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Introduction: Becoming human: changing perspectives on the emergence of human values

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This book is significant as one of the first wide-ranging surveys which embodies, reflects and develops the consensus that has emerged at the beginning of the twenty-first century about the emergence of humankind. Perceptions have shifted very substantially. The so-called human revolution, referring to the emergence of our species *Homo sapiens*, and with it the shift to modern and complex behaviours (Mellars and Stringer 1989), is no longer seen as something which happened in Europe, or possibly in Western Asia, something like forty thousand years ago. Instead we realise, with the wealth of new anthropological data available in Africa, that our species emerged there something like 200,000 or 150,000 years ago. Molecular genetic evidence confirms and amplifies the emerging picture (Forster 2004), indicating that our species, *Homo sapiens*, emerged in Africa, and first dispersed from there to Arabia and so to the rest of the world around sixty thousand years ago. The important new discoveries from the Middle Stone Age of Africa, including the crucial evidence from the Blombos Cave discussed here (Henshilwood, this volume), reveal that those new behaviours associated with the human revolution were already developing in Africa (McBrearty and Brooks 2000), where they are well documented some seventy thousand years ago.

The Symposium from which this volume arose took place, appropriately, in the Dordogne region of France, at Les Eyzies, in the very area where some of the key first discoveries were made during the nineteenth century relating to the early achievements of our species. It was by then realised that the ‘stone age’ earlier proposed by the Scandinavian antiquaries could be divided into the Neolithic (the new stone age, the time of the early farmers) and the Palaeolithic, the much longer preceding period when humans pursued a hunter-gatherer way of life. The

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Neolithic period succeeded the climatic improvements which came with the end of the Ice Age, the Pleistocene period, some ten thousand years ago. And it soon became clear that remains of our own species, *Homo sapiens*, were found there no earlier than the Upper Palaeolithic, whose beginning can now be set by radiocarbon dating, some forty thousand years ago. By 1860, human remains had been identified, near Les Eyzies, in the rock shelter of Aurignac. In 1879 came the momentous realisation that the animals painted on the ceiling of the cave at Altamira in north Spain should be dated to the Upper Palaeolithic period – the recognition of Palaeolithic cave art. Very soon comparable discoveries were made in the Dordogne, many of them close to Les Eyzies, as indeed is the painted cave at Lascaux (although this was not discovered until 1940). As discussed later, the painted caves are found mainly in south France and north Spain, and this Franco-Cantabrian cave art is a notable feature of the European Upper Palaeolithic. So, too, are the carvings, on bone and ivory, found in the caves, rock shelters and open sites from the same period and area, although their distribution is a wider one.

If we are looking at the early development of human culture, these finds have a very special significance. For while humans had been tool makers for hundreds of thousands of years, as Henry de Lumley reminds us in his Prologue, those very early hominids clearly did not have the ability or, we infer, the mental capacities associated with our own species, *Homo sapiens*. It is only with our own species that we find the range of new behaviours seen here in the Franco-Cantabrian Upper Palaeolithic, reflected in new tool kits (with a blade technology replacing the earlier flakes), with greater variety in stone tools, with the use of bone, antler and ivory, and crucially with the first personal adornments (beads mainly) and the first representational art (Mellars 1991).

A key aim of the Symposium, which was funded by the John Templeton Foundation, was to consider the early emergence of the various qualities which we may consider particularly human. The use of a complex language is one of these, but its appearance is notoriously difficult to assess on the basis of material culture alone. Other human qualities are more accessible, not least through the remarkable range of artefacts which appear in the Franco-Cantabrian Upper Palaeolithic. To reconstruct the activities which took place in the painted caves, and to make inferences as to their meaning is, however, no easy task. But if we are interested in the origins of ritual, of religion and of human spirituality, then they are of crucial relevance.

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In his Prologue, de Lumley reviews briefly some of the earlier behaviours – tool manufacture, the use of fire, and deliberate burial of the dead – which are seen already before the Upper Palaeolithic and prior to the appearance in Europe of *Homo sapiens*. These are indeed activities which are special to the genus *Homo*, seen already in such earlier hominids as *Homo erectus*, and which are not seen among other genera of the animal kingdom. But the Upper Palaeolithic period brings something more, and it is with that ‘something more’, with these early intimations of what we may call spirituality, that our Symposium was particularly concerned.

