know exactly how cells were formed in the first place. (buildacell.org)<sup>6</sup>

By the way, the claim to have created new life was not so new after all. Already Miller and Urey were celebrated in 1952 for having done so. However, little has been heard recently regarding their once-famous experiment with an alleged primordial soup (Miller, 1953). The earlier excitement has made way for the sobering insight that what they had presented was just a technical assembly to produce amino acids and some other complex molecules.

**Reconciling Trends.** Although Schrödinger had given impulses towards the reconciliation of the natural sciences with religion in the 1940s and 1950s, slow but steady changes became more evident in the 1990s. Primarily, this happened in humanities and social sciences. Jürgen Habermas, one of the main representatives of the Frankfurt School, which had resorted to Marx and Freud (Bogner, 1986), started to praise religion in the late 1990s for its positive role in history and for society (Sheedy, 2016). The author vividly remembers the 1999 Psychotherapy World Congress in Vienna where the committed psychoanalysts Otto Kernberg and the Austrian Cardinal König were on stage together, almost holding hands and assuring each other of their respective discipline's

importance. After the turn of the millennium convergences within the inter- and transdisciplinary discourse became even more evident. At that time, the author was moderating some lecture series at the Berlin Semiotics Research Centre to which he invited experts of various and even contrasting disciplines in order to stimulate interdisciplinary discussions and elicit synergies. In a lecture series on time (*Zeitzeichen*), for example, there were, among others, the late astrophysicist Erwin Sedlmayr and the late philosopher Hans Poser. When Sedlmayr was explaining complex astronomical processes such as those occurring at black holes, he was asked why this or that was so. A common answer was, “Because God has made it this way”—to the astonishment of the audience, but to the agreement of other scholars.

At least we can say now that within science, which has provided the very basis for the technology of the dominant global culture, there exist ways to understand the world, the core ideas of which might be acceptable from indigenous peoples’ perspectives with their respective worldviews. Nevertheless, let us also look at some particular points on which we can assume that there are understandings in nonindustrial cultures that differ to a certain extent from understandings that are common in the industrial culture. As the dominant culture’s worldview is all but homogenous, we can expect to also find some positions that could perhaps overlap with indigenous views.

**Conceptions of Time.** One of the subjects to be taken into consideration in this respect should be that of time. Just briefly referring to Schrödinger (1958) again, he addressed the phenomenon of the unidirectional time-arrow (in *Mind and Matter*). Time flows in one direction only, which, from a theological perspective, can be seen as proof of the existence of God: The four dimensions we live in consist of the three dimensions of space, which are constantly being moved along the timeline. Whereas we can move ourselves by choice within the dimensions of space, we have no control over our movement on the trajectory of time; rather, *we are being moved along it by an external force* if we consider our well-acquainted dimensions separately and comparatively. Yet, is there any other way than seeing just one timeline, like a singletrack railway?

One of the fruits brought forth by quantum mechanics is the multiverse theory. It was presented in 1956 by Hugh Everett III in his *Theory of*

*the Universal Wavefunction*, submitted to Princeton University as his PhD Thesis. According to Everett, the world constantly splits into multiple versions, as every quantum event results in different outcomes. Although based upon Schrödinger's approach, which is widely accepted and which Everett extended with his own mathematical calculations, many physicists still seem to be somewhat reluctant to integrate the idea of multiple universes into their own works. At first sight, it seems to threaten our common understanding of reality. But would such a fear actually be justified?

Perhaps this could be appeased by putting some more weight on considering which consequences that theory has for the flow of time itself. One question that is implicitly answered by quantum mechanics concerns the number of parallel universes. How many are there? Just two? Or a handful? Or is it some more? Well, indeed there is no reason to assume any limitation. The number of parallel universes might be infinite, as new ones are constantly emerging. As a result of such considerations, we can assume that our selves exist in various worlds. Each time that we have made a decision, we might have made different decisions in different worlds that brought us again into different situations. Our infinitely various selves might take quite different journeys through life, thus being shaped to be entirely different personalities, having made different decisions, being with different or no partners, having different or no children. Some of them might have already died, others might outlive that very self which is travelling on this particular timeline. In fact, we can take into account that *all possible* outcomes and situations might exist in parallel worlds. If such views exist in indigenous philosophy too, that might explain the stoicism that is sometimes prevalent in indigenous cultures; perhaps we could learn from it.

So, assuming that parallel worlds exist, what are the consequences? Well, for the time being—none. There would be no consequences for us, as for each of us, only the timeline matters that has brought us here where we are now, in each and every moment. All those infinitely many other timelines that have branched off do not matter to us. We cannot switch between them; we do not even know for certain if they are there. All we can do is look back on our particular timeline.

Strikingly, the core assumptions that humans make about time seem to be relatively robust across different worldviews. If we leave aside the aspect of timelines splitting up, then there is agreement regarding the interplay of the human mind and time, even across millennia. What Augustine has written in his Confessions around 400 A.D. is still accepted today. Past, present, and future exist in our minds, the past as memory, present as perception, and future as expectation. Yet, we must admit that even presence does not exist, as it is a point without diameter that moves on the timeline (See Augustine's Confessions, "praesens nullum habet spatium" Book 11, Chapter 27). Psychologists might want to put it more precisely here, namely that even the present perceptions belong to the past, as it takes some—generally a couple of hundred—milliseconds for them to pass through our physiological system to be consciously realised. When we relate the aspect of time to the aspect of reality, then, out of the three categories of past, present, and future, only the past is real. It is a fact that has been irreversibly written on the timeline. Anyway, it can be postulated from the apparent stability of the concepts regarding time that there is cross-cultural agreement upon these concepts, regardless of whether they are considered in the industrial or in indigenous cultures.

Some benefit that we could perhaps draw from these time-related considerations is that they make us aware of the responsibility we have in life. Each and every situation demands that we react to it and make the right decision. As we know, we *cannot not behave*. Therefore, it matters that we always do the best thing. As it seems, we are, in a way, writing our life on the timeline,<sup>7</sup> and every moment is irreversible once it has been written. So, it is up to us that with the lives we lead, we strive to make our timeline the very best of all. Taking such a perspective should also be compatible with other cultures' understandings of time.

By the way, there is also no constraint by which we would have to assume that the number of dimensions is limited. We live in the particular constellation of our four dimensions—three space dimensions and one time dimension; yet, there might be an infinite number of other dimensions, the nature of which we cannot even imagine, as our thinking is tailored for functioning within this particular constellation of the few dimensions that are known to us (Boström, 2002).

Our cognitions pertain to time and space. Other dimensions, let alone other constellations of other dimensions are out of our range. Indigenous worldviews are generally down-to-earth while at the same time assuming other realities beyond.

**Fractality.** Actually, mathematics even deals with noninteger dimensions, especially in regard to fractals—hence their name. Although von Koch had already addressed the issue in 1904, the concept of fractals became popularised in particular by the work of Benoît Mandelbrot (1982), a mathematician working intensively on fractal geometry. Fractals are characterised by the infinite repetition of patterns. These patterns, in turn, are characterised by self-similarity.<sup>8</sup> When we look at fractals at any level, we find that the structure we see is repeated within the details of that level, and when we look at each detail, we find that the structure is repeated within the details of the detail, and so on. This works in the other direction as well: zooming out from any level reveals that this level is a detail of a higher ranging level, which, again, is a detail of an even more higher ranging level, and so forth.

Thus, fractals contain not only self-similarity but also infinite complexity. It is to Mandelbrot's merit that he raised awareness of fractality being a basic principle of the world, of nature, of creation. When we take a closer look at the leaf of a tree, we can see that the structures within it repeat again and again from larger to smaller vessels. And as von Koch (1904) had already shown, snowflakes exhibit a fractal structure. We can find fractality in the growth of crystals, in the formation of clouds, as well as from the atom to the solar system to galaxies. As yet, we do not know what the atoms of an atom would be like or if galaxies are molecules of a world beyond our threshold of recognition.

Interestingly, we structure our world in fractal ways similar to the structures of our bodies, such as vessels compared to highways and then streets becoming smaller, eventually ending up in residential areas. The concept of fractality has had a profound impact on a variety of disciplines, including economic sciences, chaos theory, art, and information technology. It finally reached humanities on 19 October 1986, when Jean Baudrillard gave his famous speech at the Museum of the Arts in Bern, Switzerland. However, it would be needless to say that indigenous peoples are well acquainted with fractality as the fractal structures

of nature are more than familiar to them. Despite the extremely high density of species in most indigenous lands, indigenous people know almost all of them, as long as their culture has not been destabilised by the dominant industrial society. They are experts in plants, and it is probably hard for them to understand that most globalised persons are not. Indigenous people not only know the general differences between plant species but also those between individual plants, and they are aware that even every leaf is an individual. No one needs to explain to them that small streams from sources go into larger streams, which go into rivers, which flow into larger rivers. Self-referent structures are not only evident to indigenous peoples; they also control them in very unique ways, as Lévi-Strauss (1949, 1958, 1962) described.

As we can note that fractality is a general principle embedded in nature, could we also find it within the conceptualisations of time? Yes, we can. Implicit in Everett's multiverse postulate is the permanent fanning-out of the timeline. And is there any other theory that puts the definition of time and space into a fractal framework? Yes again, Niklas Boström's simulation hypothesis does so, and even though it appears to be quite a stretch, we shall be able to link it up to our central issue, which is indigenous peoples and technology.

## The Simulation Hypothesis

To enter into this topic, let us first look at some implications from theoretical physics. When we ask what space, time, matter and energy are, it turns out that they are definitions. There is no matter in the sense of any basic substance, be it fine grains or whatsoever. The matter of the universe is displayed in the Periodic Table, which contains a limited number of elements. Due to the characteristics of the elements, in particular their electron configurations, they are clearly and logically arranged in periods and groups. At the time the table was formulated, not all elements were known. Yet because of the logical structure, the properties of the still unknown elements could already be described, and these properties were confirmed once those elements had been found. Looking at the Periodic Table is somewhat awe-inspiring in the theological sense,

as it reflects the structure given to the matter of the universe. Nevertheless, matter itself can be broken down to subatomic particles whereby those particles again should not be misunderstood as tiny grains. Rather, matter consists of structured energy with all structures being equipped with particular properties. These properties are objects of research; they are definitions assigned to those structures, which, in turn, are also defined to be the ways they are. Energy, for its part, is also something that is defined the way it is, and so are the dimensions we live in—three space coordinates being moved along a timeline. To make use of a present-day metaphor, the universe is a huge and complex programme, and we are complex files within that programme (Table 11.2).

Next, let us proceed by examining the state-of-the-art of computer-generated virtual worlds. Not too long ago, all we had were clumsy figures composed of rough pixels in computer games. By and by, the pixels became smaller and smaller so that now, depending on the resolution, they can hardly be discerned. The movements of the figures have become smoother and are now so close to reality that in some cases one could not even tell a film from a computer-generated clip. Meanwhile, computer-generated virtual worlds have come to a stage where the figures can lead lives of their own. We can equip them with

Table 11.2 Periodic table of elements<sup>9</sup>

Group ▶	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18													
Period ▼																															
1	1 H																	2 He													
2	3 Li	4 Be											5 B	6 C	7 N	8 O	9 F	10 Ne													
3	11 Na	12 Mg											13 Al	14 Si	15 P	16 S	17 Cl	18 Ar													
4	19 K	20 Ca											21 Sc	22 Ti	23 V	24 Cr	25 Mn	26 Fe	27 Co	28 Ni	29 Cu	30 Zn	31 Ga	32 Ge	33 As	34 Se	35 Br	36 Kr			
5	37 Rb	38 Sr											39 Y	40 Zr	41 Nb	42 Mo	43 Tc	44 Ru	45 Rh	46 Pd	47 Ag	48 Cd	49 In	50 Sn	51 Sb	52 Te	53 I	54 Xe			
6	55 Cs	56 Ba	La to Yb												71 Lu	72 Hf	73 Ta	74 W	75 Re	76 Os	77 Ir	78 Pt	79 Au	80 Hg	81 Tl	82 Pb	83 Bi	84 Po	85 At	86 Rn	
7	87 Fr	88 Ra	Ac to No												103 Lr	104 Rf	105 Db	106 Sg	107 Bh	108 Hs	109 Mt	110 Ds	111 Rg	112 Cn	113 Nh	114 Fl	115 Mc	116 Lv	117 Ts	118 Og	
	s-block (incl. He)		f-block		d-block (sometimes excl. group 12)										p-block (excl. He)																
Lanthanides												57 La	58 Ce	59 Pr	60 Nd	61 Pm	62 Sm	63 Eu	64 Gd	65 Tb	66 Dy	67 Ho	68 Er	69 Tm	70 Yb						
Actinides												89 Ac	90 Th	91 Pa	92 U	93 Np	94 Pu	95 Am	96 Cm	97 Bk	98 Cf	99 Es	100 Fm	101 Md	102 No						



artificial intelligence<sup>10</sup> and make them not only perceive the virtual world around them but also react to it. We can programme natural laws into this virtual world, which the figures in it can perceive as such, and we can furthermore equip these entities not only with logical thinking but also with individuality, feelings of identity, emotions, and of course self-perception. Considering the terrific speed of the progress IT has made—I grew up in a time without PCs and mobile phones—it seems only a matter of a few years that these virtual worlds will be much richer in detail than they are now, with biological processes being mimicked, including reproduction, with geological phenomena going on, with climate and hydrological processes, and with astronomy being observed by the AI-equipped entities in it. However, if you pull the plug, everything will be gone.<sup>11</sup>

Such a virtual copy of the world with quasi-autonomous, quasi-human beings in it would then imply—given sufficient sophistication and complexity—that its inhabitants on their part could start their own computer technology, programming virtual worlds as well, the inhabitants of which again could programme virtual worlds, and so on and so forth. Now, the unavoidable question is: How about the fractality into the other direction? That is to say, do we live in a computer simulation? That is the provocative question Boström (2003) posed, and one might be tempted to dismiss it as science fiction. But nevertheless, it has outstanding, not only philosophical, implications.

Boström (2003) weighs the pros and cons of the idea that our world is something like such a simulation and thus created by a higher intelligence. He does so in a stringent philosophical manner and comes to the conclusion that we cannot rule out that possibility.<sup>12</sup> The important point here is that this approach is fully compatible with the various forms of indigenous spirituality, as well as with religion in general; one could just as well say, the world has been dreamt. Call Him the creator or call Him the programmer—that doesn't really matter. Even the idea of miracles is no longer problematic, as a programmer is almighty in the sense that he can programme anything he wants into the programme *ad libitum*.

**The Simulation Hypothesis as a Metaphor.** The simulation hypothesis is certainly not to be understood in such a literal way that there

is someone, let alone a gamer, sitting with a computer, who has programmed the world in a way equivalent to what programmers do as we know them. Rather, it would make sense to understand it as a metaphor for creation. Generally, metaphors based upon contemporary themes and terminology provide some easy access to concepts for those who otherwise would not feel much relation to those concepts. In this sense, that hypothesis is even helpful to reconcile technological and indigenous worldviews. Thus, the question, are there any IT aspects that relate to spirituality, can be answered with yes by referring to the simulation hypothesis. Impulses which this approach provides for Judaeo-Christian theology cover a large spectrum; they might pertain, *inter alia*, to:

- A Kabbalistic variant of reading the very beginning of the Torah, by which the order of letters is maintained, yet due to another segmentation, the words are different, resulting in another meaning, which might be worthwhile to collate with the IT perspective as conveyed by the simulation hypothesis.
- To roles and functions of Elohim as compared to Adonai:
  - On the one hand, from an IT perspective, it is clear that the latter is the Almighty chief programmer, beyond and above any space, time, or structure He defined.
  - On the other hand, the fact that the former is grammatically presented as plural gives rise to,
    - for one thing, considering that programmers can programme bots for a number of routine tasks within the elaboration of complex programmes;
    - for another thing, this allows for the integration of polytheist indigenous metaphysics, which by the way generally include the concept of the supreme Creator, too. E.g., Aboriginal Australian spirituality refers to *culture heroes* as spirit beings that each did some of the creation work.
- The question, would a programmer like to enter his perfectly designed programme to experience it himself, is something theologians might want to discuss,

- in relation to the Lord “walking in the garden in the cool of the day” (Gen. 3:8),
- as well as in relation to the Messiah as portrayed in the New Testament. In connection with previous notions, such an avatar aspect becomes particularly relevant as rescue work belongs to the Messiah’s central role, which Jesus as the Saviour holds. Nevertheless, the fact that rescue and correction are necessary implies that something had gone wrong. However, that wrong-going cannot be blamed on God, as He is perfect, but it might perhaps be blamed on entities equipped with certain autonomy to act. Apart from humans, these could perhaps be, at least if we stick to the IT metaphor, bots (see above, passages on Adonai/Elohim).

As we can infer from those various implications, it can be expected that there might be at least several such implications for each of the different metaphysical views among the thousands of indigenous cultures. Moreover, the metaphorical application of the simulation hypothesis highlights the compatibility and integrability of indigenous metaphysics. This is of increasing importance, as within the processes of globalisation, an increasing number of indigenous peoples are now faced with globalised worldviews. If the reflections made here would enter their discourses, this might support the reconciliation of worldviews and help with making the right choices while integrating them.

**Multiverse, Fractality, and Time.** Turning back to the simulation concept for another moment, those worlds within the hierarchical stages do not have to fully match each other; they could even be quite different, as are other fractal features on different levels. Although electrons might spin around the atomic nucleus, they do not fully match, but only correspond in principle to, planets orbiting around a sun; such a star does not truly match a planet, even when the star circles around a black hole in the centre of a galaxy, and that black hole is of course not equivalent to that star. The degree of similarity between stages of fractal structures depends on the algorithm by which that fractal is defined. Somewhat more resembling each other might be the vessels that you see when you look at a tree’s leaf with a magnifying glass. And here comes

another aspect: In theory, fractals might go endlessly into both directions, i.e., into the higher and into the lower levels. But in nature we see finite chains of levels, so that we can generally assume the existence of both finite, as well as infinite chains of levels, and the latter could even be divided into those that have no beginning and no end, and those that have a starting (or ending?) point, from which they go into one (or more than one?) direction(s). With regard to the conceptualisation of time, this includes the possibility that time had a beginning, from which it splits into an unknown and possibly infinite number of directions. These manifold possibilities of time flow(s) hopefully include the various indigenous perspectives on time, so that here, too, some transcultural agreement can be found. One of such perspectives would be the Aboriginal Australian concept of Dreamtime which refers to universal existence beyond our time–space–constellation, and out of which our world constantly emerges.

It is sometimes said that there was a cyclical understanding of time in certain indigenous cultures (e.g., TenHouten, 1999). However, this should not be misunderstood in the way that time would solely go around in a circle. Rather, such concepts of cyclicity pertain to repetitions, such as the seasons of the year, like wet season and dry season, the seasons of particular fruits, or even birth and death. At the same time, people of those cultures are well aware of what Schrödinger called the time-arrow, or the unidirectional flow of time, and it is also clear to them that time cannot be stopped, as one can stop a film, move forwards and backwards in it, like with a film-editing software.

However, when we realise that not only the natural laws, but also the very dimensions, i.e., the space–time–constellation in which we live, are defined, then we cannot do otherwise but reflect on the metalevel(s) while at the same time being aware that this is impossible in the sense that our reflections are restricted to space and time. Such determining of dimensions, which are being set in a particularly functioning constellation and filled with well-defined structures, is something that is done from outside time and space. Here, we meet the borders of our ability to express things, as even the concepts of “putting” and “doing” belong to time and space, and we can say nothing about how the Creator acted from His metalevel position. In his book on *Anthropic Bias*, Boström

(2002) discusses the fine-tuning of the universe as evidence for God, as well as the tendencies of humans to reason in certain ways that are caused by the specificities of their own existence. However, as he is also human, as we all are, his thinking is of course determined by space and time as well, and so are the various thought experiments he presents. Apparently, there is no escaping from what we are programmed for—at least not within this space–time.

## Life as Extra Value Added within Creation

So, what else might be there? Ask indigenous persons, and they might be astonished about that question. Outside the dominant global industrial culture, it is common sense that there is a Creator above all, and that life is a special quality added to matter. Often, this conceptualisation goes beyond the mere notion that humans are equipped with a soul. A living tree is different from a dead tree. If there is life, that is something which can become evident. It should not be too difficult to impart this to persons of the industrial culture. If you take two grains of, say, wheat, one being dead one being alive, you would not see the difference until you test if they germinate. If you analyse them beforehand, either using imaging techniques or statistical methods, they would equal each other, being composed of the same constituents. Yet, once you have put them into soil and given them the chance to sprout, the one that is alive will do so, while the other doesn't.

While sprouting, the germling actually violates natural laws, while the dead grain does not do so. The germ bud pushes soil aside. Without life, such movement would not happen. So, the violation of natural laws is a core characteristic of life. Since violation sounds somewhat negative, one might also say that living matter is equipped with the autonomy to manipulate other matter within its radius of action. From the very beginning, the cell growth of the fertilised oocyte is something that would not happen without life inside. Take an object in reach of you and lift it—a book, a pen, or whatever you like. That book or pen would not have moved to that position if there would be no life to do that intervention. Even if you just lift your hand, that hand would not have come to

that position without life. Now imagine that 3D printers would be so advanced that they had all elements available and that they could copy any object within the fraction of a second. If such a printer would copy your body, that would not be a copy of yourself; rather, it would just be a corpse.

From a materialistic position, it might be claimed that processes of life were subject to natural laws as well, though in more complex ways than those of dead matter. This is what, e.g., Nurse (2021) conveyed, although due to the one-sidedness his argumentation is not very convincing. Nurse (2021) tried to explain—or excuse—his view (in chapter 3 of his book) by a personal experience he had when discussing with a clergyman. In such an endeavour, though, there is no logical link between personal sensitivities and universal issues such as the origin of life. Schrödinger (1944/1958, 1948) in turn, while describing life from the perspective of the natural sciences, maintained that this did not sufficiently explain life as such. He tried to find a solution by coordinating that descriptive level with quantum theory, but still found that there was something crucial beyond it. Consequently, after having asked *What is Life?*, he turned to exploring the relation of Mind and Matter. Towards the end of *What is Life?*, he raised the question, “*What is this ‘I’?*” (Schrödinger, 1944/1958, p. 89; italics in original), then explaining that by no means could the self be blotted out<sup>13</sup>:

In no case is there a loss of personal existence to deplore.

Nor will there ever be. (Schrödinger, 1944/1958, p. 90)

And towards the end of *Mind and Matter*, Schrödinger explained that,

I have tried (...) to contrast the two general facts (*a*) that all scientific knowledge is based on sense perception, and (*b*) that none the less the scientific views of natural processes formed in this way lack all sensual qualities and therefore cannot account for the latter. (Schrödinger, 1944/1958, p. 163)

He was ahead of the time, as this is a good reply to Paul Nurse’s book *What is Life?* that was to follow in 2021.

**Information as Meaning Beyond Matter.** Walker (2017), struggling hard but unsuccessfully, as she admitted, by attempting to understand the wonder of life from a materialist perspective, opted for shifting the focus towards informational concepts. Yet again, the materialist conception of information that she held is questionable. In semiotic terms, the existence of information requires an entity that has structured something purposefully.<sup>14</sup> This implies that the resulting structure has a meaning. This meaning goes along with a code known by the structurer. Thus, that meaning can be decoded by the structurer because he put the meaning in whatever he structured. In addition, the structure can be decoded, i.e., the particular meaning can be understood, by anyone else who perceives it and who is in possession of the same code and of the degree of intelligence that is required for this by the complexity of the respective structure.

## To Conclude: The Unbalanced Relation

With regard to mutual understanding, the relation between indigenous and technological perspectives is disturbed by positions on the part of those representing the technological culture which, from the indigenous perspective, are certainly experienced as arrogance. By taking such positions, the technological culture becomes stuck in deadlocks. It maintains premises and *a priori* rules out approaches that could lead to new insights. This dogmatic behaviour is contradictory in the sense that it is not in line with the scientific claim of being in search of truth.

Instead of explicitly or implicitly labelling indigenous views as backward or primitive, rashly discarding them, it would make sense to try, with scrutiny, to understand them. One would be surprised by the many aspects that match once they are interpreted without prejudice. Seeing oneself as part of nature and seeing oneself as part of a programme is just a different terminology. Indigenous peoples generally refer to a Creator; the application of AI in virtual worlds and the notion of the world as a programme facilitate aspects that match the view of nature, including humans, as creation. Considering the imbalance of cultural dominance, it is up to the industrial culture to attend to indigenous worldviews and

make use of reconciling opportunities. Understanding that “them” and “us” are both parts of the same creation-programme that might hopefully counteract the imbalance of dominance.

## Notes

1. By the way, while writing this article, the author has checked ChatGPT and found out that it is fraudulent by inventing professional-looking references (even in APA style including doi) that cannot be verified, and even lacks essential knowledge.
2. [sic]. Personal communication, 5 Feb. 2023; quoted with the correspondent’s permission.
3. See John 3:16.
4. Standards of covering the body as insisted upon by representatives of Christian denominations reflect cultural norms of the respective church or faith community.
5. Retrieved 26 Feb. 2023.
6. Retrieved 26 Feb. 2023.
7. Which might be perceivable from a metalevel outside time–space.
8. It should be noted that at that time, this was a much-discussed topic and also a central aspect in other disciplines—cf. Luhmann (1984), who picked up the concept of autopoiesis from Varela and Maturana, and implemented it as self-reference into his theoretical framework.
9. Retrieved 9 April, 2024, from [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Colour\\_18-col\\_PT\\_with\\_labels.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Colour_18-col_PT_with_labels.png).
10. I am somewhat reluctant to use this term, as the programmed electronic routines have nothing to do with what the underlying Latin *intellegere* means; I only use the term AI because it presently is common.
11. This is a loose quotation from the film *The Thirteenth Floor* (Emmerich & Emmerich, 1999; Los Angeles: Centropolis). The central statement of the simulation hypothesis is not new to literature and film. Predecessors of the Emmerichs’ film have been the



novel *Simulacron-3* (Galouye, 1964), and the two-part film *Welt am Draht* (Fassbinder, 1973; Hamburg: ARD).

12. Cf. The reflections made by Popper (1935) on (non-)falsifiability.
13. Cf. Descartes's famous explanation of *cogito, ergo sum*.
14. Cf. Posner (1994).

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# 12

## “Do not Pluck that Flower”: The Forest and Cultural Identity for the Temiar Tribe in Malaysia

Rachel Sing-Kiat Ting and Justine Jian-Ai Thong

It was approximately 6 pm and we had made plans to attend a *sewang* (healing ceremony) with the locals. Previously, I had seen women wearing bouquets of wildflowers around their hair and I truly loved that! I thought it was a sign of reverence for the ceremony attendants and so I decided I would also pluck some wild flowers around our homestay. As I was about to do that, our homestay owner abruptly stopped me with a shout. I was stunned, confused, and felt chided for my behavior. The Temiar homeowner explained that it is major taboo to pluck wild flowers after 5pm. That was the time the spirits/*gins* returned to the plant and if I pluck them it would interrupt the return, evoking anger from mother nature. I am glad that this mistake led to a great insight into Temiar spirituality and culture... finally I could see things from their viewpoint.

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Between 2019 and 2021 our research team conducted interviews with Temiar individuals on their narratives of suffering. There were a total of 101 Temiar participants from remote resettlement villages in Malaysia. In the ethnographic account, the first author reported the incident above.

When I retold this story, some of my (first author) psychology students frowned at this “irrational taboo”. Some even laughed. The Temiar’s taboo is no longer “understandable” by psychology students who have been colonized by scientism. Thus, we fear the erasure of Temiar culture during the age of the secular machine. It seems that we would rather believe the information a chatbot generates than believe a real human being telling us their perception of a natural law.

Because of a “fear” of technological development and the loss of the full spectrum of human ontology, this chapter calls for an ontological turn in psychology (Sundararajan, 2023) by placing ourselves in the realities of the Temiar tribe in Malaysia. From both an emic and etic approach, this chapter argues that the vicious cycles of deforestation and the lack of land rights are causes of major suffering for Temiar individuals—at the macrolevel, as well as the clash of cognitive styles at the microlevel. Finally, the implications of our indigenous psychology study in the Southeast Asia region for a value-driven and minority-focused global psychology will be discussed.

## **Historical Background and Spirituality of Temiar (Adat)**

Mainly located in the forest fringes of Perak, Pahang, and Kelantan states in Malaysia, the Temiar are a Senoic group and one of the largest of the 18 subethnic Orang Asli groups (OA, also known as Indigenous people; Masron et al., 2013). Their traditional beliefs in spirits inhabiting natural elements inspire a respect and reverence for how OAs interact with and perceive their ancestral forest (Benjamin, 2014). Their surrounding lands are part and parcel of their spirituality and tribal identity. Economically, the Temiar, like many other Indigenous peoples in Southeast Asia, rely largely on traditional natural resources for economic survival and stability (Chua et al., 2019).

However, Indigenous groups such as the Temiar continue to face land dispossession and environmental destruction from resource extraction and infrastructure development in their traditional territories by state and private businesses (Salamanca, 2019). The inability to obtain possession of land titles, for example, has left a majority of their land vulnerable to outside interests (Aiken & Leigh, 2011). This, in addition to the poor living conditions, has led to various problems such as: deforestation, depletion of natural resources, environmental degradation, and increasing tensions and conflicts over resources and land ownership.

Traditional spiritual practices among the OA are founded on the existence of supernatural spirits and various rituals involving familial spirits. The Temiar, in particular, are known for their belief in familial spirits that are used in healing (*sewang*). They have encountered these spirits either in dreams or channeled through performers in song and OA dance ceremonies (Roseman, 1991). In addition, the belief that spirits inhabit natural elements subsequently influences the way they perceive their forests and natural surroundings—with respect and reverence (Benjamin, 2014). Their surrounding lands are thus part and parcel of their spirituality as well as their tribal identity. While their traditional beliefs are also referred to as animism, the OAs often refer to their religion as *adat*, a word referring to customs and traditions (Toshihiro, 2009). The Temiar also believe in other spiritual forces, such as a deity called the thunder god (known as *Karei*), said to be a supernatural being able to control humans and their behavior. *Karei* punishes those who misbehave (Masron et al., 2013). Other gods, who they refer to as “*chinoi*”, control bad luck, disasters, or illnesses (Masron et al., 2013).

Aside from their traditional spirituality, religions such as Islam and Christianity have been increasingly introduced through economic development and missionary activity (Benjamin, 2014; Masron et al., 2013; Toshihiro, 2009). Historically, the Malaysian government has also favored and pursued a policy of assimilation and Islamic conversion to integrate OA into the Malay population (Endicott, 2016). While spiritual traditions are still upheld in many OA communities, there has been an increase in conversions to world religions such as Islam and Christianity (Toshihiro, 2009). Furthermore, the Malaysian government historically has favored and pursued a policy of assimilation through

Muslim conversion (Endicott, 2016). Consequently, significant numbers have converted to world religions, with approximately 20% converting to Islam and 10% to Christianity (JAKOA, 2018). These conversions have birthed a myriad of subcultural system changes that mirror the larger globalization movement.

## Suffering Events of Temiar (An Emic Approach)

This section extracts the key findings from a series of studies (Thong et al., 2023, Thong et al., in press) conducted in Temiar villages from 2018 to 2020. Over several field trips with a total of 101 interviewees we engaged in an emic study of their worldviews of suffering followed by its etic implications for global psychology and mental health. All names and titles referred to are pseudonyms or nicknames. Narratives of specific interviewees will be designated by a number in parentheses (e.g., T09). We first focus on the suffering of the Temiar in relation to poverty, human-animal conflict, land rights, and sociopolitical issues, against a backdrop of tension between the old ways of life versus the encroachment of the outside world through deforestation, modernity, and globalization.

### Poverty When Being Away From the Forest

We found a unique kind of struggle with poverty among the Temiar we spoke to. It was not the kind calculation based on the materials provided or market values in the modern world but economic loss due to challenges faced in adapting to a globalized world: *“Back then it didn’t matter if we did not have money, as long as our forest was there...”* (T08) This was reflected in ongoing changes to their living environment leading to a forced switch from their centuries-old practices of relying on their forests: *“Our heart is in the forest... Not in the city, not in the towns... We Orang Asli’s heart is in the forest”* (T04); *“We love the forest as our ancestors who also lived in the forest. Our medicines and herb plants are natural. Like betel, we go and take it... the plant, it grows itself... we just take, drink and*

*swallow. That's what we love... love... love a lot...*” (T01). Instead, there is a growing dependency on a cash economy. The context of this poverty was the loss of ability to depend on their forest sustenance and know, how resulting in the necessity of purchasing from the store for their basic needs: food, gas (for their motorbikes and boats), clothing, and diapers for the newborn. Families reported that they were living from hand to mouth daily and could not buy sufficient food.

There's not enough either. Even if we use what money we have to buy chicken, it is not enough for us. We do not have enough to eat or even to keep extra for tomorrow or the next day. There is barely enough for a day. (T07)

## Human-Animal Conflict Caused by Deforestation

The difficulty grappling with the market economy was exacerbated by human-animal conflict, particularly with elephants. These elephants persistently destroyed food and cash crops, contributing to further reliance on store cash-bought items. Temiar interviewees discussed these hardships in relation to sociopolitical reasons such as the mismanagement of elephant populations by authorities. For instance, these particularly troublesome elephants were said by the locals to be animals foreign to their territory, having been released into nearby forests leading to a swell in human-elephant conflict. Citing the ongoing deforestation, some of our interviewees expressed pity for the animals who were also merely finding resources and sustenance amidst a depleting forest. One interviewee remarked, “*They didn't disturb our lives back then. But now they are hungry we think...pity them*” (T28). These problems with elephants had been scarce in the past but were increasingly problematic in the present:

In the past, during our ancestors' time, there were none. There were some (elephants), but they were local and lived in the hilly areas. However, now the animals have run out and are all over the hills and mountains...We



have reported them to authorities, but these animals (elephants) are still here. (T14)

## Strangers in Our Own Land

Sociopolitical discrimination created significant suffering when Temiar interviewees struggled over land rights. One 50-year-old headman of a village, whom we refer to as Pak Blak, spoke to us of their deep roots in the forests and lands: “... *the land we love, cannot be taken away. We were born here, we have lived here since our ancestors. Now, we still live here. We have children and even grandchildren*”. In addition, pollution of their forests further threatened their traditional livelihoods. Meanwhile, fifty-six-year-old Ahgah said, “*The rivers are polluted and muddy, the land has deteriorated, where can we find our resources now, look at our houses, we can't venture into new business, because it is difficult now to find our forest resources*”. The lack of proper housing, roads, and other basic facilities were linked to dereliction of government responsibilities and incomplete projects. As expressed in the following: “*About these promises [from the government], we feel dissatisfied. It is difficult for us to progress. Two government parties promised us wooden houses...but there were none...promises of brick houses were not fulfilled...roads as well... water pipes too*” (T07). Interviewees also feared losing their land, which symbolizes their home and future.

“So we live in dependence. If we dig and plant, if the government wants the land for development, they move us to someplace else. They only pay compensation for the crops. For us it's like we wonder whether we really are living in Malaysia? Or Are we Malaysian citizens or some other country? Where is our home?” (T15) “Life is uncertain... We feel we depend on the land of others... We feel that our future and our children's future are at risk”. (T04)

## Lack of Security and Autonomy in Welfare Governance

Because killing and hunting of elephants is prohibited by law (Wildlife Conservation Act, 2010), Temiar villagers cannot retaliate and lack resources to protect themselves. Thus, they turn to governing bodies to manage the elephant populations. Many hoped for help from their government welfare organization, the Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA). “*We only have JAKOA. JAKOA is our department; they manage our welfare. JAKOA manages Orang Asli’s rights. So JAKOA, they manage all our matters. Who else will help us? Therefore, we too, rely on this department*” (T04). Despite hoping for welfare aid, there were challenges encountered with the inefficiency, suitability of the aid (particularly in terms of housing), infrastructure, and education. Additionally, with only an average of three welfare staff officers per district, there was often a lack of manpower. Despite JAKOA being the only legal representative for Indigenous people (OA) in Malaysia, its credibility has been cast in doubt due to a top-down management of leadership comprising mainly of non-OA leaders, without any self-determination by the OA themselves (FMT, December 8, 2022).<sup>1</sup> For instance, one young lady we befriended named Zap dreamt of becoming a nurse told us, “*It is difficult to continue with one’s studies after secondary school. With my grades I would have been able to go into a private college but government sponsored options require better grades*”. This is because spots in public tertiary programs are typically more competitive than private institutions here in Malaysia. However, the cost of private tertiary education is unaffordable for the younger Temiar generation. Meanwhile, it appeared that many were uncomfortable or reluctant to tap into PTPTN (National Higher Education Fund Corporation), a government institution providing study loans for Malaysian students to fund their tertiary education, fearing that they might not be able to pay the loans back. Since the concept of “loans” is seemingly a product of neoliberalism and capitalism and foreign to the Temiar, the welfare policy would inevitably break down when implemented.

## Tensions Between Modernization and Customary Ways of Living

As mentioned previously, the urban ideals of development were not shared by many of our Temiar interviewees. Instead of being a “rich” city dweller in a small living space, our Temiar participants wanted their “space” in the rural area,

No need to be rich in order to have an easy life... We don't want all these developments to make life easy, no no... Orang Asli is not about desiring development. To have ease in life is to feel as if our lives have space. It is to feel that we have sufficient space. (T15)

The exposure and increasing subscription to “modern” food sources, impacted the traditional harmony and reciprocity between the Temiar and their “forest supermarket”.

“In the past we ate yams, planted yams scattered anywhere in the jungle... all bloomed in the jungle” (C19); “I can find food in the forest, it's all there... the forest is our supermarket. We go to the forest and we find vegetables... Catch fish or whatnot...we eat what we want” (T08); “we go to the forest. Take taro, take vegetables. Take whatnot. We return and eat. There's fish, frogs. . .” (T11); “Everyone will share the food together, we eat together, hunger together” (T04); “if we have the forest, we feel that we are okay with no money so long as we live in the forest.” (T08)

Younger generations may no longer recognize the forest as their “supermarket” and no longer experience the sense of autonomy and sufficiency that their forefathers found in the forests. This leads, in turn, to a cash economy that, in part, contributed to the poverty-related suffering mentioned in the earlier paragraphs. Meanwhile, increasing exposure to modernity and economic development resulted in changes in diet and lifestyle. This includes, for example, the introduction of canned food, sugar, oil, and, perhaps to a deeper level of concern, alcohol and *ketum* leaf<sup>2</sup> abuse. These changes were in turn attributed to common health issues such as high blood pressure and overall fatigue of the body.

“Last time, there was no alcohol... um all kinds of things... now people are bravely bringing them in, the ketum leaves...they sell them” (T07). “People in the past rarely ate like this... That is why they didn’t get tired and rarely got high blood pressure... like this kind of milk (condensed milk) was rarely found.” (T07)

Meanwhile, the Temiar continue to grapple with tensions between modern healthcare methods and their traditional ways of healing. Many still prefer the traditional modes of healing, which are more holistic and less intrusive than modern medicines. One middle-aged male interviewee had an intense fear of having his body broken by needles or surgical procedures if he were to be hospitalized. Hospital admission is usually a tedious process that takes a whole day of travel to the nearby hospital and needs a letter of approval from JAKOA to subsidize the transportation fees. One Temiar interviewee hoped that the financial subsidy could be extended to the family members who bring the sick patients to the hospital, especially children who accompanied their elderly parents to the hospital for surgery. Considering the strong kinship bond between Temiar, it is no surprise that letting a sick family member to visit the remote hospital by themselves is a “cruel” choice. Hence, many Temiars view modern healthcare as the last resort unless it is being “forced”.