This is what gave the meeting – and, I believe, this volume – its very special character of controlled speculation. We were able to bring together some of the leading specialists in the archaeology of the Palaeolithic period, and to invite them to consider the problems of postulating the new aspects of human experience and behaviour which may be inferred from these abundant, suggestive and yet sometimes enigmatic finds. We managed, I hope, to avoid some of the technicalities of the archaeological specialist, aided by the scrutiny and the commentary of two distinguished theologians, Keith Ward and Wentzel Van Huyssteen, with whom we were able to consider and debate such notions as ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’ at a very general level.

Another important feature was the worldwide scope of our subject matter, and of the discussions of it. For while the wealth of Franco-Cantabrian evidence was inescapably close to us, situated as we were in its heartland in Les Eyzies, we were anxious to take a global view. The significant new evidence from South Africa was brought to us by Christopher Henshilwood, one of its leading researchers, as well as by Francesco d’Errico, who has worked extensively on the beads and adornments not only from Blombos but also from the European Upper Palaeolithic. The crucially important case of Australian rock art, and of the Australian Palaeolithic, was introduced to our discussions by Paul Taçon, one of its leading exponents. And Henry de Lumley, Jean Clottes, Paul Mellars and Margaret Conkey were able to bring their unrivalled knowledge of the French Palaeolithic to bear on our discussions.

The creative explosion, to use the term introduced by John Pfeiffer (1982), seen so clearly in the Franco-Cantabrian cave art of the Upper Palaeolithic, certainly presents the modern observer with a challenge. At what point in the archaeological record can we document the emergence of ritual, and of what we might regard as religious behaviour?

At this point, however, we have to consider more carefully the hominid population already present in Europe, and in the Dordogne, when these first representatives of our own species arrived some forty thousand years ago. Here we turn to ‘Neanderthal Man’, to use an older terminology, to the Neanderthals. That remarkable species *Homo neanderthalensis*, which preceded our own species in Europe, with its accompanying Mousterian material culture, can no longer be seen to represent a universal stage in human evolution, the immediate predecessor of our own species. Rather, the Neanderthals were evolving in Europe and Western Asia at just the same time that our species was appearing in Africa. But the overlap period, the contact period in Europe, when the incoming *sapiens* humans lived alongside their Neanderthal predecessors for some thousands of years (how long is in dispute), becomes one of absorbing interest. For some of the behavioural traits seen in Europe during the Aurignacian period, with the arrival of *Homo sapiens*, seem to be anticipated by the earlier Neanderthals. Deliberate human burial is a good example, which seems to be well documented among Neanderthals even before our own species arrived. And other features developed in both groups at the same time. Did the Neanderthals learn them from the sapient incomers? Or were these features an indigenous development? These questions are of interest in their own right. But they become even more so when considered within the context of emerging spirituality, and of the development of what we have come to regard as specifically human values.

As we shall see, there are indeed forms of behaviour seen in the Upper Palaeolithic period which seem to mark new kinds of self-awareness, implying the development of new value systems, which we have always regarded as unique to our own species. If we hoped to find evidence in the archaeological record for the first appearance of the human soul, this would be the place for it. Evidence of ritual documents what we may consider as the first concrete indication of religious belief. The remarkable representations of animals and of humans, which for convenience we call ‘art’, become so abundant that we are obliged to see them as reflections of a new awareness of what it is to be human, and what it is like to be aware as humans of our place in a wider world. But if some of these first awakenings developed also among the Neanderthals, how many of them did so autonomously and independently? If they did, surely we may think and speak also in terms of Neanderthal spirituality, just as we may of

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sapient spirituality at this early time? At first that seems reasonable and perhaps unsurprising. But on reflection it would represent a radical new departure: it would challenge our assumption that the human species to which we today all belong is unique, standing apart in our experience of self-consciousness, in our perception of the nature and inevitability of death (and perhaps of the hereafter), and in the unique qualities of the new kinds of social relationships which can develop when we are fully human.

Neanderthal reflections

One of the most interesting features of the meeting in Les Eyzies from which this book developed, was indeed the very thoughtful consideration given to the cognitive archaeology of the Neanderthals. It was recognised moreover that there is a need to distinguish carefully between two phases of Neanderthal experience. The first is the long period, associated in Europe with the Middle Palaeolithic and with Mousterian culture, when the Neanderthals were the only hominids around. The same was broadly true for those areas of western Asia in which Neanderthal remains are found. The second phase comes after the first arrival in Europe (and in Western Asia) of our own species, *Homo sapiens*, around forty thousand years ago, following the out-of-Africa dispersal some fifteen thousand or twenty thousand years earlier. For a few thousand years the two populations must have lived side by side. There is speculation, indeed controversy, as to whether they interbred. Current DNA studies have sometimes concluded that the DNA of the Neanderthals did not make a significant contribution to that of the modern human gene pool, although that view has been contradicted. These are matters which DNA studies can be expected to clarify over the next decade or so.