## **Impact of Globalization on Indigenous Populations (An Etic Approach)**

### **Poor Health Conditions Due to Intrusions and Displacement**

The balance between these Indigenous tribes who have historically lived in harmony and reciprocity with their life-giving forests is broken in this age of machine and capitalism. As we reviewed the research relevant to the attribution and emotional expression of suffering among Indigenous peoples in Southeast Asia (Thong et al., 2021), we found their suffering events included mental health disorders, somatic symptoms, poor health, and dietary-related illnesses, as well as the defacement and

loss of their sacred places of worship. Many of these events were related to the negative impact of interactions with outsiders. For instance, the introduction of certain pathogens brought in by outside traders to the Co-Tu in Vietnam resulted in the death of their livestock (Singer et al., 2015, p. 216). The defacement of the Malaysian Batek's sacred places by outsider activities (such as logging or tourism) resulted in an avoidance of these sites for fear of retribution from the angry spirits of nature (Tacey, 2013).

The common goal was for sustainable development by improving the quality of life for many underrepresented populations. However, the increased accessibility to the remote Indigenous people in Southeast Asia might bring more harm than help due to the influence of the powerful stakeholders. Rather than self-determined development desired by the local communities, many so-called “developers” are giving away modernized facilities such as boarding schools and hospitals to the Indigenous communities. Though the “outsiders” had good intentions to “help”, the mistrust toward them among Indigenous communities had been reinforced through the encroachment on their livelihood and natural environments (Singer et al., 2015). There were tragic stories of indigenous children who ran away from boarding schools due to homesickness (Wong et al., 2018). There was the imposition of modern ideas of “development” by building dams to generate electrical power, flooding the forest, and resettling the whole tribe to a new village with the promise of a new infrastructure. However, many promises were not fulfilled by the politicians in time. This kind of “development” has been a most common practice in relation to Indigenous people who cohabit with the forest, not just in the case of Temiar. For most this is a “mutually beneficial” practice—the majority needs the “resources” and the minority needs the “development”. In reality this is actually another form of oppression and exploitation. Experiences of suffering are evident in the form of “fear” or “taboo”, and the somatic form of “paralysis” or “weaknesses” (Thong et al., 2021), which are often overlooked or mislabeled by Western-trained psychologists.

In another healthcare project that we engaged in, the Indigenous villagers in Malaysia told us why they did not feel comfortable sending their pregnant wife to the hospital for labor. The reason was because the

hospital would keep their wife for a month waiting for the delivery. By taking away the major “caretaker” (wife) of the household, this would separate the wife from the families, deter the families from visiting them, disrupt the traditional ways of celebrating new life in the community, and leave other children or elderly in the household unattended. This colonial, “institutionalized” way of providing “care” in the modern healthcare facilities, educational institutions, and so forth, was actually creating more displacement than easy access for care among Indigenous people in Southeast Asia (Morten, 2017).

### Cultural Mismatch Due to Religious Conversion

Rapid modernization through technology and trading has created “alexithymia” (lack of language for emotional expression) in the Yi minority of China (Ting & Sundararajan, 2018). Similar cognitive shifts were evident in our study of converted Temiar in Malaysia. Our psycholinguistic analysis (Thong et al., 2023) revealed a strong-ties rationality in the Temiar’s cognitive appraisals of suffering as well as emotional expressions, with varying degrees in different religious groups. More specifically, the traditional, spirit-oriented Temiar exhibited strong-ties characteristics such as collective destiny (reflexive self- “We”) more than the Temiar-Muslims and Temiar Christians (“I”). These differences in cognitive and affective styles were reflected in their different epistemologies, values, levels of resilience, and coping behaviors in the face of suffering. Religious conversion would help us understand how it supplements the community with additional resources during times of suffering. However, as seen among the Temiar Christians, the adoption of new cultural and religious identities may lead to potential clashes with the local, traditional Temiar population. For example, the Temiar Christians reported social problems due to religious conversion, “*We are seen as different from others*” (C10) and “*We are accused by those (non-Christian OA), who don’t believe (in our faith)*” (C12).

While the three religious groups of Temiar are distinctly different in cognitive styles and cultural/religious identities, they share the same fate. Religious conversion offers pre-modern tribes a path to the larger

society, but these Indigenous populations are doomed to be marginalized, whether or not they cross, through religious conversion, the epistemic divide between their traditional rationality and that of modernity. For the traditional Temiar, their failure to cross the epistemic divide to the modern sector of society contributed to their social rejection and land-right exploitation. Temiar Christians crossed the epistemic gap to the other side, as evidenced by their abstract-conceptual cognitive style characteristic of Christianity and the modern world (Thong et al., 2023). However, that did not purchase for them membership in the modern sector of their society. Instead, it led to rejection from within their own Indigenous community. The Temiar Muslims were more assimilated into the larger Malay society, but that did not deliver them from the fate they shared with the other Temiar groups, whose rivers are polluted by the international logging companies, whose crops are being ravaged by the hungry elephants as a result of deforestation, and whose children have little access to school in the next town due to poor road conditions. The case of the Temiars reveals an irony in the religious conversion of the marginalized populations, namely, that of the comparative ease in crossing the epistemic divide compared to the social-economic gap of mainstream society. This may be especially true with the emerging world religion of technology and the market, which promises salvation for all, but reserves its paradise only for the chosen few (Ting et al., 2022). The discovery of a predominantly externally focused and experience-near mentality in the kinship-based Temiar culture hereby extols the need for Western psychology to expand its psychological theories and concepts beyond WEIRD populations to heed the global voices of suffering.

## Implications for Global Psychology

### **Ontological Changes in Indigenous Psychology Research: Value-Driven Minority-Focused Research**

The main challenge faced in the field of indigenous psychology (IP) is the ontological and epistemological incompatibility with mainstream psychology (Sundararajan, 2023). Many IP researchers have advocated

for the legitimacy of traditional knowledge and practices, which are not honored in Westernized mainstream psychology and may even be rejected as superstition. By studying and showcasing the plight of the indigenous people in Malaysia, we find that the “myth” of “do not pluck that flower” reflects a “cry” for preserving their lifestyle and their awe of mother nature. This ancestral Temiar taboo is there as a wise reminder for the rest of humankind to listen to natural laws of sustainability. There is a time to pluck and there is a time to rest. This kind of rhythm and balance was disrupted when their land was overrun by colonizers in the eighteenth century and when they were forced to assimilate to industrialization (rubber plantations), trading activities (durian plantations), religious institutions (Islamization), and machines (internet connection). Modern psychology could be a friend or foe, depending on one’s stance toward tradition vs modernization. If mainstream psychology only focuses on digital data, rather than narratives, there is a risk of misinterpreting and reducing their spiritual reality of “do not pluck that flower” to an “animistic belief”. It overlooks the morality and wisdom underlying the taboo, just because the latter serves no economic benefit.

As Sundararajan (2023) has rightly pointed out that “...subjective interpretations do not have a rightful place in the scientific ontology that privileges objectivity as the hallmark of truth” (p.113). One way to solve the crisis of global psychology is to construct an ontology that grants a place for subjectivity and morality in our study of humankind. Hence, we hope our chapter contributes to an ontology in a global psychology. By decolonizing the mindset of modern psychology, we advocate taking the reality of the culturally different other seriously.

Indigenous psychology (IP) is a countervailing, intellectual movement across the globe against the hegemony of mainstream psychology (MP). Thus decolonization--the capacity to think critically about MP-- constitutes the backbone of IP...This decolonization thrust is reiterated in a recent development in IP-- the ontological turn. Ontology refers to human’s basic commitments and assumptions about reality, namely what things are, and what they could be. The ontological turn refers to taking



the culturally different other's reality seriously—indeed far more seriously than is possible in psychology so far. (Sundararajan, 2023, p. 112)

As has been well stated by Sundararajan (2023), an ontology of the “subject” is different from an ontology of the “object”. The former allows reciprocal transaction between the researchers and participants, while the latter focuses only on data mining the participants' responses. We did that in our study with the Yi minority in China (Ting & Sundararajan, 2018) when we shared the research outcomes and publications with our participants. We formed long-term friendships that lasted beyond the termination of our study. We continue to form similar reciprocal partnership with the Temiar community in Malaysia.

We are not simply nostalgic over the loss of tradition. We advocate for an advancement of psychological science by respecting multiple ontological realities—one that encourages critical thinking rather than trusting Generative AI (e.g., ChatGPT), one that could engage in ethical discernment rather than holding beliefs that are “politically correct”, or one that measures the impact of research not by the number of citations but by the evidence of social changes that improve life for minorities. We advocate for value-based psychology that is built on the inclusion of minorities in the research as a way to counteract the “helicopter research” (Hernandez, 2022). The latter is conducted in many cross-cultural psychological studies where researchers from wealthy countries descend on an impoverished country, conduct their research studies, and then return to their countries to analyze the data they collected and publish the results. Often, they do not even include or consult with the local people of those countries in the process of the study (p. 83). Sometimes the results pathologize the minority group (as is evident in APA's statement on structural racism in 2022) and “the cultural others” such as Temiar (e.g., low health literacy).

The consequences of an ontology of the object are obvious in our current issue of big data mining in psychology (e.g., subject pool), overgeneralization of WEIRD psychology, and the imposition of colonized mental health sphere among Southeast Asians (e.g., “self-esteem” as the determinant to all well-being, “seeing a ghost” as hallucination, consulting spiritual medium is due to low mental health literacy

or shame) (Goss, 2014; Nguyen, 2017; Suryani, 2002). We hope that through our pioneering study in Temiar, we can build a global psychology as a science that is less mechanistic and more relevant to humans in the age of technology.

## **Retrieving the Lost Gem of Communal Spirituality in the Southeast Asia Region**

In the past, indigenous psychology (IP) has been seen as a movement to critique Western psychology theory by examining psychological concepts or disciplines in the non-Western context (Kim et al., 2006) and studying the impact of culture and other social processes on people's intrapsychic processes and behavior. In recent years, IP has advocated for “giving voices to the voiceless” by empowering local psychologists to conduct culturally relevant to improve the lives of local communities, especially among the Global South, who still live in poverty (Bhatia, 2019). The intersectionality of East and West in Southeast Asia due to the imprint of Western colonizers provides a myriad of opportunities to study the whole spectrum of cultural transformation and transactions. Its unique multiracial and multireligious landscape provides the context in which to develop a global understanding of the complex dynamics between different cultural groups. However, in the past, most of the international and indigenous psychological publications in Asian regions have been dominated by high-income and homogenous countries, such as Hong Kong, Mainland China, Taiwan, Korea, and Japan (see Yeh, 2019).

Therefore, our IP study among the Temiars is innovative for IP in Southeast Asia. Giving voice and space benefits not only the Temiar, but also global citizens who no longer hear the mountain singing, the river crying, nor the forest mourning. Voices of suffering from the Temiar group echo the suffering of many other indigenous minorities worldwide, who face similar social rejection and land-right exploitation when their strong-ties network falls apart as a result of neoliberalism and migration. Understanding the ontological clashes between Temiar society and the modern world could also help us understand the

macro level conflicts taking place in modern day societies (e.g., Israel-Palestine conflict; Syria-Turkey conflict; Ukraine-Russia war). This type of reflexive etic approach (Yeh, 2023) helps us to appreciate IP findings in a less-developed country, and challenges the mainstream approach of objectifying “trauma” or “resilience” as a personal trait. The communal spirituality shared by Temiar is in fact not uncommon among many strong-ties communities in Asia (Ting et al., 2019; Ting et al., 2020) that still uphold the ontology of the subject (experiential cognition). For instance, Lee (2023) found that the spiritual medium (*dand ki*) was sought after by traditional Chinese devotees who lost their loved ones, even in a so-called modernized country such as Singapore. Ting & Ng (2012) also used spiritual guidance in the psychotherapy process with Chinese believers in Malaysia to process their grief and guilt over deceased loved ones. The Chinese Tibetans also use sky burial as a communal ritual to send off the deceased to future life (Ting, 2016). There are many more examples of communal spirituality that are still commonly practiced and play a central role in communal well-being. Not having an ontology to honor these spiritual traditions would be a great loss to global psychology in the face of deforestation, climate change, and geo-political threats.

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## Notes

1. Based on news report <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2022/12/08/reform-jakoa-orang-asli-mp-urges-govt/>
2. Read more about Ketum leaves here: <http://www.myhealth.gov.my/en/abuse-of-ketum-leaves/>

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# 13

## **Gongju Ren “Tool People”: Alienation, Spiritual Lethargy, and Social Work in China**

Wenlei Huang and Jie Yang

In March 2023, at the office of a community resident committee in Chengdu, Sichuan province, the first author Huang visited Xiao Li, a social worker sitting in front of a queue of anxious residents.<sup>1</sup> Xiao was explaining a social insurance policy to an elderly woman and assisting her with face recognition on her phone. Three years ago, when Huang first came to the community for fieldwork, Xiao was a social worker leading multiple projects. Huang wondered why she had dropped those projects and switched to community administrative work now instead.

“I feel a cold-afflicted heart [I feel bitterly disappointed]”, Xiao said.

Xiao first came to the community seven years ago, taking her child to participate in volunteer activities organized by the community. She then became a volunteer herself and was later employed as a full-time

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social worker. She has since taken on multiple roles and responsibilities. Among those jobs, some were government-funded projects, some were requested by the community resident committee, and others were unpaid volunteer services. Despite rules and regulations about setting boundaries and maintaining a “professional” relationship, Xiao’s work extended well beyond her “job” description. For Xiao, doing social work in the community is about “taking root”:

I have witnessed their [the community] changes through the years. . . I remember the name of each client. I remember when and where we last met. I would greet them every time I saw them. . . Every time when there are activities—even now when there are no more projects or funding [for me]—I would show up and give support. I take pictures for them. I treat them with a sincere heart. (Huang’s interview recordings, March 22, 2023)<sup>2</sup>

As a social worker, Xiao’s job demanded more than her physical labor, but her whole body and heart. In reality, such labor of the heart—i.e., affective labor—could be exhausting. Xiao shared her experience of burnout or spiritual lethargy:

Once you volunteer to help with something in the community, that thing will become a responsibility that sticks with you and grows on you before eventually turning into an obligation. I am a warm-hearted person; I often end up taking on new responsibilities before being requested. . . Through time, people become inert. We are active no more. We become dumb; we no longer express that much. After working for a long time, especially under huge pressure, everyone would assimilate into a pattern, a routine—a tool-person (*gongju ren*). You know what I mean? (Huang’s interview recordings, March 22, 2023)

Xiao eventually decided to take a break from social work, focusing only on administrative work. In this chapter, we examine the experiences of social workers and their sense of alienation, diminished value, and spiritual lethargy—becoming *gongju ren* “tool-people” in their own words—amidst China’s emphasis on technological advancement. Until



recently, social work in China was integral to government-funded initiatives for “community development” to promote grassroots governance—an attempt to re-establish connectivity and harmony partly disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic (see for example, Zhang & Yang, 2023). However, social work is now increasingly oriented toward re-engineering community life to boost the community-based economy, a trend that pulls social workers in the opposite direction.

The competing demands placed on social workers to foster relationships and advance the economy have created a particular form of subjectivity: the “tool-person.” Social workers’ self-identification as tool-people suggests that they are aware of their awkward position—caught between contradictory forces. Instead of working hard to meet shifting demands, social workers consciously *tang ping*, literally “lie flat,” lowering their expectations and taking on an apathetic outlook on life to avoid burnout and preserve themselves (Brossard, 2023). This attitude can be traced to the Daoist understanding of spiritual freedom, which cultivates a peaceful heart free of preoccupations. We contend that while social workers who lie flat appear passive or spiritually lethargic, they are, in fact, actively articulating and redefining their roles to avoid excessive exploitation of their affective labor that could lead to psychosomatic stress, and to maintain spiritual resilience and well-being. In this chapter, we hope to address the following question: What is left of humanity when the dominant mode of economic accumulation has co-opted not only the body (through physical labor), but also human affect, relations, and potentiality?

## Methodological Background

This study is based on the first author’s ethnographic fieldwork among social workers in Chengdu from October 2019 to January 2021, and from October 2022 to May 2023. Methods included participant observation in community activities, in-depth interviews with 22 social workers (among whom 16 were female), four members of resident committees, and analysis of community development policies and publicly available project reports. Social work in Chengdu centers on

the notion of “community development” in the form of government-funded projects that aim to promote grassroots governance and cultivate community connectivity and harmony. Community development projects are typically conducted by social work organizations in collaboration with community resident committees. Such projects typically last for one year, during which social workers—the vast majority of whom are young females aged 23 to 45—work closely with residents and community-level authorities to organize social activities and nurture neighborhood relationships.

Huang joined one of such social work organizations as a research fellow in October 2019. Her group was tasked with three community development projects to be carried out in collaboration with local residents and the community resident committee. Originally aiming to promote volunteerism and sustainable community participation, the projects were suspended in January 2020 due to the COVID-19 outbreak. As the first wave of the pandemic subsided, and at the request of the community resident committee, Huang’s social work group shifted the direction of their work to local shop owners.<sup>3</sup> After multiple rounds of discussions and negotiations, it was decided on a work plan for the project: they would recruit community residents to interview local shop owners and present the shop owners’ stories in a variety of forms, such as community newspapers, handmade zines, woodcut prints, and collective photo essays. Everything appeared to be well-planned and properly arranged. However, just before the first event of a series of activities, due to the tremendous demands from both the local residents and the community resident committee, Huang experienced major distress on May 10, 2020, which she documented in her diary:

It was 5 a.m. in the morning, two hours before I set my alarm, and five hours before the 7-hour workshop I was to host. I was lying in bed. I could clearly feel a burning pain in my chest. I felt my trembling, coldness, and sweaty hands. I could barely feel my feet. At the same time, tears—or some warm liquid—was continuously flowing from my eyes and turned cold as they reached my ears. As a properly cultured human being I was fully aware that I was not supposed to be in a state like this. I have prepared everything for the workshop. I was supposed to

take some rest. Yet I couldn't. With all the psychosomatic reactions, my head was preoccupied with even more drama. I imagined a thousand ways the workshop would fail—including technical glitches, being tongue tied, and the staring of the community leader. ... So I lost control of both my body and my mind.

This account reflects the kind of pressure, distress, and exhaustion that came as a result of the intensive affective labor imposed on social workers after the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Between the Community and the Market

The profession of social work (*shehui gongzuo*) first appeared in China during the late 1980s and paralleled the country's rapid economic development and social transformation. In China, social work is expected to help alleviate some of the many complex social challenges that characterize urban life in a socialist market economy (Sigley, 2016). On the one hand, since social work is typically represented as knowledge and practices that aim for empowerment—helping others to help themselves, it is supposed to play a positive role in generating grassroots participation in community government. On the other hand, in the non-governmental sector, social work is to alleviate social tensions, exercise social control, and “ensure social stability at a time of rapid transformation” (*ibid.*, p. 107). As a result, individual social workers and the profession are often caught between empowerment and intervention. In her research on therapeutic governance in China's transition to a market economy, co-author Jie Yang (2015) explored tensions in the subjectivity of community-based psychosocial workers who are often caught in similar binds. Those workers are often retrained party staff and members of residents' committees and must navigate competing roles and demands. They “walk a fine line” between their professional training and local politics (*ibid.*, p. 73).

In the last decade, social work in China has been managed in the form of “government purchase;” the government purchases social work services from professionally qualified social organizations and institutions “in a market-oriented and contractual manner” (Ministry of Civil

Affairs and Ministry of Finance, 2012, para. 2).<sup>4</sup> Services provided by social work professionals typically include humanistic care, psychological guidance, conflict mediation, relationship adjustment, resource coordination, and promotion of individual adaptation to the environment. In Chengdu, such social work services are usually funded by the Civil Affairs Bureau and the Social Governance Committee at the municipal and district levels, and are implemented by professional social work organizations in collaboration with government agencies at the district, street, and community level. In recent years, more government-funded initiatives for community development have popped up as the government has promoted local innovation to support grassroots governance. In the broader context of China's emphasis on the market economy, such community development projects have been increasingly appealing, since many people are nostalgic for "authentic" community life and regard it as a potential antidote for increasingly "alienated" urban life.

However, since the COVID-19 pandemic and the corresponding economic downturn, expectations for these community programs have shifted. Besides enhancing community governance, the local government seeks to revitalize neighborhood vitality and the community-based economy damaged by the pandemic. Apart from social workers, many communities also work with technical experts and businesspeople to implement various activities including workshops, exhibitions, and street fairs. Many new players in the profit-making market sector (like technology companies, retail chains, marketing agencies, start-up businesses, cafés, and bookstores, etc.) also seek to collaborate with local communities. Operating in the name of "community businesses," these companies tend to approach social work with a business logic—utilizing community relations for commercial gain. Within this general trend, these businesses are increasingly taking on communicative and affective forms.

At the "China (Chengdu) 2nd Community Commerce Development and Promotion Summit," Gao Fengqin, president of Xi'an Changbai Xinshi Shopping Plaza, delivered a speech on how community business can empower community governance. She identified the community as the "new racetrack" of future businesses, especially in the post-pandemic context. Since, for Gao, the community is the closest to people, and

thus is the closest to consumers, businesses should focus on people, observe people, understand people, and serve people. Gao stressed that to operate within the community, businesses must have *yanhuo qi* “hustle”—“affective, trivial, indefinable;” such *yanhuo qi* is “the most plain and simple, the most long-lasting sense of ordinary life” (Huang’s fieldnotes, January 10, 2023). At the same conference, Antony Au, president of IDL Commercial Design Limited, proposed the concept of “emotional exchange business.” He suggested that a community business is there “to create a place with emotions” so that “the times people spent together, their intimate relationships, the taste and sound of a community vibe, could all be transformed (*zhuanhua*) into sales and consumption” (Huang’s fieldnotes, January 10, 2023).

Where community development was being “empowered” by new business forms and became a means to promote a transformation of human interactions into consumption, expectations for the roles and responsibilities of social work began to shift. On the one hand, social work centered on understanding and serving people. Thus, it provided the basis for businesses to operate and expand in local communities. During the conference mentioned above, Zhong, an audience member sitting next to Huang and who was a staff person at a state-owned enterprise focusing on urban development, commented that what we were hearing from the speeches was “merely the surface.” “Now very few businesspeople are doing the actual work (*wushi*); those allegedly working in this field are all playing with concepts, matching resources, or building platforms” (Zhong, personal communication, January 10, 2023). In other words, businesspeople are focusing mostly on developing new ideas and facilitating collaborations on a macro level. In practice, the “actual work,” such as recruiting participants, organizing activities, cultivating relationships, and resolving conflicts, is usually done by social workers. For Zhong, they are expected to use their communicative skills to smooth out the operation and expansion of economic activities in local communities.

On the other hand, while businesses in local neighborhoods became more communicative and affective, social work and community relations were instrumentalized and rationalized. Social work increasingly adapted to a market-based logic. Take, for example, the “Exhibition of Outstanding Community Development Projects” held at the Chengdu

Social Innovation Center (Huang's fieldnotes, December 17, 2022). Based on publicity materials distributed at this exhibition, ideal community development projects must demonstrate "efficiency" (*xiaoneng*) and "social impact" (*yingxiang li*) based on quantifiable performance indicators (*zhibiao*). According to the outstanding community development project's reports, social work was expected to be "detailed" (*xi hua*) and "quantified" (*liang hua*) in terms of, for example, how many events were held, how many people were "covered" (*fugai*) or "mobilized" (*dongyuan*), how many interviews were conducted, and how many organizations were set up. These standards were intended to ensure that different projects could be "objectively" measured and evaluated against a single set of criteria, and that they could be abstracted as "modes" (*moshi*), "systems" (*tixi*), "action paths" (*xingdong lujing*), and standard processes ready to be "replicated" (*fuzhi*) and applied elsewhere.

In this context, social work takes on a new role of mediating between human interactions and economic relations. In addition to re-establishing social connectivity amidst the pandemic, social workers also feel pressure to facilitate the transformation of community relationships into economic gain. This inevitably leads to the instrumentalization and rationalization of social work. For example, Zheng Kai, manager of a technology company, had been working with multiple communities in Chengdu to construct a mobile platform for shared parking. In a sharing session organized by the project evaluation team in November 2020, he introduced the company's experience in successfully "expanding the scope" of their projects:

The most important part of our work is 'dredging' [facilitating formation and communication] the relationship (*shutong guanxi*) within the community. And it is the most difficult too, even a bottleneck. To promote our mobile app and install the sensors in the parking lot, we have to get through all levels of relations: community resident committee, property management, and security. The process is tedious and time-consuming. We are now having our own employees—all full-time programmers—do the job, and the cost is too high. We are in urgent need of professional social workers to do the relation work. (Huang's fieldnotes, November 11, 2020)

Zheng identified “dredging the relationship” within the community as the most important and difficult part of their work, regarding it as much more uncertain and time-consuming than technical issues like developing the mobile application. Zheng’s perceptions reveal a general view of social work from a market-oriented perspective: it acknowledges the importance of affective and communicative labor, yet degrades this work as it is rationalized and contrasted with the logic of market expansion. Community relations—the very basis for operations and expansion of businesses in local communities—paradoxically became frictions, or obstacles in the implementation of projects. Instead of actively generating both monetary and social values, the significance of social work seems to be in its *elimination of obstacles* so that the technology can function and the market can expand. In this sense, social workers are caught between existing relation-centered expectations and an ascendent market-based value orientation. Indeed, many social workers have described their everyday work as leaning toward marketing and customer service. They have to navigate competing roles and demands, and often experience a sense of value degradation as their work is increasingly utilized to boost the community-based economy.

## Becoming a Tool-Person

In August 2020, halfway through the first author Huang’s community development project to promote volunteerism and sustainable community participation, Feng Mu, the co-initiator and collaborator on the project, called Huang to discuss the next steps of the workshop series. By then, the team had already organized three workshops, multiple meetings, and street fairs, and had completed 30% of the quantitative requirements set by the contract. However, as more work was being done, the direction of the project and the objective of each workshop were becoming increasingly unclear. The project aimed to cultivate connections with local residents and encourage continuous participation, so they were keeping contact with all participants of previous workshops, collecting their feedback and suggestions, updating them about future activities, and inviting them to participate further. The project

needed to promote community activities and recruit volunteers, so they produced community newspapers and distributed them to local residents during street fairs. The project aimed to boost community-based economy, so they worked closely with participants who interviewed local shop owners. They edited the script and presented those stories through online WeChat posts to attract “traffic” or online attention to local businesses. The multiple expectations created such huge confusion that they wondered what they were doing. The heavy workload stressed Huang so much that she expressed a simple wish to just put it all to an end.

Feng Mu shared the same confusion, and she was there to help. She discussed with Huang to clarify the needs and expectations of different parties. After going through the experience of past activities and feedback from participants and the community resident committee leaders, Feng concluded that their work had been used by the community as a form of branding and marketing for local businesses. She then tried to reassure Huang:

We are being expected to do something that we cannot achieve. If the community is to increase the popularity and sales of local business, we are definitely not as efficient as marketing agencies. And if we are to write a story book about the community, we will not see remarkable achievements in the short run, not to mention the community has already been indicating that we are not ‘fast enough’. . . Don’t you see that we are just a pawn in this? We are just tool-people (*gongju ren*). Maybe it’s time to stop taking anything personally. We should let go of ourselves. Let’s just focus on the contract, do what we have to do, fulfil the quantitative requirements, make the activities colourful—full of heat and noise (*renao*). Then we could try to have some fun of our own. (personal communication, August 10, 2020)

Here, Feng Mu referred to a term that has taken on greater significance for social workers amidst the instrumentalization and marketization of their labor; social workers observe that they are becoming *gongju ren* “tool-people.” Originally a social media buzzword appearing on the Chinese internet around 2020, “tool-person” refers to someone who is handy, readily available, has no emotions, and works hard just like a



tool without complaint. It is a recurring label among social workers in Chengdu.

At first glance, the subjectivity of the tool-person seems to signify the alienation and reification of the working subject. For example, May Bian is a social worker and part-time counselor Huang first met in a meeting of social workers to discuss how to design engaging activities and facilitate participation in the community. Several days later, Bian proposed to form a mutual support group of social workers. She explained to Huang the reason based on her understanding of her work:

My everyday work is a process of high-intensity output (*shuchu*). I need to respond fast, and this is very emotionally exhausting. I often felt like a tool-person, merely responding to other people, making myself consistently adapt to their needs (*xiangxia jianrong*)... When I am working, I cannot say anything that is meaningless; every word I say has to be useful. And at the end of a busy day, I will fall into a state of aphasia. It seems that the whole world is empty; there is only myself. I wish to be a living person, not a tool. So, I really need connections outside of my work. (personal communication, November 26, 2022)

Bian’s narrative demonstrates how intense affective labor can be dehumanizing and emotionally draining, transforming a “living person” into a “tool.” In this process, human interaction is alienating and governed by abstract laws. They function according to rational calculations characterized by “output,” “compatibility,” and “usefulness.” The analogy to technology has been increasingly prevalent in the recent decade, with the rapid development of internet businesses and social media. And, such alienating interaction is perceived by social workers to be intensified since the pandemic outbreak. Most in-person communication was moved online, especially during the frequent and uncertain lockdowns since 2021. Indeed, social workers frequently express a similar sense of alienation, describing their working state as “being a tool” driven by a “strong sense of purpose,” feeling “rigid,” “tense,” and “mechanical.” Many also mentioned experiencing “physical and mental exhaustion (*shen xin pibei*)” and often found it “very hard to communicate as a person.” One informant even expressed the feeling of “being possessed” while working, and it was not until her body started to break down that

she eventually realized that she “had actually been emotionally drained for a long time” (Huang’s fieldnotes, January 4, 2023). Exhausted to the point of losing control over oneself, the social worker was transformed into a tool-person, her human attributes alienated from the self and fed into economic interactions. And in the face of competing expectations to form relationships and increase economic activity in the community, the tool-person also has to make herself handy and flexible, so that she could fit into multiple, shifting demands.

In this sense, we might want to think about the subjectivity of the tool-person as a reflection of a larger picture of the gradual subjugation of humanity into dominant modes of accumulation. In their seminal work, *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) identified the prioritization of “communicative, cooperative, and affective labor” in the transformation of the dominant productive processes in the postmodern global economy (p. xiii). Defined as an aspect of immaterial labor, the affective labor of human contact and interaction is considered “an extremely important element” in the rise of the service (tertiary) sector (ibid., p. 30). While the product is defined as immaterial, affective labor is “labor in the bodily mode” that is immersed in the corporeal or somatic (ibid., p. 293). Affective labor generates intangible products: “a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion—even a sense of connectedness or community” (Hardt, 1999, p. 96).<sup>5</sup> In contemporary working contexts, affective labor is becoming increasingly pervasive and has tended to spread “throughout the entire workforce and throughout all laboring tasks” (ibid., p. 97).

The new position of social workers resulted in a degradation of their affective labor to the level of economic relations, and this had specific implications for the individual subject. Classic Marxist theories of labor in the context of industrial production largely focus on the alienation of the subject from the product of her labor. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Karl Marx (1978[1844]) examines the anthropological consequences of working conditions within the structure of capitalistic production. For Marx, the subjugation of the worker is rooted in the condition of alienation, in which “the object which labor produces... confronts it as *something alien*, as a *power independent* of the producer” (ibid., p. 71, emphasis in original). In his analysis of “the age

of modern capitalism," Georg Lukacs (1967[1923]) identifies the process in which human subjects are reified and rationalized. Through a close reading of Marx, he argues that the essence of the commodity structure is the process of reification, through which the relation between *people* takes on the character of a *thing*. The subject ends up being controlled by the product of her own labor, as "a mechanical part incorporated into a mechanical system" (ibid., p. 8). The once-organic aspect of the worker's personality comes into conflict with abstract laws functioning according to rational calculations, and the working subject is expected to function precisely and predictably—just like a *tool*. The human qualities and idiosyncrasies of the worker are degraded and appear "increasingly as *mere sources of error*" (ibid., p. 8, emphasis in original).

In contrast to industrial production, the new mode of accumulation based on affective labor has subjugated not just the disciplined body in a Foucauldian sense, but what belongs just as essentially to human beings: communicative action, human relations, feelings, and emotions. It is the human capacity and potentiality that is instrumentalized, reified, and "degraded" to the level of economic interactions. And through a reciprocal process, production becomes communicative, affective, enriched, and "elevated" to the complex level of human relations (Hardt, 1999, p. 96). Such is the paradoxical position of social workers: they are caught between complex, affective human interactions on the one hand, and abstract, alienated economic relations on the other. This also reveals the ambivalent nature of their affective labor. Although it is prevalent and regarded as of extreme importance—even indispensable—the affective labor of social workers is often degraded and devalued under the logic of economic relations, as illustrated in Zheng Kai's example. Michael Hardt reminds us of the "enormous potential" of affective labor, since the production and reproduction of affect generate "collective subjectivities" and networks of "sociality"; yet those subjectivities and that sociality are "directly exploitable by capital." (1999, pp. 96–7). This explains the dialectic of the tool-person: the person is turned into a *tool*, and her affective labor is incorporated into a larger process of accumulation; yet she still needs to be a *person*, as it is exactly her human attributes that are captured and alienated.

Having discussed how social workers' affective labor is incorporated into economic accumulation, now we will look into another aspect of social workers' dilemma—that is, navigating multiple, shifting roles and demands between economic *and* government mandates.

## Navigating shifting demands

During a charity fair in mid-January 2023 that celebrates the new year, the first author Huang met the community leader Peng Ke again. It was the community's first New Year event since the outbreak of the pandemic. Seeing that the neighborhood had finally resumed some of the liveliness of the old days, Peng brought up the community development projects Huang and her colleagues were working on two years ago. Peng expressed the judgment that, after they left, other social work organizations "couldn't do it":

We just expect that the residents who come to participate, those who come to volunteer, would feel the vibe of the community, gain a sense of meaning and value through their participation. But what did these organizations do? They simply designed one activity after another, organized one training after another, for the mere purpose of taking pictures, checking the to-do lists, fulfilling the tasks. This is really, really sad. Such type of formality has now become a routine trick (*taolu*) for social work organizations in Chengdu. If you are new to social work, it is still understandable; but you have been working with the community for years. (personal communication, January 15, 2023)

This kind of critique of "routine tricks" is quite common in the evaluation of community development projects. Social workers have shared stories of the kind of "superficial formality" that Peng Ke noticed: repeatedly inviting the same group of residents to meet minimum attendance requirements, gathering participants for the sole purpose of taking pictures for documentation for project evaluation, organizing events no one would ever be interested in, but offering souvenirs to guarantee attendance. Social workers attribute such rigid, soulless work patterns to job burnout and spiritual lethargy in their field. In other words,

it is *precisely because* these social workers have been working with the community for many years that such “routine tricks” are formed. This seems to echo Feng Mu’s observation about social workers becoming tool-people: they are only there to “fulfil the quantitative requirements” in the contract.

Yet, there is another thread in Feng Mu’s discourse. Conducting “routine tricks” is not an end in itself, but rather a *means*. Being a tool-person seems like less a matter of passivity and more of a *navigational tactic* to “have some fun of our own.” Thus, as we take a closer look at the everyday use of the word, we can see that social workers’ active self-identification as tool-people is a form of *articulation*. Through its use, they make sense of their situation and redefine their roles. For example, Wu Yang is a social worker and screenwriter running a drama club in the community. She used to work in a marketing agency, but the job was so stressful that it produced physical symptoms. “I went to see a counsellor, who advised me to do some social work, ‘even if it’s unpaid.’ So I came to the community and talked to the leader.” Wu said she has now managed to maintain emotional balance and to keep a sense of boundary:

Social work entails a unique sense of caring as a human being, but it is uncertain. It feels like opening a blind box: you never know whether it is a gift of healing, or a Pandora’s box, drawing you into the swirl of other people’s emotional drama. So it would be nice to keep certain distance. If you get too close, you will be caught up into other people’s emotions. And that will be exhausting. So now I would say, do not contact me during non-working hours unless your life is in danger... Also now I care much less. I do not expect much feedback or response from people, otherwise you will have to climb a very high mountain. You are just ‘a screw’ in a machine,<sup>6</sup> a tool-person in a larger picture, and there is a limit to what you can do. (Huang’s interview recordings, January 12, 2023)

For Wu, maintaining boundaries allows her to distance herself from other people’s emotions, and thus away from an excessive investment of affective labor. Through active self-identification as a tool-person, she actively sets a limit to her work. According to the social workers, to become a tool-person one needs to maintain the inner power to stay “numb and insensitive” (*dun gan*) to work demands, which take

many mundane forms including optional tasks like unread messages, unattended clients, unfinished reports, unmet expectations, and not-yet-fulfilled promises.<sup>7</sup> In other words, the tool-person is a form of *articulation*—non-necessary, loose connection—among social workers, used to redefine their roles and avoid distress and burnout. In an interview with Lawrence Grossberg addressing the politics of ideological struggles in the post-modern era, Stuart Hall engages articulation as both a theoretical and political intervention:

[T]he theory of articulation asks how an ideology discovers its subject rather than how the subject thinks the necessary and inevitable thoughts which belong to it; it enables us to think about how an ideology empowers people, enabling them to begin to make some sense or intelligibility of their historical situation, without reducing those forms of intelligibility to their socio-economic or class location or social position. (Hall, in Grossberg, 1986, p. 142)

For Hall, articulation is not simply utterance of a lasting truth. Rather, it is a process of making connections through which social or political ideas become social forces by forming new political subjects and transforming current realities. In this sense, the tool-person is a particular subjectivity formed when social workers navigate the shifting demands between the ideal of a rational, frictionless market on the one hand, and the community and its entangled social relations on the other. In a time when the very qualitative, human, and individual attributes of the working subject have become among the primary sites for extraction, reification seems to be the last line of defense. By transforming a person into a tool—a relatively bounded entity with limited capacity—what was once the alienation of the social worker’s human attributes now appears to be an active denial of vital capacities. And what was once the degradation of human values turns out to be a rejection of excessive expectations beyond one’s control. Paraphrasing Han Byung-Chul (2017, p. 1–2, emphasis in original), this process signifies a compulsory return to the “disciplinarian *Should*” by active denial of the “freedom of *Can*.” “*Should* has a limit.” In the face of exploitation that penetrates into the subject’s inner energies and vital capacities, alienation can

demean, but it can also protect; reification can decompose labor, but it can also compose a life—a life nostalgic of the routine, when time was “predictable,” achievement was “cumulative,” and life still made sense as “a linear narrative” (c.f. Sennett, 1998, p. 33). In the face of the unlimited “freedom of the *Can*,” romanticized scenes of routinized labor now seem ever more appealing: “through mastering routine and its rhythms, people both take control and calm down” (ibid., p. 20).

The articulation of social workers as tool-people allows them to stick to a fixed routine, limit their affective investment, and thus transform their social realities. It is through becoming a bounded entity that a social worker is able to reclaim her sense of humanity. In the face of “the unbridled disembodiment process of postmodernity,” robot builders in Japan redeem their sense of humanity through the tinkering of the humanoid robot (Katsuno, 2011, p. 108). Instead of working hard to meet shifting demands, a social worker can simply say: “I am just a tool-person, and there is not much that I can do.” Being caught up in a position with multiple, competing expectations, social workers actively rearticulate their situation to redefine their roles and balance their emotional state.