A strong focus of current interest is the development of the so-called Châtelperronian culture, which shows continuing Mousterian features, yet with innovations which resemble those of the Aurignacian culture. This is generally held to have been brought in with the new sapient population. It is a focus of intense debate whether such innovations should be regarded as the result of acculturation – that is to say the direct result of contacts between the two populations – or whether they may represent independent innovations produced by the Neanderthal population themselves which would have taken place even if *Homo sapiens* had not been present.

The evidence of originality and innovation in Neanderthal communities is reviewed here by Jane Renfrew. Her position is supported to some extent by David Lewis-Williams (this volume) in his consideration of early spirituality, and of the degree to which we may associate this with the Neanderthals. The position taken by Francesco d'Errico is rather different. In his perspective, most of the significant innovations seen in Europe are to be associated with the incoming sapient population.

In a few years we may be in a position to understand more clearly the significance of the highly interesting 'overlap' period between the Neanderthals (before their extinction) and the new *sapiens* population. It is difficult to speculate about what might have been the Neanderthal contribution, about what they might have contributed had not their trajectory of development been modified and ultimately terminated by the new *sapiens* incomers. But here we touch on a further controversy: to what extent was the extinction of the Neanderthals brought about by the competitive influence of the new *sapiens* population? Or were they a doomed species who might not, in any case, have survived the climatic severities of the Late Glacial Maximum and then of the climatic warming which followed?

The human contribution

The nature of the 'creative explosion', and particularly its location, was considered in the paper by Colin Renfrew. During the Upper Palaeolithic period, cave painting seems to have been restricted to France and Spain, with a few outliers in Italy. The most notable exception is that of Aboriginal painting, discussed with authority in the paper by Paul Taçon. There are of course other instances, discussed briefly in the paper by Renfrew, but most rock art is first seen after the Pleistocene, in the Holocene period. The possible reasons for this precocious flowering of cave art in France and Spain are systematically considered in the paper by Paul Mellars.

Palaeolithic sculpture, mainly in the form of the small 'Venus' figurines, extends during the Gravettian period east from France and Spain through Germany to the Czech Republic to the Ukraine and indeed as far east as Siberia. Again there are comparable finds from Italy. But the remarkable thing is that such small human representations are in general not a feature of the Upper Palaeolithic period in any other part of the

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world. In the Pacific, terracotta sculptures on this scale are indeed seen in the Jomon or Proto-Jomon culture of Japan from early dates, before 10,000 BC. And there may be other early finds in the Pacific. But this interesting circumstance does not undermine the validity of the general observation that such small sculptures of figurines are not more widely seen until the development of the Holocene period, some of them accompanying early farming. Again, representation in the Upper Palaeolithic is a very localised phenomenon.

The important point is developed in the paper by Meg Conkey, that these various representations which are often designated as ‘art’ may have a wider significance. In some cases it may have been the very action and process of making such representations which was significant, rather than the end products themselves. This approach is strengthened by the detailed study by Jean Clottes of a strange practice, presumably of symbolic significance, yet which cannot be assimilated under the rubric of ‘art’ – or at least not of representational art. The paper by Iain Morley dealing with the place of music and the production of sound in early ritual again supports the view that the focus upon visual ‘art’, interpreted in a modern sense, gives too narrow a perspective in the consideration of the rich symbolic behaviours and rituals which were developing during the Upper Palaeolithic period.

Human values and spirituality as universals

In the course of the meeting there was much discussion about the inferences about belief which might reasonably be formulated on the basis of the representations or ‘art’ found in the Franco-Cantabrian Upper Palaeolithic, but also in other Palaeolithic contexts, notably in Australia. The paper by Paul Taçon recognises that representation or ‘art’ may have antecedents going back much earlier than the Upper Palaeolithic, a point which bears on the discussion of Neanderthal self-awareness and spirituality.