## A Freedom that Cannot be Exploited

In addition to maintaining a sense of boundaries, Wu Yang’s narrative in the previous section highlights another navigational tactic—to “care much less” and “not expect much feedback or response.” This corresponds to the practice of *tang ping*, literally “lying flat,” lowering expectations and taking on an apathetic outlook. Appearing as a social media buzzword on the Chinese internet in 2021, “lying flat” is an attitude that responds to the intense competitiveness of the education system and the labor market. Instead of working hard to the point of burnout in China’s prevalent overwork culture, many people tacitly adopt the practice of lying flat, doing minimum work to get by. This is a balancing strategy to maintain spiritual resilience and well-being—an attitude with subversive potential in the face of the disintegration of the meaning of life at this stage of late capitalism (Brossard, 2023).

Social workers are not immune to such discourses. Many social workers quoted the attitude of lying flat when speaking about how they deal with excessive stress and maintain emotional stability and peace of mind; some said a person should recognize one's own limit and "let go of oneself." Following a meeting of the mutual support group of social workers, May Bian described how her relationship with people in the community had been changing:

We should respect other people as humans; and we should allow ourselves to be humans. Now my job is mostly accompanying rather than interfering. I used to have very clear, detailed plans, and my energy was strong. That would eventually become the obstacle of my work. Now I am practicing a sense of looseness (*songchi gan*)—letting myself relax, not imposing on people or forcing on things. I no longer plan that much; it is more about letting things happen naturally. I have realized that every time when I am willing to 'let go' (*she*), I will receive more unexpected 'gains' (*de*). . . The future is naturally generated, not artificially planned. (Huang's interview recordings, January 19, 2023)

Bian's narrative exemplifies a form of the "lying flat" attitude among social workers. Instead of seeking to obtain "a sense of control" and sticking to rigid plans and objectives, social workers are mindfully practicing "a sense of looseness"—relaxing and staying chill, learning to let go, and leaving the mind void of worries and expectations. One informant described her way of facilitating participation during workshops: "It is a particular state of mind that I know I could take things as they are, that whatever happens I could still handle it in my heart, without attempting to control everything that is happening" (Huang's fieldnotes, November 13, 2022). Specifically, this practice involves various working techniques such as "to leave space," "to slow down the pace," "to listen more and talk less," "to get along with moments of silence without pushing for response," and "to be an accompaniment rather than an interference." For social workers, in order to maintain spiritual resilience under stressful working conditions, it is crucial to admit one's own limit and let go of excessive expectations and an overwhelming sense of purpose.



The attitude of “lying flat” and the practice of “a sense of looseness” can be traced to the Daoist understanding of spiritual freedom, which can be exemplified in the notion of *xin zhai*. Literally “the fasting of the heart,” *xin zhai* refers to a peaceful state of mind free of preoccupations. It is important to note here that the Chinese term *xin* refers to both the heart and mind. Presuming “an intimate connection between affect and cognition,” *xin* highlights a non-reductive, holistic, intersubjective, and contextual approach to feelings and experience (Sundararajan, 2015, p. 18). The idea of *xin zhai* is conceptualized in Chapter 4, “The Mundane World,” of *Zhuangzi*: “The Dao gathers and presents itself in an unoccupied and peaceful mind; This state of emptiness (*xu*) is the fasting of the heart” (唯道集虛, 虛者, 心齋也).<sup>8</sup> Here, Zhuangzi tells a story of Confucius trying to advise his disciple, Yan Hui, who is facing the formidable task of trying to reform an arrogant ruler with a sharp tongue and quick wit. Zhuangzi suggests, in Confucius’s name:

If you can wander inside the fences and are not attracted to fame; you speak out when your ideas are welcome, and you keep quiet when they are not. Do not appear to be an open door, nor seek to be a cure. Find peace in your heart, accept what comes naturally, act only when you have to and do not press on with strenuous efforts. And you will come close [to the Dao]. (Zhuangzi, Chapter 4, section 1, para. 8)<sup>9</sup>

This idea of *xin zhai* also coincides with the Buddhist teaching (as in *The Heart Sutra*) of “dwelling without concerns or obstructions in the heart (*xin wu gua ai*).”<sup>10</sup> The point is to settle with the uncertainties of the situation without being affected or manipulated, and to follow what comes naturally, without trying to master or interfere. It is not attempting “to climb a very high mountain,” in Wu Yang’s narrative. For social workers, this idea suggests self-awareness of their alienated status, fully recognizing the limitations of their capacities, and *living with it*. Being just tool-people in the mundane world, social workers let go of the obsession with purpose, act only when they have to, stop when things are almost done, and refrain from excessive affective investment. Through “the fasting of the heart,” Zhuangzi stresses the spiritual freedom of a person—the freedom of being free of purpose—in direct

contrast to the alienated form of “individual freedom” in the neoliberal economy (Han, 2017, pp. 2–4). Being entrepreneurs “who are set free by free competition,” individual subjects internalize the needs and purposes of the Capital and are efficiently and automatically exploited (*ibid.*, p. 4). Daoist notion of freedom points to an alternative state of being: cultivating a state of mind that is peaceful and unoccupied, dwelling without concerns or a sense of purpose—this engenders a freedom that cannot be exploited.

## Conclusion

In China, community governance is both a top-down and bottom-up process. The expertise of social workers must encompass continual political and social cross-currents. Social workers must generate grassroots participation and exercise social control. However, the field in China is currently experiencing a new, added dynamic: they now have a role to play in the cultivation of community relations to boost the local economy. In this context, the tool-person is a particular subjectivity of social workers formed in the mediation between relation-centered expectations and market-based value orientation. More than reification and devaluation, being tool-people highlights social workers’ self-awareness of their multiple binds and struggles, and also their articulation of ambiguous subjectivities.

In their book on “the remaking of the person” in post-reform China, Arthur Kleinman and colleagues (2011) identified “the divided self” as a particular subjectivity formed in navigating competing moral demands and contradictory emotions in China’s transition to a market economy. They interpret the divided self through the image of an owl with one eye open and the other closed, which, they argue, is “emblematic of a deep structural tension in China’s moral worlds and in the Chinese individual” (*ibid.*, p. 23). While the open eye takes in the technical, financial, and political realities of the time—the other eye is closed, “so as to distance the person from the immediacy, expediency, and sheer practicality of getting on with life and negotiating the constant flow of threats and opportunities” (*ibid.*, pp. 23–4). This closed eye distances the person

"from the powerful pull of context" and helps the individual consider what really matters, including "care of the self and concern for others" (*ibid.*, p. 24).

The subjectivity of the tool-person mirrors this image of the owl. For social workers, while one eye is open to the everyday realities of their alienation, reification, and value degradation, the closing eye distances the self from those pressing demands and shifting expectations. It creates a space of contemplation, and, writ large, the concept of tool-people allows us to consider: Is the tool-person an inevitable subjectivity formed in the face of the technology and the market? In addition to "not seeing" in Kleinman's sense, is the practice of lying flat also a form of invisibility, or not being "seen," by the dominant forms of accumulation? Does this represent a shift to give the agency away from the subject, who used to close an eye, but who now simply lies flat and hopes not to be spotted?

Central to the discourse on the tool-person is a constant concern about being a genuine, living person. Facing the "empty world" and her isolated self, May Bian realized that she had become a tool-person. She initiated a mutual support group for social workers in order to seek more "connections outside her work"—connections with colleagues. Caught up in the double bind between the relation-centered expectations and market-based value orientation, Feng Mu recognized that she was merely a tool-person. She decided to "do what we have to do," "fulfil the quantitative requirements," and perform the "routine tricks" so that in this process, "we could try to have some fun of our own." To avoid being drawn into "the swirl of other people's emotions," Wu Yang stressed that she was just a tool-person. Keeping "a sense of boundary" and lowering her expectations, she strived to retain that "unique sense of caring as a human being," which was the very reason she chose to become a social worker in the first place. The subjectivity of the tool-person is not only about acts of defense or resistance, to counter alienation and spiritual lethargy; it is also about acts of accommodation and collaboration that enable social workers to navigate shifting roles and demands and negotiate a changing social reality.

## Notes

1. In this study, informants were given pseudonyms or nicknames.
2. All recording was done with the consent of the interviewee. The research the chapter is based on received ethics approval from the Research Ethics Board at Simon Fraser University.
3. This was done in the name of “facilitating the resumption of operation and production ( *fu gong fu chan*)” of community businesses. See “Chengdu Municipal People’s Government on the Issuance of 20 Policy Measures to Effectively Respond to the Pandemic and Stabilize the Economic Operation”. February 7, 2020. Retrieved April 8, 2023, from <http://cddrc.chengdu.gov.cn/cdfgw/ztlm031/ydyq.shtml>.
4. “Ministry of Civil Affairs and Ministry of Finance Guidance on Government Purchase of Social Work Services.” November 14, 2012. Retrieved April 8, 2023, from [http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2013/content\\_2361580.htm](http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2013/content_2361580.htm).
5. With the affective turn, people tend to use affective labor as a way of going beyond the traditional feminist studies of emotional labor or emotion work, which focuses on the individual’s management of their own emotional experience as part of job requirements. However, affective labor emphasizes both an individual’s emotional management and its effects on other people’s emotional experiences—that is, to affect and be affected. In the context of global neoliberalism, affective labor stresses the circulation of both affect and people together in social, economic, and political processes (Ahmed, 2004).
6. The “spirit of a screw” stands for the work spirit in the Chinese industrial age, and is associated with a great sense of pride in the working class. In Wu Yang’s discourse, *luosiding* “screw” stands for a small, bounded entity within a larger apparatus, with limited capacities.
7. *Dun gan* describes a power of insensitivity, a detachment from external influences and pressing expectations.

8. This translation is adapted from two sources: Wu (2008) and China Daily (2015), the latter retrieved February 9, 2023, from <https://language.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201512/23/WS5b209fd5a31001b82572097a.html>.
9. This translation is adapted from three sources: Fang (2010), Wu (2008), and Palmer et al. (2006).
10. This translation is adapted from Chenette (2015).

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# 14

## Navigating Life (*ming*) in Contemporary China: The Shifting Meaning of “Changing Fate (*gaibian mingyun*)” in the Quest for a Better Life

Mieke Matthyssen

### ***Mingyun*: Partly Malleable “Fate”**

After two months of an illicit but passionate affair, Wu Dawang, a young peasant soldier in Mao’s Liberation Army, has a last chance to bid farewell to his lover, Liu Lian, in whose house he served her and her husband, Wu’s military superior. Torn between his passion and his desire to climb up the social ladder—in return for his “revolutionary services” Liu Lian arranged his promotion to the city, and the contrary will happen when he cannot control himself and misbehaves now—his Political Instructor delivers to him a final philosophical lecture of a rather different kind from his usual offerings:

In all the meetings and classes we’ve had together, I’ve told you nothing but lies and empty words. Now you’re leaving, I might as well tell you the truth. At the end of the day, we’re all here on earth to make our lives a bit

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better. A soldier born to a worker dreams of becoming an official; a soldier born to a low-ranking official dreams of becoming a high-ranking official; a soldier from the countryside wants to make it to the city. Perhaps this dream does not meet the criteria of being a selfless revolutionary soldier, but that's how it is. Although climbing up one rung of the ladder might not sound much as an ambition, it ends up taking most people a lifetime of effort. (Adapted translation from Yan L., 2021, pp. 209–210)

Although this fragment of Yan Lianke's novel *Serve the People* (itself a quote from a speech by Mao) is set at the peak of the Mao cult and only addresses the fate of soldiers, the dream of upward social mobility in a strictly hierarchical, stratified society<sup>1</sup>—ironically the opposite of Mao's communist egalitarianism—has not changed much over the years. Moreover, climbing the social ladder can well be considered the crux of the common Chinese phrase “changing fate (*gaibian mingyun* 改变命运).” The dynamics of this “changing fate” in the quest for a better life, however, shifts with time, as one online author poetically points out: “The first thing that determines your fate (*mingyun*) is the era you live in. So you had to sing the song of whichever mountain you go to” (Anonymous, 2022). Stated otherwise, “changing fate” through climbing the social ladder itself is informed by the prevailing socioeconomic and political circumstances, the achievement—and desire—discourses they bring forth, and the degree of personal “fate control” that results from these (Sangren, 2012). Concretely, following China's turn to state-managed capitalism since the 1980s and the accordingly profound changes in cultural norms, values, and everyday practices (Nehring et al., 2016), the actual meaning of, and particular (non)action for “changing fate” have also seen some transformations.

Let us first clarify the so-called “fate” as a common but not very accurate translation of *mingyun* 命运. The crucial character of most English translations as “fate” is *ming* 命. In ancient times, the character *ming* referred to an “order” or “command” from superiors above, and later took on the meanings of “life” and “fate, destiny” (Lupke, 2005a). As a kind of determining “life force,” *ming* up till today has not only seen much intellectual debate in mainly (Neo-)Confucian thought (Chan, 1963; Lupke, 2005a), but has also deeply pervaded Chinese



folk culture, which is still visible in the many sayings containing *ming* (Daulet et al., 2019; Raphals, 2005), of which some will be addressed later. This *ming* “life force” at its core is more powerful than humans. Think, for instance, of one’s conditions at birth or other uncontrollable external forces. However, in actual life, *ming* encompasses two important dimensions, expressed in two compounds containing *ming*: a moral Confucian dimension, called *tianming* 天命, and a more pragmatic, dynamic dimension oriented toward the future, called *mingyun*.<sup>2</sup>

First, there is the ancient compound *tianming*. *Tian* 天, itself often inaccurately translated as “heaven,” is a kind of metaphysical Confucian “moral order” with the capacity to form personal connections with the individual. As such, *tianming* denotes a person’s “mandate of *tian*” or one’s personal mission or “destiny.” Early Confucian thinking posits that it is a person’s moral duty to exert one’s utmost to develop one’s human potential (mission) to the full through continuous efforts of spiritual and moral self-cultivation. However, some things might turn out beyond one’s control, and these should be consigned to the “moral order” (*tian*). This idea of accepting the status quo is expressed in sayings such as “The mandate of *tian* is unpredictable 天命无常” (various origins); “Ambitions (the heart-mind) are higher than the moral order (*tian*), but fate/life (*ming*) is thinner than paper 心比天高命比纸薄” (from the *Dream of the Red Chamber*, one of the Four Classics of Chinese literature); and “Life and death lie with *ming*, wealth and poverty lie with the moral order 生死有命，富贵在天” (from the *Lunyu*—“*Yan Yuan*”).

Nevertheless, admitting that there are things beyond one’s control gives no reason why one should relax in the moral endeavor (Cui, 2009; Harrell, 1987). Moreover, a person should endure (*ren* 忍) hardship because “negative” experiences can be beneficial by strengthening will, resilience, and inadequacies (Cheng et al., 2010, p. 400). Thus, efforts and endurance are integral parts of the self-cultivation process of the sage (see, e.g., *Lunyu*—“*Yao Yue*” and *Lunyu*—“*Ji Shi*”). This is illustrated in sayings such as “Rejoicing in the moral order and knowing *ming* 乐天知命,” in other words, “Be content with one’s lot” (origins in the *Book of Changes*); “Obey the mandate of *tian* 顺天应命/顺天承命” (origins in feudal society); and “What is destined to happen will eventually happen, and what is not destined to happen cannot be forced 命里有时终须

有，命里无时莫强求” (Ming dynasty). Additionally, the wise state of knowing when to accept the status quo and when not in Confucianism is described as “knowing (*tian*)*ming* 知(天)命.”

Second, *ming* combined with the character *yun* 运, “movement” and “luck,” as in *mingyun* (“fate”), should be envisaged as a dynamic process that unfolds in time, a trajectory into the future.<sup>3</sup> The term *mingyun* exemplifies how each life journey is determined by external forces or conditions (*ming*) and yet remains “malleable” in the course of one’s life (*yun*). We could call *mingyun* a pragmatic “process-fate,” where various forces in the environment as well as in time come into play and can be taken into account in the totality of one’s life. This idea of a partly malleable “fate” has given rise to “fate management” practices such as geomancy (*fengshui* 风水), fortune-telling (*suanming* 算命, literally: calculating life/fate), and rituals of folk belief that have always constituted vital aspects of Chinese people’s daily life. “Fate management” practices assert “that life events are predetermined by external forces, but that there are ways for people to foretell and influence the negative impact of these forces” (Leung, 2010, p. 228). In other words, taking (or not taking) the right action and creating the right circumstances can change one’s *mingyun*. To remind the readers of this particular meaning of *mingyun* as “partly malleable fate,” its translation as “fate” will be written in quotation marks in this chapter.

The dynamics of *ming* as a “life force” are well documented in an expression attributed to late Qing literatus Wen Kang (mid-nineteenth century), which literally sums up ten *ming*-influencing factors, containing both practical and spiritual elements: 1. *Ming*-fate, which is unchangeable, inborn; 2. Luck (*yun*), which fluctuates; 3. Geomancy; 4. Accumulating hidden merits through virtue; 5. Study; 6. Fortune-telling based on one’s name; 7. Hand and face reading; 8. Praying; 9. Knowing important people (*guanxi*); 10. Nourishing life practices (*yangsheng* 养生). These factors inform a person on the right (non)action to avoid a (further) negative impact of *ming* and to spot “opportunities 机会.” Expressions that emphasize the successfulness of efforts are “Three parts are destined by *tian*, seven parts depend on hard work 三分天注定，七分靠打拼” and the abundance of contemporary

slogans that emphasize “struggle 奋斗” and “efforts 努力” as virtues and moral duties.

In this light, metaphysical *tianming* containing a moral imperative that at times incorporates acceptance of the status quo, and *mingyun* as a “process fate” emphasizing “fate” agency, are not paradoxical, but rather dialectic and complementary alternatives of human agency in the drama of *ming*. Efforts are mandatory, but if the “life force” turns out greater than humans, and genuine efforts are not effective in realizing one’s moral duty or in improving one’s life, then the “fate” logic is acceptance without remorse. In this chapter, I delve into this shifting navigation of one’s *ming* over the last six decades through both acceptance and agency in the quest for a better life. More specifically, I will focus on how period-specific variations of “changing fate” are discursively deployed and experienced in the dynamics of *ming*.

In accord with contemporary Chinese author, artist and cultural scholar Feng Jikai’s (b. 1942) conviction that “it is only the fate (*mingyun*) of common people that represents the fate of that era” (Feng, 2016), discourses on *mingyun* can be considered narratives of their time, expressed through the people of these times. Hence, this exploration of various “changing fate” aspirations serves as a window to the changing times, and shows how not only traditional cultural and folk factors, but also more recent socioeconomic changes and political demands have impacted *ming* agency in search of more wellbeing. Moreover, despite (or due to) both growing social control and social insecurity, traditional values that inform dealings with *ming(yun)* have transformed into quite modern and sometimes (by parents and the government) unsolicited forms. In its most extreme form, upward social mobility takes on a radical downward course.

## Method

Following Feng Jikai’s (2016) remark above that only the “fate” of common people represents the “fate” of the given times, my argument draws on interviews with 16 Chinese middle-class urbanites aged 25 to 72 typically holding a BA degree, complemented with Chinese literary

sources and data from discussion fora from Chinese cyberspace. As the topic itself is quite abstract and often paradoxical, to investigate common “fate language,” I always started my interviews with an open question about associations with the term *ming(yun)*. As proverbs are short but enduring sayings that reflect people’s beliefs, attitudes, and values, and thus are an important carrier and mirror of cultural values and beliefs (Weng et al., 2021), I further presented the abovementioned Chinese proverbs related to *ming(yun)* that originate in both ancient and more recent official and popular sources. I then asked my interlocutors to pick the ones they felt most compelled to react on and invited them to include as much as possible concrete examples of their experience. As explained above, the sayings altogether contain some contradictory convictions, which served as an invitation for the interlocutors to express their opinion on these contradictions. The notion of “changing fate” was invariably brought up spontaneously.

## “Changing Fate” in the Mao Period: “The Lost Generation”

In a time when Mao Zedong considered changing the “fate” of the nation (Yan Z., 2021), only one goal dominated individual life: contributing to collectively changing the “fate” of China through class struggle. The regime notably did not leave much room for negotiating personal “fate.” In no way different from feudal times, life for common people was all about “tireless struggle,” now for the sake of the revolution, with “Serving the People,” sobriety, and thriftiness as core principles of the Chinese Communist Party.

Not surprisingly, literary sources from that period exhibit a preoccupation with the unavoidability of “fate” and the absence of “fate” control. The so-called “lost” or Zero Generation, who effectively was deprived of the opportunity to access higher education (Broaded, 1991), predominantly expresses *ming(yun)* as a metaphysical lot one cannot escape. In many of his powerful poems, painter, poet, and novelist Gao Xingjian (b. 1940) goes even further, and—playing with the different meanings of *ming*—considers the core of *ming* to be nothing more than living “life”

(*ming*) with its uncontrollable bits of good and bad luck and opportunities, while seeking spiritual relief in grace and beauty (Gao, 2018; Lupke, 2005b).<sup>4</sup> In the face of *ming(yun)*, the dominant sentiment is powerlessness, and the only meaningful thing to do is to live and survive (Gao, 2018; Lackner & Chardonnens, 2014).

Two decades after the Mao period, writers such as Yan Lianke (b. 1958; cf. his quote at the beginning of this chapter) and Yu Hua (b. 1960) tried to come to terms with the fates they suffered as children in their literary works. They represent the genre of Chinese fiction known as “Scar Literature” that emerged in the late 1970s soon after the death of Mao Zedong in an attempt to heal the traumas suffered during the worst years of the Mao era. In this kind of fiction, protagonists often lament their “fate” as something that is totally beyond their control and dependable on the “mood of the day,” i.e., the political structure and powers (for detailed examples, see Lupke, 2005b). In his *China in Ten Words*, Yu Hua describes how a miserable 12-year-old Red Guard first became a national celebrity and later fell from grace. She had criticized a teacher in her diary, who then made her life intolerable. Therefore, the young girl resorted to writing a letter to the *Beijing Daily*, claiming that “she was just a junior Red Guard who loves the Party and Chairman Mao” (Yu, 2013, p. 71). The story made headlines all over the country, and the girl became an anti-establishment hero and role model for students nationwide. Three years later, with the death of Mao and the fall of Madame Mao, she—and with her, her family—fell from “heaven into hell, labeled at sixteen a lackey of the Gang of Four [a radical faction of the CCP including Mao’s third wife Jiang Qing]” (Yu, 2013, p. 70). As Yu Hua explains, “In that era, destiny did not rest in one’s hand; everyone found himself swept along in the current, and nobody knew whether fortune or fiasco lay ahead” (Yu, 2013, p. 71).

Yu Hua’s most well-known novel, “To Live 活着” (written in 1993 and famously put on screen by director Zhang Yimou in 1994), is still mentioned by young people today as a striking example of the workings of “fate” in human life. In “To Live,” the protagonist encounters one misfortune after the other, and attributing this to “fate” serves as a consolation and contributes to his peace of mind (Yu, 2021). In those days, maintaining a powerful social network (*guanxi*) and the corresponding

dynamics of reciprocity of face and favors could not always avoid misfortune, since a person's face (social status) could change overnight without the slightest warning. Even the supportive and protective function of the family was reduced; the community took care of everything.

In addition to the capriciousness of the regime and the inability of one's social network to improve one's life, there is yet another explanation for the overwhelming attitude of resignation toward *ming*. Under Mao's socialist orthodoxy, not only were Western and traditional Chinese culture and intellectuals and bourgeoisies repressed, but folk practices such as fortune-telling, geomancy, and face- and hand-reading were also officially suppressed for being superstition (Baum, 2021; Goossaert & Palmer, 2011).<sup>5</sup> This lack of soothing folk practices very likely added to feelings of powerlessness in the face of "fate."

## **"Changing Fate" in the Reform Period (1980–2000): Generation X**

Entering the first phase of economic reform after the atrocities of the Cultural Revolution, the next generation grew up with more personal rights and freedoms, and with an increasing exposure to Western elements. In 1978, when Deng Xiaoping declared the opening up and reform, he also advocated the famous maxim "getting rich is glorious"—strikingly the contrary of what his predecessor advocated. In particular urbanites were suddenly confronted with not only a flood of information, but also academic and economic opportunities, including a growing consumer market available for those who studied well and worked hard. Hopes were high and optimism blossomed. Communist society gradually changed into an entrepreneurial "capitalist society with Chinese characteristics," and "changing fate" became equivalent to doing it better than the former generation: enjoying city life and its benefits (e.g., education and social security), owning an apartment, consuming modernity, and contributing to the social status of one's family.

Despite the rather defeatist attitude of the "Lost Generation," it did not prevent them from encouraging their children to actively change their "fate," in the hope of benefitting from it too. Since the nationwide

implementation of the one-child policy in 1980, it felt as if their one child indeed was the only one who could still work towards improved quality of life. The path to “changing fate” was still largely guided by the dialectical rhetoric of struggle; this time not through class struggle for the “fate” of the nation, but through class mobility for changing one’s personal “fate” (and indirectly also that of the nation).

For this generation, the highway to “changing fate” was through becoming “knowledgeable,” unambiguously articulated at the time by the omnipresent slogan “Knowledge changes fate 知识改变命运.”<sup>6</sup> As one of my interlocutors, herself born in 1982 and now a university lecturer, explained, she felt that above all children and youth became “knowledge machines” who were required to process as much knowledge as possible at a high speed (Interview, 5 January 2022, Ghent). The logic implied in the maxim “Knowledge changes fate” was that those in impoverished situations through acquiring knowledge could realize the dream of “Carp jumping over the dragon’s gate 鲤鱼跳龙门.” This expression is a metaphor for succeeding in the imperial exams—the ambition of all literati in imperial times, and the only way to gain real power. Currently, the phrase denotes “making a significant advance in one’s career.” As is commonly assumed, this success changes not only one’s own but also the “fate” of the entire family and the future generations (Anonymous, 2014). Moreover, as single children, these youth were the only persons who actually could succeed in doing so.

The power of knowledge for “changing fate” was most visible in the reinstalment (1978) of the famous, or rather infamous, College Entrance Exam, the *gaokao* 高考. The *gaokao* was, and still is, the prerequisite for any form of higher education, and later provided entry into private business, educational, or governmental positions. One of my interlocutors, a PhD student in pedagogics and Hakka minority, recalled his father (b. 1964) repeatedly telling him that he took the *gaokao* eight times in the early 1990s, ending up with still ongoing nightmares. As he explained, his father endured this pressure year after year simply because this was the only way to escape the miserable fate of a poor and tough living in the countryside. He just wanted to do better than his parents, or at least be as prosperous as his neighbors, and, in the background of the dismantling of the bureaucratic “iron rice bowl” system and the emergence of

private social security, to be able to financially support his entire family (Interview, 15 June 2022, Wechat). This description neatly exemplifies a child's moral duty of filial piety (*xiao* 孝), which meant nothing less than the responsibility of often caring alone for six people: two parents and four grandparents.

It is important, however, to note that success in higher education, and after that in the academic or booming entrepreneurial sector, was not just a natural outcome of struggle and effort (and a portion of good luck), but also of “opportunities.” “Opportunities”—generally conceived of as a holistic combination of the right timing, place, and people's setup—have always been an integral part of Chinese success culture, to which an abundance of common sayings testify.<sup>7</sup> As many of my interlocutors explained, “opportunities” were readily available for those who inherited a good rank, but could also be made more visible and within reach not only through the re-emerging fortune-telling practices, but also through one's personal social network (*guanxi*). This also implied that the son of a factory manager did not need to be successful in the *gaokao*; inheritance and kinship continued the power line. In general, in these two decades of optimistic reform, chances to “change fate” were high for those who worked hard, had a good network and/or were otherwise resourceful enough to spot “opportunities.” The model example *par excellence* of that period is Jack Ma (Ma Yun, b. 1964), former CEO of Alibaba, also known as “that person who changed his own fate and the fate of others.” He started his immensely successful business from scratch, failing secondary school once and picking up again, and only at a later age entering university (Wang, 2018).

This combination of effort, knowledge, a good network, and “opportunities” was well summarized by one of my interlocutors, Mr. Liu, a 57-year-old, divorced computer engineer. At the time of the interview, he had worked for three years in a small Belgium dumplings company set up by a Chinese immigrant. He continuously stressed the idea of “preparing yourself well” so as to be ahead of your (bad) “fate” and be able to grasp the “opportunities” when they presented themselves. He mentioned at least 20 times the idea of “getting ready” by means of continuous learning (for instance, at his age, he still took many online courses during COVID-19 lockdowns), and by maintaining a healthy



body through physical exercise and a balanced diet, typically known as nourishing health (*yangsheng*) practices (for instance, he advised me not to eat a lot in the evening, a few nuts and some vegetables). This “preparing,” he continued, requires two things: both sustained effort and a positive and active attitude. That is, not complaining, and moreover, not comparing. Because, as he further explained, one will always discover someone whose “fate” seems more fortuitous than one’s own (Interview, 10 June 2022, Lokeren).

## “Changing Fate” in the Postreform Period: Generation Y

By the time economic reforms had passed the second decade, the private sector had grown remarkably and China had joined the WTO in 2001, Gen X had proven to be quite successful in obtaining more quality of life than their parents. As for Gen Y, influenced by Western values, they increasingly desired financial independence and individuality. However, two decades after the one-child policy they were still carrying the heavy weight of care for (grand) parents, a moral duty that quickly became part of a governmental “civilizational project” to counter moral decline (Meinhof & Zhang, 2022). As state-owned enterprises were gradually dismantled, factory managers lost their powerful position, and demands on the labor market switched to highly skilled people. The postreform Little Emperors’ quest for success and security in the social, professional, and material spheres gradually became problematic.

In reality, the importance of the most crucial life-changing event, the *gaokao*, only increased. *Gaokao* results were not just the required entrance ticket to higher education but also decisive for the quality of the university one was allowed to enter. Moreover, obtaining a BA (4 years) would not guarantee a job anymore, which meant again studying strenuously to pass the MA and, later, the PhD entrance exam. One of my interlocutors, himself a PhD student at Ghent University, explained that currently, only approximately 20% succeed in the MA entrance exam. Competition is nerve-wracking (Interview, 6 November 2021, Ghent). To perform with excellence, young people are mentally and intellectually “prepared” from

the day they are born, which is often described as the “goose-fattening” pedagogy and still visible in the recent neologism *jiwa* 鸡娃 “chicken-baby.” Toddlers were seen as fertilizer plants in a greenhouse, pushed by their parents to continuously improve themselves. They were to be successful in all exams necessary to “jump the dragon’s gate” (Matthyssen, 2024). In other words, intellectual and emotional endurance remained the primary path to climb the social ladder.

However, toiling for upward mobility did not come to an end after entering the labor market. By now, with the rapid increase in highly skilled graduates, and despite ongoing economic growth, both competition for employment and competition on the job (to keep the job and move up) have become more stressful. In addition, the emphasis on economic growth and wealth no longer sufficed to maintain state legitimacy and gradually switched back to a more nationalist discourse. Citizens were urged to contribute to the “Chinese Dream 中国梦” (since his speech in 2012 a term closely associated with Xi Jinping) and to the “Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation 中华民族伟大复兴” (Zhang, 2020; Zhou, 2017). As a result, in a market economy that increasingly incorporated neoliberal elements alongside authoritarian centralized control (Harvey, 2005), both outside pressure and one’s own desire for success intensified. This gave rise to a booming self-improvement, motivational, and counseling industry: TV shows, podcasts, popular books, and later a flourishing coaching industry which helped mold successful, resilient, and self-reliant citizens who worked hard to fulfill their’s and the nation’s “Chinese Dream” (Huang, 2014; Nehring et al., 2016; Yang, 2018). Among these resources, a great deal dealt with how to actively “change fate” (e.g., Xu, 2008), of which many aimed at secondary school students preparing for the *gaokao*. One of my younger interlocutors still enthusiastically explained that if there was one book that helped her through the last years of secondary school, it was undoubtedly “Learning how to change fate” by “fate” guru Li Xiaopeng (2006) (Interview, 19 May 2008, Shenyang). The cover states: “A book that every secondary school student but also every person eager for success should read.” The book’s proposed strategies smoothly shift from developing the right state of mind and study methods, to being diligent and setting a target, to managing social

relationships. Similar to the reform period, and despite increasing “obstacles,” belief in the malleability of “fate” was still dominant among the young and middle-aged, as, for instance, the back cover of one of the self-improvement books in clear neoliberalism-inspired language shows: “Fate is not determined by *tian* (moral order); success and defeat is human-made” (Yue, 2007).

In all this motivational pep-talk, the socialist rhetoric of struggle and effort is nevertheless still conveniently complemented by the Confucian moral stance on failure despite all efforts. Such “misfortune” is beyond one’s control and should be accepted without any resentment toward others or oneself (Tseng et al., 2005, p. 137). In the fiercely competitive society of postreform China, this optimistic, ancient wisdom still comes in handy as a consolation strategy. In this respect, many sources refer to the saying “Be content with one’s lot.” Interestingly, one of my interlocutors explicitly associated this saying and the saying “*Tianming* is unpredictable” with self-consoling rationalization when things get tough and one becomes emotional (Interview, 15 June 2022, Wechat). Becoming emotional about the quirks of “fate” is indeed the last thing to do. In a public appearance to promote her book as giving “profound insights in particular to those born in the 1980s and 1990s,” famous TV host and media personality Li Sisi (b. 1986) explained the wisdom behind this saying as the optimistic counterpart of complaining: “If things in life happen in accord with one’s wishes, then that is good fortune. If not, then it is an experience. In this way, everything has its meaning” (Gui, 2016). This layer of existential meaning-giving obviously echoes the popular modern-day Confucian self-cultivation discourses from the motivational books that urge citizens to be hard-working and resilient, and simultaneously promise personal growth.

## “Changing Fate” for Generation Z, and Generation Z+

As for young adults today, the mainstream ideal of struggling to improve life has not in the least changed. For instance, alongside a quote from the fate-changing model example of Jack Ma (see above), the cover page of

success-book “There is no innate good fate, only teeth-gritting struggle” (Luo, 2014) states:

Young people who deeply feel that their ideals are fully rounded (rich) but reality skinny (poor) should, instead of complaining about the cruelty of fate, face up to life and struggle hard, and refresh their fate with passion, willpower, and hard work.

Alongside the growing market of books on “changing fate,” the revival of divination books and practices and the availability of digital technology to consult these<sup>8</sup> not only make the means to rationally “know fate” overwhelmingly accessible, but also make people more self-reliant for finding “fate management” advice. For instance, as a few of my interlocutors mentioned, for taking part in the *gaokao* and other exams, fortune-tellers on online platforms like Taobao are paid huge amounts to give tips on what to wear to the exam, or to sell blessings online that will help the examinee to perform better.

Interestingly, the success rates seem contrary to reality, and the envisaged “personal growth” following defeats has seen some unexpected changes. Despite China’s strong economic position, the declining poverty gap, and the end of the reform era, the underlying core factors—political stability, ideological openness, and rapid economic growth—are unraveling. Gradually, “opportunities” for social mobility and thus material comfort and old-age security have diminished. For the youngest among Gen Z, the number of highly skilled graduates available for positions is immense. To be as competitive as possible in both the academic and labor market, the bar is raised higher and higher. Once having finally entered the labor market, young citizens see themselves confronted with the phenomenon of “involution” (*neijuan* 内卷, literally: “spiraling inward”) and its “996” work ethic (9 hours/day, 6 days/week, or worse, 007), with sky-rocketing house prices, gender imbalances, and the so-called “left-over men/women.” This leaves many young city-dwellers unintentionally without a partner, children, and house, and on the verge of collapsing. In other words, no matter how hard one struggles to improve one’s competitiveness, the material, social, and moral rewards are now far

from guaranteed. Even discussions on official media have started to question the importance of the adage “Knowledge changes fate.” For instance, one such discussion states that “In the past thirty years, the transformation of the country has continued, but the transformation of individuals’ fate (*mingyun*) has gradually come to a halt” (Anonymous, 2014).

In reality, the situation is even worse, as one blogger points out: “If education cannot ‘change fate,’ is one’s class not solidified then? ‘Class solidification’ must be seen in this way: the way up is inevitably painstaking, and the big door down is always open” (Anonymous, 2022). In other words, the fear of losing what one already has achieved also increases, resulting in a situation in which everyone, no matter what class they belong to, seems to be anxious and afraid. As anthropologist Xiang Biao lucidly states, “The lower class still hopes to change its fate, but the middle and upper classes aren’t so much looking upward, and they are marked by a deep fear of falling downward” (Wang & Ge, 2020). Moreover, the unescapable “fate” young citizens are confronted with is now not simply being unable to do better or even as good as former generations, but having to deal with the mental, social, and physical pressure resulting from being exploited by a highly competitive, neoliberal system, and from the group pressure to succeed. As Xiang Biao further explains, “involution” is “Confucian culture that has become competitive,” in which following the mainstream is not new, but incessant competition is (Wang & Ge, 2020). Add to this the omnipresent nationalist pressure to contribute to the revival of the Chinese nation, and the situation becomes unbearable. The defeat of the system is imminent.

Evidently, this hopeless situation takes its toll. But compared to older age cohorts, Gen Z is more individualistic and willing to question the “moral order” (*tian*) coming from both parental and governmental authority. Two of my interlocutors, both university teachers in their forties with more than 15 years of teaching experience, explained how they have seen youth change over time. Despite the obligatory courses on Marxism, the doctrines of Mao, nationalism, and the recently added courses on “Xi Jinping Thought,” many of those who spent their late teens with Xi Jinping in power do not feel much like blindly contributing to the country and obeying their parents. This ultimately leads to a shift in life-changing aspirations. Following a few sudden deaths of young

employees in high-tech companies in early 2021, and the massive and devastating COVID-19 lockdowns, increasing health concerns prompted the emergence of an alternative lifestyle among young adults: “lying flat 躺平.” Instead of pragmatically opting for a low-pressure, low-paid, socially advantageous “iron-rice-bowl” job in the public sector,<sup>9</sup> for becoming a “return youth 返乡青年” and living a simple but relatively healthy life in the countryside, or for studying the new hype “the art of running 润学” (that is, how to flee from adverse conditions by emigrating), they chose to retreat altogether and just “lie flat.” Although not all of them practice this lifestyle the hard way, the group’s (unofficial) mission is quite straightforward: a “low desire 低欲望” life without a car, a house, a stable job, a family and children (Matthyssen, 2024).