The crucial question as to the extent to which the figurations and representations seen in the Upper Palaeolithic are the product of rituals which might be considered to be ‘religious’, and hence to document the inception of religion, is considered in different ways in the papers by Merlin Donald and by Steven Mithen, as indeed in that of David Lewis-Williams. Both Donald and Mithen lay emphasis on the significance of

involving the material world in the ritual and cognitive process by the activity of actually making things and doing things. One of the pervasive themes of the symposium and of this book is that spirituality and materiality cannot be separated. The roots of religion are to be found in ritual practice. And ritual practice, as documented by the material record goes back before the Franco-Cantabrian ‘explosion’, back indeed before the Blombos engravings, to repetitive activities undertaken very much earlier and documented in the material record, which we may infer were meaningful to their practitioners, and which may be regarded as ritual.

The volume concludes with reflections, by Wentzel Van Huyssteen and by Keith Ward, on these themes. These are scholars well versed in the varieties of experience to be found in the history of religious thought. One interesting conclusion which arises from this scrutiny of the archaeological record of the palaeolithic period is that the development of symbolic practices, and thus perhaps of spirituality, has been a somewhat gradual one. To be sure there are moments of intense innovation, such as is seen in France and Spain with the ‘creative explosion’ of Franco-Cantabrian cave painting. But these developments had their analogues, although in a quieter way, in Australia, in Africa, and perhaps more widely. More significantly, they are no longer seen as representing a sudden and amazing first step, an initial burst in human expression and spirituality. Already, more than thirty thousand years earlier, the human revolution was already taking place in Africa. Anatomically modern humans emerged there, and many of the behaviours which have been associated with modernity (in the archaeological sense) can also be recognised there.

As this volume clearly shows, the process of becoming human has been a slow and gradual one. Early indications of self-awareness and what may be termed spirituality are seen first in Africa, and may be discerned in Australia as well as in Europe. That remarkable creative explosion, which soon brought about the decoration of the Grotte Chauvet, and later of Lascaux and of Altamira can now be recognised as a local episode which did not have its counterpart in Asia or in the Americas. It should not be generalised as representing a stage in human cognitive and spiritual development. But at the same time the richness of the evidence found there, in the Upper Palaeolithic of France and Spain, offers fertile ground for speculation upon the relationship between the production of symbolic material culture, the practice of ritual, and the roots of spirituality.

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The emergence of symbolic thought: The principal steps of hominisation leading towards greater complexity

Henry de Lumley

Symbolic thought represents one of the essential dimensions of human cognition, transcending the material world and integrating cognition within a universe richer than that of the senses, and combining concepts, that is to say abstract notions, into a system of complex relations. The advent of *Homo sapiens*, whose brain shows developed frontal lobes, areas of which were involved in functions essential for symbolic thought, coincides with the appearance of evidence for a high level of symbolic activity. Humans later invented the first jewellery, as well as decorative and parietal art.

But well before the appearance of Modern Humans, the first elements of symbolic thought gradually developed in human cognition, in parallel with the emergence of consciousness.

Accompanying the development of cranial capacity and of cerebral complexity, the major steps in hominid technological and cultural evolution, crossed significant thresholds, and were marked by the progressive emergence of symbolic thought, in the processes of the acquisition and treatment of data. The tool serves not only to dominate the exterior world but also to understand it. The transmission of knowledge and skills indicates the appearance of the human communication system: the development of language structured from social experience.

The first tools and the emergence of conceptual thought

The earliest stone-tools, found at Kada Gona in north-eastern Ethiopia, date to 2.5 Mya (see Figures 2.1–2.4). These tools may be taken to indicate the presence of conceptual thought and the ability for early humans to conceive of a model. But it is clear that the only preoccupation

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2.1. Chopper on a trachyte pebble. Gona EG 10, Hadar, Ethiopia, 2.55 Mya.

of their makers during the production of these tools was to obtain a sharp instrument with which to disarticulate large herbivore carcasses or to cut up meat.

The first handaxes and the emergence of a sense of harmony

The earliest current evidence for handaxes comes from West Turkana, Kenya, dated to 1.65 Mya. Similar finds have been made at Konso, again in Ethiopia, dating to 1.5 Mya (see Figure 2.5). These tools show both lateral and bifacial symmetry, thus demonstrating early human acquisition of the notion of symmetry. Soon after this, the Acheulean culture produced perfectly symmetrical and very regular tools (see Figure 2.6), sometimes with the choice of rocks of a pleasing colour for their