Obviously, this did not go unnoticed by the government: “lie flat” posts were removed, online “lie flat” groups were blocked, and “lie flat” merchandize was forbidden. Official sources reacted mainly by saying that it was shameful and even criminal for young adults to “lie flat” now that the country and their fellow countrymen needed them (Matthyssen, 2024). In reaction to the new spiritual trend among youngsters to “study metaphysics 玄学,” in which specific “fate management” practices are supposed to solve all problems,<sup>10</sup> one official comment strengthens its argument by claiming that:

Fate (*mingyun*) is not “metaphysics”. Fate is full of forks in the road that have nothing to do with social psychology or any theory; those forks are the “objective ignorance”<sup>11</sup> that we have to face. Therefore, taking full account of “objective ignorance” requires not only an external perspective and statistical thinking, but also a full acceptance of chance and uncertainty, and the ability to take the occasional miraculous twist that fate throws at us. (Anonymous, 2021a)

Another state media outlet declared that “It is allowed to accept fate and endure hardship, but it is not allowed to “lie flat” (Anonymous, 2021b). In other words, remain silent and continue to struggle. One sharp observer, however, in compliance with the original post entitled “Lying flat is justice,” turned this logic upside down, stating exactly the

opposite: “It is allowed to lie flat, but not to accept fate and endure hardship” (Laisili, 2021). Referring to the abovementioned novel by Yu Hua, “To Live,” as an example of the workings of “fate,” another commentator argued as follows:

It is written in “To Live”: Never believe that suffering is worthwhile. Suffering is just suffering, and suffering is unlikely to bring success. The so-called hardening of willpower exists only because suffering itself cannot be avoided. Those who propagate the idea that suffering now will lead to enjoying a happy, comfortable life in the future are just bullshit. There is no causal relationship between suffering and enjoying happiness. Whether we choose to “lie flat” or to struggle is a choice we should have by birth, and we should not be blamed by anyone. (Anonymous, 2021b)

We should, however, keep in mind that “lying flat” is not a positively motivated choice inspired by some underground youth (sub)culture, as some academic sources want us to believe (e.g., Gu & Hou, 2022). Lie-flatters want to break with the mainstream pattern of “being consumed by the desire for upward mobility and the fear of failure” (Wang, 2017, p. 141). One blogger represents the sentiment of many fellow lie-flatters:

I do not like to “lie flat”. I feel that although life is a bit hard, I don't want to give up pursuing my dreams and goals. [...] So lying flat is not for fun. I do not like the “involution” either. I just want to work reasonable hours! We are employees, not machines! (Anonymous, 2021c)

For these young adults, the “goose fattening” motivational talk they had to swallow since their birth lost its appeal. Neither the ideal of heroic struggle, nor the Confucian moral obligation of efforts without rewards, bring solace anymore. These youth simply feel mentally and physically exhausted, and spiritually empty. As a result, they develop a strong need to take care of their spiritual, affective, and aesthetic life. As one of my interlocutors, a PhD student who grew up in the Chinese countryside and was trained to become a highly educated, successful city-dweller, laconically said, “‘Changing fate’ has now become like changing from a robot into a personally thinking and feeling being” (Interview, 14 April 2022, Ghent).

In other words, this small group of young misfits in society want to “change fate” not by morally enduring hardship but by taking care of themselves—to the apparent disadvantage of the family and the state. Since there is no “exit mechanism” allowed (Wang & Ge, 2020), only one option is left: withdrawal, either physically, mentally, or both. One of my interlocutors laughingly referred to the lie-flatters who question the moral order (*tian*) as resembling the smart but disobedient Monkey King Sun Wukong in the *Journey to the West* (one of the Four Classics of Chinese literature), famous for “being in defiance of the moral order (*tian*) and changing one’s fate (*ming*) 逆天改命.” Additionally, the famous words “My fate (*ming*) is up to me, not up to the moral order (*tian*) 我命由我不由天” of Ne Zha the Magician, a protagonist in a film and series hit in 2019, might have given inspiration. For this small group, “changing fate” is indeed a self-chosen path down the social ladder, out of self-preservation. It is not that they do not fear “falling downward”—after all, it is like “committing moral betrayal,” and criticism is huge (Wang & Ge, 2020). However, the dehumanization they experience leaves them no choice.

## Conclusion: “Changing Fate” and an Economy of (no) Desires

Since the Mao era, various forms of *ming* agency can be observed among subsequent generations, showing both common and diverse patterns. First, discursively, “changing fate” in the quest for a better life in one way or another inevitably involves effort, struggle, and endurance. However, the actual enduring takes on period-specific content: from enduring communist cruelties, to enduring painstaking intellectual and emotional upbringing. Not to forget the fierce competition in educational, professional, and even amorous life. And all this with constant feelings of shame for being unsuccessful and being a social outcast.

Second, the mountain—that is, the determining sociopolitical circumstances—has changed dramatically in less than sixty years. The corresponding song to sing—the actual changing or accepting “fate” in the navigation of life—changed accordingly:



- from contributing collectively to the revolution in the Mao period and accepting one's personal lot,
- to actively improving one's family's living standard by life in the city in the reform period,
- to getting rich(er) and gaining more social status in the postreform period,
- and most recently, for some, to living a low-desire life under the radar.

This switch in personal aspirations is well summarized by Yu Hua when he self-reflectively remembers his own childhood after having observed generations after him:

Let me try to capture the changing outlook of three generations of Chinese boys as a way of mapping China's trajectory over the years in simple terms. If you asked these boys what to look for in life, I think you would hear very different answers. A boy growing up in the Cultural Revolution might well have said, "Revolution and struggle." A boy growing up in the early 1990s, as economic reforms entered their second decade, might well have said, "Career and love." Today's boy might well say, "Money and girls". (Yu, 2018)

A third observation, one that Yu Hua's description escapes, is that there are limits to the efforts and endurance to "change fate." These limits are similarly an unintentional but direct product of the prevailing socio-economic and political context. At some point in the "neoliberal society with Chinese characteristics" (Harvey, 2005), when individual resources are used up, personal health is severely endangered, optimism nowhere to be seen, and dehumanization is the new normal, then no rationalization, no Confucian social morality or personal mission (*tianming*), no nationalism or self-effacement seem to work anymore. One is unable to find a balance between accepting and changing one's "fate," that is, living an impersonal, machine-like life. So, when asking the fourth generation after Yu Hua what to look for in life, they might well say, "Being left in peace, and rest." For them, the only sane thing to do is doing it differently from the former generations, and putting a limit to the moral obligation of enduring and accepting, even if that means feeling like a misfit.

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## Notes

1. In imperial China, society was officially divided into nine layers of social stratification. This system was called the “nine-rank” system, and used to categorize and classify government officials, i.e., the elite. During Mao’s egalitarianism, the system knew a temporary breakdown. In its contemporary form, it has seen many changes, of which the most important the inclusion of “common people.” In general, the three upper levels are for Party members that have some power to influence national or local administration, but also get special benefits, e.g., not queuing in hospitals and access to special products; the three middle levels are reserved for intellectuals and those working in the public sphere, education, health sector, etc.; the lowest three levels are workers and farmers. (e.g., Lu, 2018; Zhang, 2021).
2. I want to thank Louise Sundararajan for helping me set these *ming* dimensions straight for the reader. As briefly as they are explained, they are in fact just a fraction of the many layers of the intricate concept of *ming* and according discussions in Chinese intellectual history.
3. The word *mingyun* is not only used for individuals, but also in a nationalist context (the fate of the nation/China), and as a global, collective fate, e.g., the recent official use of the phrase “community of common destiny for mankind” 人类命运共同体 first used by Hu Jintao in 2007 to describe a foreign-policy goal.
4. A beautiful illustration of Gao Xingjian’s vision of *mingyun* is one of his short *Wandering Mind and Metaphysical Thoughts* poems:

- “You came to this world by accident 偶然来到人世; And by accident, you’ll be gone 又偶然走了; How fate affects man 命运之于人; Or how man affects his fate 或人之于命运;. It’s all the same 可不如此” (Gao, 2018: pp. 90–91).
5. Soon after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, China experienced a “fortune-telling fever.” Fortune tellers re-emerged to publish extensively and ply their trade in public. However, despite the general relaxation of state policies toward folk beliefs, fortune-telling was still considered a superstition and therefore remained illegal. See e.g., Baum (2021).
  6. The phrase “Knowledge Changes Fate” has become most famous from a series of inspirational lectures by a Hong Kong PhD, Lam Wai Yin. According to the Chinese search engine Baidu, the 8 episodes of this lecture series are mainly aimed at “helping all those who love to learn and aspire to enhance their self-worth to achieve their aspirations.” See <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E7%9F%A5%E8%AF%86%E6%94%B9%E5%8F%98%E5%91%BD%E8%BF%90/3004327>, Last accessed 10 December 2022.
  7. Examples of sayings expressing the importance of “opportunities” are “Grasp the opportunity when it is there 机遇来了要抓住”; “When there is change, then there is an opportunity 有变化就会有机会”; “Push the boat along with the current 顺水推船” (i.e., making use of an opportunity that naturally comes up).
  8. See for instance the many APP’S and podcasts on “changing fate,” e.g., *Book of Changes* expert Zhang Ailing’s 709 issues of more than 10 minutes each on “The mystery of fate (*mingyun*) in life as explained by the *Book of Changes*” (<https://www.ximalaya.com/album/16883222>).
  9. Young people chose for less money and a post in the public sector (officials, schools,...) for several reasons: idealism, less pressure, but also very practical reasons such as being entitled to a school place for (still unborn) children (Zhang & Morgan, 2022).
  10. Literally: “Dark and mysterious learning,” also called Neo-Daoism. This is a mystical school that developed in the third and fourth centuries, in which metaphysical speculations sought

to adapt Daoist theories to the dominant Confucian theories and ideals. Now, it refers to an amalgamate of fortune-telling and other metaphysical fate management practices (See Baidu <https://baike.baidu.com/tashuo/browse/content?id=660f43d935c752e232fef19c>, Last accessed 13 December 2022).

11. The “objective ignorance 客观无知” used here refers to the Kalman filter, an algorithm in statistics and control theory that provides estimates of some unknown variables given the measurements observed over time, including statistical noise, and other inaccuracies.

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# 15

## The Loss of Soul in a World of Utilitarianism and Commodification: Munajat e Shabaniya and its Psychological Call for Transcendentalism

Sayyed Mohsen Fatemi

### Soul loss, Positivism and Neoliberalism

The modern world promised predictability, the truth of scientific discourse, and the privilege of exploring and endorsing truth arrived at through logical positivism and linear forms of thinking. It was in line with the increasing mastery of the scientific mode of knowing. Bertrand Russell (1956) suggested that one of the goals of psychology was to develop “a mathematics of human behavior as precise as the mathematics of machines” (p. 142). The emphasis on the physicality of human beings led to an erasure of any such thing as a soul. One may find the nullification of the soul in those writers who focus on positivist and materialist perspectives on human beings. Horgan (1999) and Bloom (1995) indicate that there are no souls. Similarly, the negation of the soul can frequently be heard from philosophers such as Dennett (1996) and

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psychologists including Pinker (1997). In line with a machine-oriented perspective, Wilson (1998) contended that “The central idea of the consilience world view is that all tangible phenomena, from the birth of stars to the workings of social institutions, are based on material processes that are ultimately reducible, however long and tortuous the sequences, to the laws of physics” (p. 291).

The exhilaration behind using the right tools such as quantification, measurement, control, replication, refutability, and objectivity, led to infatuation with the physicality of human beings. The view of human beings within physiological, biological, and linear models resulted in a predilection for “repairing damage within a disease model of human functioning” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). Furthermore, a Darwinian paradigm reinforced explaining human nature through reductionist models where human nature needs to be solely and simply examined as material phenomena.

This chapter addresses the loss of soul in terms of the hegemony of a Neoliberal materialist emphasis on commodification and instrumentalism. Materialism served as a grand narrative to control human life which became aligned with the propensity of avid seekers of power and wealth. Neoliberalism promoted values tailored toward consumerism and materialism. It disconnected human beings from any genuine transcendental exploration and engaged them in a parochial agenda at the service of a machine-oriented world. The hegemony of the machine brought coldness, artificiality, pretentiousness, and superficiality in human relationships. Technology and the machine were created by human beings but later governed human life.

Materialism has been the dominant paradigm in scientific scholarship to the extent that any alternative mode of thinking beyond materialism is disregarded. In line with the hegemony of Neoliberal materialism, the materialistic interpretation of human beings does not leave room to acknowledge any ontological validity for the soul. “Sorry, but Your Soul Just Died,” by Wolf (1996) may illustrate the sovereignty of materialism in almost every domain of human life.

## Humanness and a Materialist Ontology

Neoliberalism promoted a definition of human beings based on materialism, not spirituality. The person was summed up in a body-oriented context. The ontology of materialism declared its control of the pervasive discourse of neoliberalism. The process not only emphasized the sphere of superficiality in a machine-oriented world, but also popularized compulsive engagements with moneymaking in almost every domain of human life. Neoliberalism promoted the idea of happiness on earth through advanced equipment of machine-laden phenomena and their materialistic implications. Spirituality was treated as a matter of superstition and a figment of imagination. Neoliberalism and the sovereignty of machine in human beings' lives denied an essential part of human beings, the spiritual part, and the presence of a soul. This rejection gave rise to a sense of emptiness in human beings that is not satisfied by the neoliberal style of living. The denial of spirituality brought numerous dilemmas in human realms including the meaning of prayer.

The entanglements and the obsession with the material world facilitated the departure from serious contemplation regarding foundational questions of life, meaning, and existence. If everything is summed up in merely what we see, hear, touch, smell, and taste and there is no hereafter, and if our being is purely the total sum of physical elements in our physiological yearnings and cravings, what should be the main goal of life except moving in that direction?

## Nihilism and the Loss of Soul

Nihilism was born in the context of such parochialism. It was in connection with this rampant form of nihilism that Frankl (1985) focused on an existential vacuum and argued that the modern world is afflicted with a collective neurosis. Heidegger (1995) examined the impact of the social and psychological malaise of the materialistic and machine-oriented perspective on human beings. He attributed the problem of the modern world to its "massiveness, acceleration and calculation" (p. 83).

He argued that the hegemony of our materialist and our detached objectivity has limited our freedom to look above what we are, to what we can become.

In an in-depth discussion of the pathological signs of human affliction, Cushman points to the failures of psychologists and psychiatrists in addressing the profound anguish of humans in the modern world. He suggests that “they have also been constructing it, profiting from it, and not challenging the social arrangement that created it” (Cushman, 1990, 609). Neoliberalism promoted a full-fledged campaign for materialism without revisiting the possibility of change and transformation at a deeper social and political level.

Critiquing the tyranny of neoliberalism, Teo (2018a, 2018b) argues that neoliberalism has endorsed a new nihilism that makes societal and systemic change appear impossible: “This status quo supporting nihilism does not refer to the idea of God, the meaning of life, or to existing values, but is rather about de-conceptualizing the notion that systemic, political-economic change is possible” (p. 243).

The monopoly of mechanical and machine-oriented manifestations left no room for a much-needed private relationship with the self. The self was subjected to material-oriented modernism and experienced as empty. Neoliberalism created distractions such that humanity was turned away from paying attention to serious questions of epistemology, ontology, historicity, social situatedness, and cultural competencies.

## Neoliberalism and the Degradation of Values

Given the prevailing Neoliberal positivism, values were emptied by imposing the logic of consumerism, materialism, and utilitarianism. Authentic values were replaced by utilitarian values to be at the service of commodification. Given the dissipation of values as a result of a neoliberal and technologically driven world, Nasr (2020) indicates that.

There are technologies which can reduce pollution, but I do not believe that those technologies alone will save us from this crisis. We have to have an inner transformation. We have to have another way of looking at

ourselves, at what the purpose of human life is, at what satisfies us, what makes us happy, and not turn over to consumption as the only way to be happy, seeking satiation of our never-ending thirst and satisfaction of endless wants that are then turned into needs. (p. 82)

Neoliberalism promoted values tailored to support consumerism. The ultimate objective turned out to be possessiveness and constant competition among consumers. Neoliberalism disconnected human beings from any genuine transcendental and relational exploration, and encouraged them to be engaged in parochial agenda at the service of a machine-oriented world.

## Emptiness

Neoliberalism promoted alienation, oblivion, and emptiness from a genuine exploration of relationships beyond the materialistic world. From a psychological standpoint, Cushman (1990) describes the manifold dimensions of emptiness and absence in a materialistic society when he writes that the absent person “seeks the experience of being continually filled up by consuming goods, calories, experiences, politicians, romantic partners, and empathic therapists in an attempt to combat the growing alienation and fragmentation of its era” (p. 600–601). Objecting to the machine mentality and its deleterious effects on dissipating human values and emptiness created by neoliberal consumerism, Cushman (1990) argues that...

This is a powerful illusion. And what fuels the illusion, what impels the individual into this illusion, is the desperation to fill up the empty self [ . . . ] It must consume in order to be soothed and integrated; it must ‘take in’ and merge with a self-object celebrity, an ideology, or a drug, or it will be in danger of fragmenting into feelings of worthlessness and confusion. (p. 606)

The era of machine and neoliberalism underscored various forms of exploitation with no authenticity for the self. Teo (2018a, 2018b) delineates the consumerism and exploitation of the self within Neoliberalism

and states that “the pinnacle self is achieved, when “I” not only have an instrumental, entrepreneurial relationship to the ‘self,’ but ‘myself’ *is* an entrepreneurial entity” (p. 585).

## Neoliberalism and the Loss of Contact with Transcendence

Neoliberalism, materialism, and the commercialization of everything downgraded the importance of a reference point for meaning-making beyond the economy. This resulted in a magnification of a utilitarian mentality in every aspect of human life. Utilitarianism left no room for paying attention to the possibility of a sublime, transcendental domain where growth, development, maturity, progress, and care are connected to a supreme, metaphysical, and transcendental level of being.

### Materialism

Neoliberalism promoted the pursuit of goals that can foster a good and positive feeling. In a marketized world, the individual is led to focus on the importance of his/her liking as a goal of choice without exploring any relationship between choices and values. In his critique of neoliberalism and the marketized world, Foucault (2008) reiterates that “[w]e should think of consumption as an enterprise activity by which the individual, precisely on the basis of the capital he has at his disposal, will produce something that will be his own satisfaction” (Foucault, 2008, p. 226). Furthermore, he suggests that “society as a whole will not be asked to guarantee individuals against risks.... Society, or rather the economy, will merely [accord] everyone a sort of economic space within which they can take on and confront risks” (Foucault, 2008, p. 144).

Neoliberalism promoted a human being with no relationship to God and any transcendental realm. A market-laden view aligned with a materialistic or secular philosophy, ignored any spiritual connection that might challenge the utilitarian monopoly and interests. Relationships were contextualized within business and profit-making strategies

in neoliberal systems. Individuals acted on behavioral economics in line with neoliberal, self-interested agents (Jones et al., 2013; McMahan, 2015). Neoliberalism promotes hubris, arrogance, and an overbearing attitude towards others (see Fatemi, 2020). When one is infatuated with one's feelings of hubris, one carelessly follows whatever one desires in an insatiable pursuit of selfishness.

## **The Spirituality of Humanity in a World Governed by Neoliberalism**

### **Spirituality in General**

Spirituality can initiate a radical departure from a marketized worldview and make it an essential component of human beings known as spirituality and religiosity. Prayer offers a new discourse where the physical cosmology is embedded within the spiritual cosmology. Prayer builds the bridge between earth and heaven and links humanity to a higher ontological commitment. This commitment lost its appeal in neoliberal systems with the nullification of a divine nature for human beings. Neoliberalism promoted the idea of personal gain and interest as the center of one's direction and minimized the search for an inner self beyond materialism. In a Neoliberal society governed by utilitarianism and unrestrained markets, there is no innerness. Prayer deconstructs this viewpoint and explicates that the truth of mankind is not in corporal and physical phenomenon, but in his/her spiritual status. Religion often revitalizes this hidden spirituality and points out that the key to vitality is a mindful relationship with the transcendent as the source of all beauty and virtue. This circumscription left no room for transcendental values that constitute the substance of human beings. The modern world saturated in neoliberalism is highly attached to secular approaches and there is no place for spiritual connection, spiritual thoughts, and its manifestations in prayers. Religion underscores that there is an invisible "I" beside the visible "I" that needs to be nourished and taken care of. Nourishing the invisible "I" is not possible through materialistic viewpoints as the

essence of the invisible “I” requires a different source of nourishment from a different realm of existence.

Neoliberalism created a self that looks for excitement, arousal, and risk-taking in a materialistic and physiologically oriented self. The entrepreneurial self comes out of a materialist view of human beings where one needs to participate in harsh competition with others to gain more access to the material world. Neoliberal individualism promoted what Tsai (2007) calls high arousal positive states like excitement, energy, and enthusiasm, but they can expose increased levels of anxiety and internal turbulence.

Prayer brings a shift of attention from this self-reliant perspective to a perspective where one can rely only on the Divine Other as the source of all goodness, virtue, and beauty. This does not nullify the role of self-confidence and self-reliance as a positive feature, but it does proscribe neoliberal approaches to boost self-esteem at the expense of avoiding negative feelings. It does not urge the accumulation of more possessions of a greed-oriented self that cannot think of social and cultural ingredients of self-transformation (Cabanas, 2018; Teo, 2018a, 2018b).

Spirituality highlights the importance of cosmological sacredness in creating a relationship between the physical and the spiritual components of human beings, between the visible and the invisible elements of humankind. It challenges the premises of neoliberalism in limiting human happiness to materialism and introduces a new perspective on human development beyond the economic and marketized indexes.

## **Prayer as a Ritual Critical of Neoliberalism**

Prayer gives rise to a transformational awareness of the fragility of neoliberal premises. It opens a new chapter for relationships between the self and the Creator. Prayers focus on others beyond one’s tribe, family, race, gender, geography, and culture. It introduces the connectedness of all human beings in a cosmological project where all are linked to the Creator. In a critique of neoliberalism and its erasure of prayer, Nasr (2007) makes a distinction between pontifical man and Promethean



man. The former integrates earth and heaven whereas the latter rebels against heaven.

Prayer deconstructs earthly equations and revamps humanity's relationships with self, others, the world, and Divinity. It challenges the essence of materialism and machine-oriented quiddity of humankind. Prayer redefines human beings beyond the materialistic epistemology to open a new realm of meaning where the invisible brings its own independent source of sensibility.

## **Prayer in an Islamic Context**

According to Islamic mysticism, all existence is subjected to a philosophical and ontological poverty, where all creatures are poor in their essence, namely, they lack independence in their existence. The nature of this existence involves an acknowledgment of a need to rely on the authentic source of all goodness and grace. Connectedness to the infinite source of grace, beauty, perfection, sublimity, compassion, kindness, beneficence, mercy, benevolence, and all sources of goodness and perfection, would provide one with a sense of peace, tranquility, and calmness. God as the origin of infinitely good provides serenity and comfort to hearts and minds.

### **Prayer as Reconciliation**

Prayers, from an Islamic-based perspective, would help one reconcile with oneself. This reconciliation begins with a revision of one's ontological status. One's ontological status involves one's orientation in existence and its follow-up positions. Power, wealth, paraphernalia, political games, parochialism, egoism, egotism, hubris, arrogance, and imperialism belong to the domain of possessiveness.

An Islamic ontological viewpoint on the psychology of human beings argues that human beings have a status that needs to be acknowledged, educated, developed, promoted, and actualized. The human status or the human ontological position needs to be constantly grown as there is no

limitation for it. The ontological position is tied to prayer as an element of awareness, revitalization, renaissance, and transcendence.

## Islamic Prayer as Connection with Allah

Islamic prayer develops communication between the creator and the creature(s) in its purest and the most genuine way. Authenticity involves the premise that God is Hearing and Knowing. Neither slumber overtakes Him nor sleep. This acknowledges that one is never alone and lonely. God is with him/her under all circumstances. Unto Him belongs whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is on the earth. This understanding gives rise to a cognitive change where one does not rely on anything but God. The change in cognition provides an understanding of the centrality of monotheism.

Unlike neoliberalism, Monotheism (Tawhid) begins with understanding the nothingness of anything except God. This nothingness acknowledges that anything in the realm of existence is nothing unless there is a connection with God. Once the connectedness of things is negated, their being is negated. Ontologically, *beings* are *beings* if they are connected to God or Allah.

## Islamic Psychological Perspectives on Prayer as Transformative

An Islamic-based psychological perspective proposes that prayer can play a transformational role, namely, emotional transformation, cognitive transformation, behavioral transformation and, above all, existential and ontological transformation. The transformational quiddity of prayer can be explored in several domains. From an Islamic perspective, *Duaa* (prayers) can have a great impact in improving and transforming one's life so much so that a Hadith (saying) from Imam Baqer (*Salavattolah alayh*) indicates that *Duaa* or prayer can change one's firmly determined destination. Prayers can bring a shift into one's life by changing the steps in one's life.

Prayer in an Islamic-based psychology espouses emotional changes where one experiences detachment or *Enqetta* in Imam Ali's words: detachment is not that you should not own anything, but it means that nothing should own you. One may experience sadness and anger, for instance, but they are not going to overwhelm one when he/she embraces monotheism. Prayer, from an Islamic-based psychological perspective, dissipates disappointment, despondency, and despair. Prayer, according to Islamic mystical psychology, fosters hope, as it nullifies the spirit of helplessness; it is never too late to change. Even in the abyss of dark nights of despair, the sunlight of hope arrives where one is given assurance not to give up. A Hadith from Prophet Mohammad (*Sallalah alayhe va alehe*) reiterates that it is never too late for one to change.

## Islamic Psychology and Transformative Prayer in an Age of Market and Machine

Individuals robbed of their souls become lost. The neoliberalist world-view does not leave room for heart and heartfulness in a spiritual sense (Fatemi, 2021). Prayer is marginalized and degraded in a technological, neoliberal society. An Islamic-based psychology offers a new paradigm in both epistemology and ontology. Existence is no longer circumscribed within material boundaries and modes of knowing are not limited to the visible and material world. Neoliberalism and machine-led governance circumscribed the ontology of life to reductionist approaches which defined human beings based on their physiological and neurological configuration and nothing more. *Duaa* (prayers) constitute a significant pillar of an Islam-based psychology. This is contrary to the traditional psychoanalytic perspective where spiritual, mystical, and religious experiences were considered signs of pathology or, in Freud's words, "regression to primary narcissism" (Freud, 1961).

The age of market and machine brought about a self-alienation where the self-induced parameters of neoliberalism such as the entrepreneurial self, emptied mind and heart of any spiritual direction. The flux of

neoliberalism even gripped a number of contemporary Muslim intellectuals and societies to compare their progress with the criteria presented by neoliberal systems (Nasr, 2020).

Mystical psychology within an Islamic mysticism brings humanity back to the spiritual sources and explains that prayer can give rise to changes in one's being. One's being can be rife with *having* so much that one becomes oblivious to one's *being*: possessiveness keeps one away from an in-depth exploration of one's *being*, one's identity. Consistent with neoliberalism, one becomes the total sum of one's material and earthly manifestations, including wealth, power, egoism, egotism, hubris, greed, lavishness, and selfishness. Prayer calls for leaving one's landscape of materialism and preparing oneself for arriving at the landscape of spirituality and transcendence where paradigms undergo foundational changes. The first and foremost change occurs in the interpretive discourse of ontology, where being is not limited to material being. A new realm of existence emerges where God serves as the Lord of the World. The One that has always been and will always be. The One that according to the holy Quran is Eternally Sufficient unto Himself.

## The Prayer of Munajat e Shabaniya

Munajat e Shabaniya is one of the outstanding examples of an Islamic prayer that authentically calls for a transcendental transformation in one's being, thoughts, feelings, and actions. Munajat e Shabaniya has also been cited by Islamic philosophers and mystics in the context of spiritual enlightenment, spiritual enhancement, mystical and philosophical development, spiritual elevation, and spiritual enhancement. The prayer has been documented to be a significant reference point for practical arrival into sublime understanding of monotheism. There have been widespread assertions among numerous scholars indicating that a genuine understanding of prayer has significantly precipitated the achievement of closeness to transcendental realms.

The prayer belongs to the Sha'ban, the eighth month of the Islamic calendar. The month is considered the month of mercy, compassion, elevation, exhilaration, connectedness, and liveliness. The prayer's source

goes back to Imam Ali (*salavatollah alayh*), the first Imam of Shia. It has been discussed and highlighted by other Imams of Shia as a vital source of human perfection. The prayer has been documented in several Islamic reference books by Sayyid ibn Tawus in *al-Iqbal*, Allamah Majlisi in *Bihar al-Anwar*, Samahiji in *Sahifat al-Alawiyyah* and Shaykh Abbas Qummi in *Mafatih al- Jinan* (Hakimi, 2005). Prayer, according to numerous mystical Islamic scholars, can give rise to psychological growth, psychological well-being, tranquility, and equanimity. It can serve as a flowing fountain of inspiration, calmness, resilience, creativity, mindfulness, and presence.

In the beginning parts of the prayer, the caller expresses that *فَقَدْ هَرَبْتُ إِلَيْكَ* (*faqad harabtu ilayka*) I have escaped toward you and stood before you. The verb “escape” with the preposition “toward” demonstrates that one is seeking refuge from a source where security, safety, support, and protection are involved. In line with principles of monotheism governing the prayer, the passage purports that one can come to realize that God is the real source where one can find unconditional, comprehensive, ubiquitous, quintessential, and constantly available love. No matter whom you are in touch with within the circle of relatives, close friends, kinsmen, family members, etc., they all have their own deficiencies, problems, challenges, and shortages. No matter how good they are, they are embroiled by their own situated attitudes, time- and space-bound limitations, their perspective, and so forth. In addition, notwithstanding the sharpness of their perceptiveness, intelligence, and understanding, they may rarely fathom one’s inner world and its mysteries. The passage underscores the significance of discernment in determining pseudo-sources of support and security that cannot be trusted.

The *Munajat e Shabaniya* prayer essentially underscores the importance of detachment. On the one hand, it explicates that the sense of elevation and transcendence cannot happen for the self within itself because the self is, *ipso facto*, in dire need of connectedness, belonging, attachment, and dependencies. The self is, essentially, inadequate to engender the required strength because it is constantly threatened and deceived by the forces that presume to support it but are merely in

pursuit of its interests within the scope of the body. On the other hand, it elucidates that the search for safety and security from others would be a mirage. Neoliberalism persists in highlighting the attachment to secular belongings.

The payer reiterates the nature of connectedness by indicating that *وَوَقَفْتُ بَيْنَ يَدَيْكَ مُسْتَكِينًا لَكَ* (*wa waqaftu bayna yadayka mustakinan laka*) standing before You, I am showing submission to You. The passage underscores the epistemological and ontological acknowledgment that the one who prays may reach a level of discernment where he/she considers oneself in the highest level of independence from needs. There are two different Arabic words, one is *miskin* and the other is *mustakin*. The first describes someone who is in a desperate state of being needy in a way that he/she is almost unable to move because of being needy. The second word, *mustakin*, goes beyond that. The exegesis of the passage illustrates that one can go and pray out of a general state of awareness where one only ascertains the relatedness to God at a superficial level. This may include the state of knowing and not understanding.

The prayer asserts that one can reach a higher level where one can discern the needy nature of oneself in all respects: we are bound by time, place, history, geography, and perspective. We are inextricably tied to a sundry array of limitations and constrictions. Our knowledge is situated, our perception is limited and limiting our habits, our mindsets, and our wants. Needs circumscribe our degree of action, freedom, understanding, and taking initiative. When one is filled with hubris and an overbearing attitude, one may be overwhelmed by a feeling of *being* beyond everyone and everything; that's the beginning of the failure, the commencement of blindness to alternative modes of being, and the negligence toward others. The passage underscores the significance of our needy nature in a variety of dimensions: our thirst, our hunger, our need for social connection, our need for intimacy, our need for power, our need for success, and so forth. The passage underscores the essence of deficiencies being ineluctably tied to our *being*. Acknowledging the philosophical poverty of our essence and quiddity would be one of the salient messages of the passage.

Munajat e Shabaniya challenges the premises and systemic values of neoliberalism. It critiques the machine-oriented oppression of

humankind and the maximization of marketizing human relations. It presents a different paradigm in contrast to neoliberal reductionist approach and questions the summation of humankind in a mechanical and machine saturated world. The prayer challenges the monopoly of values within the materialistic system of neoliberalism and objects to the minimization of humanness and its being downgraded to a physiological phenomenon. The prayer propounds the significance of a new understanding of humanness through spirituality while refuting the subjugation of humanness to machine led utilitarianism.

The prayer calls for emancipating humanness from the artificially crafted compartmentalization of neoliberal systems. Munajat e Shabaniya offers a wake-up call in the midst of the bombastic discourse of neoliberalist values that insist on translating individual possibilities within the amplified mindset of materialism.

## Conclusion

Modern reductionism of human beings to mechanistic-materialistic models of human life brought about a degradation of human values where materialism overdetermined human interactions. Neoliberalism governed by commodification and marketization of everything and by imposing a utilitarian worldview. The exploitation of everything including relationships turned out to be pervasive. A materialistic view of everything supported by a machine-oriented perspective undermined transcendent human relationships. Human innerness was emptied by the massive promotion of materialism and consumerism. Prayer was marginalized and considered a figment of imagination.

Prayer serves as a source of healing in a world embroiled by nihilism, consumerism, and materialism. Prayer redefines human life and transforms epistemological and ontological premises. It develops a new relationship based on a transcendental acknowledgment. It redefines meaning, being and becoming, and calls for liberation from a machine-led slavery in our so-called modern world.

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# 16

## Final Reflections

Louise Sundararajan 

What is this volume about? We may start by spelling out what it is not about. This volume does not claim to have found the answers to the problems of technology and the market. It does not intend to give guidance or self-help skills in this age of perplexity. Nor does it offer any easy solutions by replacing the idols of Silicon Valley with gods of the bygone age. Rather, the purpose and intent of this volume is to reclaim thinking as defined by Hannah Arendt (1958/1998). Thinking for Arendt is not simply problem-solving, so much as an engagement in the existential process of meaning-making with a moral compass (Brinkmann, 2022).

For an illustration of true thinking in this sense, we revisit the old gardener in *Chuang Tzu* (Mair, 1994). Who is this old gardener who refused to use Tzukung's contraptions to water his garden more efficiently with (see chapter 1)? Some clues can be found at the dawn of human history as reconstructed by archaeologist and anthropologist Graeber and

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Wengrow (2021). The old gardener could be one of those horticulturalists, who “farm but don’t create irrigation works or use heavy equipment like ploughs” (p. 447). Otherwise put, the old gardener could be one of those who practiced “play farming” (p. 260). Graeber and Wengrow (2021) made extensive documentation of play farmers who “hovered at the threshold of agriculture while remaining wedded to the cultural values of hunting and foraging” (p. 271).

There is a value conflict between play farmers and serious farmers—the latter but not the former took advantage of advanced technology to speed up the agricultural revolution, which made possible the accumulation of surplus in natural resources, resulting in disparity and hierarchical social structures. By contrast, “Truly egalitarian societies [preferred by the play farmers]... are those with ‘immediate return’ economies: food brought home is eaten the same day or the next; anything extra is shared out, but never preserved or stored” (p. 129). Not having a surplus makes taxation difficult, let alone empire-building. Seen in this light, the Luddite stance of the play farmers is political in the sense that it entails defending a particular way of life, as Graeber and Wengrow (2021) point out that, “the process by which cultures define themselves against one another is always, at root, political, since it involves self-conscious arguments about the proper way to live” (p. 203). The authors claim that it is with political self-awareness that these play farmers “possess all the requisite ecological skills to raise crops and livestock, but ... nevertheless pull back from the threshold, maintaining a careful balancing act between forager (or better, perhaps, forester) and farmer” (p. 268).

So far, so good. But we may find our common sense assaulted when Graeber and Wengrow (2021) claim that “rather than being less politically self-conscious than people nowadays, people in stateless societies might actually have been considerably more so” (p. 112). How could we consider those people at the dawn of the first technological revolution (agriculture) to be thinkers with political self-awareness? This simply flies in the face of the evolutionary account of civilization which, according to the authors, consists of a linear progression of “advanced metallurgy, animal-powered vehicles, alphabetic writing systems and a certain penchant for freethinking that is seen as necessary for technological progress” (p. 349). According to this account, thinking in general

and freethinking in particular comes only with 'advanced' civilizations. The authors point out that this evolutionary narrative of the big history is mistaken. So is the Enlightenment account that paints a linear progression of history as a "series of revolutionary breakthroughs (Agricultural Revolution, Urban Revolution, Industrial Revolution)" (p. 498). Citing accumulating evidence in archaeology, Graeber and Wengrow (2021) argue that "human beings really have spent most of the last 40,000 or so years moving back and forth between different forms of social organization, building up hierarchies then dismantling them again" (p.112), so much so that "The only consistent phenomenon is the very fact of alteration, and the consequent awareness of different social possibilities" (p.115).

According to Graeber and Wengrow (2021), there are two consequences of the big histories spawned by Darwinism and the Enlightenment: "One consequence is that huge swathes of the human past disappear from the purview of history, or remain effectively invisible" (p. 442). Another more serious consequence is that it makes us stuck, thinking that the totalizing power of modern technology and the state is the necessary culmination of human history. We have lost sight of all the other social possibilities that our remote ancestors used to contemplate and pursue. The authors ask: "'How did we get stuck?' How did we end up in one single mode? How did we lose that political self-consciousness, once so typical of our species?" (p. 115).

To get unstuck we turn once more to the old gardener. It is interesting to note that there is no denouement to the brief encounter between Tzukung and the old gardener. Obviously, the old gardener did not stop the agricultural evolution in China. But the equalitarian values of the hunter-gatherers that he defended laid the foundation for Daoism to flourish as a significant counterpoint in Confucian China. Contrary to the replacement logic of both Darwinism and monotheism, the perennial debate between Daoism and Confucianism has no apparent winners, and is considered by the Chinese as a reflection of the symbiotic relationship between the yin and the yang, the opposing orders of reality which are at once antagonistic and complementary.

Likewise, our strictures against technology and the market need not be cast in the mode of a battle at Armageddon, so much as one of the

perennial debates spawned by the perpetual tension between the yin and the yang. This point is important, because humans always make a mess that leads to much suffering when they wage wars of good against evil, but they are much better at negotiating between alternatives. Indeed, as Graeber and Wengrow (2021) point out, human beings “through most of our history, have moved back and forth fluidly between different social arrangements, assembling and dismantling hierarchies on a regular basis” (p.115), such that “what really makes us human... is our capacity – as moral and social beings – to negotiate between such alternatives” (p.118).

How shall we negotiate with technology and the market? We will need the moral courage to pull back from what we deem wrong. Take for instance counter-bullying measures in any society. Graeber and Wengrow (2021) point out that, “while the bullying behaviour might well be instinctual, counter-bullying is not: it’s a well-thought-out strategy” (p. 86). The authors go on to say that “what makes societies distinctively human is our ability to make the conscious decision not to act that way” (p. 86). The old gardener puts the matter more simply: “It’s not that I am unaware of such things, rather that I would be ashamed to do them” (Mair, p. 111).

Writing in 1994, Carl Sagan warned us of the dangers posed by technology to human civilization:

...then technology is invented.... In a flash, they create world-altering contrivances. Some planetary civilizations see their way through, place limits on what may and what must not be done, and safely pass through the time of perils. Others, not so lucky or so prudent, perish. (p. 306)

At this critical juncture in human history, how do we see our way through? We will need a clear sense of values to negotiate between the alternatives. We will also need the moral courage to place limits on what may or may not be done. Most importantly, we need to be able to re-imagine the human possibilities far beyond the confines of our secular age in which as Peter Berger (1967) observed more than a half a century ago, an overarching sacred canopy of values no longer exists. To get you started on the long and hard negotiations ahead for the future of humanity, this volume offers a rich repertoire of human capacities for

values and a moral compass that can be traced back to an age in which people, as the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin (1990) put it, “grew up in the arms of the gods” (p.13).

“*When the gods have Fled*” was initially suggested by us as the title of this book, followed by the subtitle “*Being Human in the age of Machine and Market.*” This order was switched around by the publisher. The reason given to us is that readers these days need to know upfront what the book is about—no time to be toying with vague and provocative titles. Let me end my reflections with an ironic request to our readers with allegedly shrunken attention span—please pause and ponder over an episode of Faust cited by Rosen (2004):

In sealing his pact with Mephistopheles, Goethe’s Faust acknowledges that the *last thing* he can afford to say is “linger awhile, how fair thou art.” (p. 136, italics in original)

Dear reader, may you fair better than Faust in your dealings with the market and the machine.

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