Cerebral Predestination? A Review of CCR No. 72

Leland Conley Barrows

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The theme that underlies this issue of Comparative Civilizations Review is that observable parallels in the development of human thought, particularly during the pre-modern period, among societies that had little or no contact with one another (China vis-à-vis Hellenic and Hellenistic Greece; both vis-à-vis Mesoamerican civilizations) owe their similarities to “the [common] structure of the brain, which, in turn, reflects a structure that can be described as fractal-like” (p. 7).

The principal article, “Commentary Traditions and the Evolution of Pre-modern Religious and Philosophical Systems: A Cross-Cultural Model” (pp. 22-59) first published in 1997 by Steve Farmer, John B. Henderson, and Peter Robinson along with an introductory update by the same authors (pp.12-21) (and a preceding introductory article, “The Commentarial Engine” by J. Randall Groves (pp. 5-11) compose the topic section of the Review to which two critical responses by Andrew Targowski and Michael Andregg are appended (pp. 60-63).

The lead authors, Farmer, Henderson, and Robinson along with Groves propose a system of computer modeling of the “structural growth of pre-modern religious and philosophical systems” that are themselves “pictured as byproducts of exegetical processes operating in manuscript traditions over long periods of time”. This modeling has enabled the authors to identify similarities at five levels of thought: brain organization, correlative thought, myth, religion, and philosophy in China, India, the Graeco-Roman world, and medieval Europe (p 7); however, these similarities collapse at the dawn of modern thought (Voltaire and post-Voltaire). Presumably, human thought patterns became more heterogeneous at this time and cannot be so easily modeled. However, the lead authors claim that the modeling techniques that they have developed might be refined and adapted so as to anticipate future intellectual developments.

Although Farmer, Henderson, Robinson, and Groves do soften the impact of what seem to be very deterministic theories with a number of soothing caveats, one cannot resist the thought that humanity, in their eyes, has rather limited control over the unfolding of its fate, that the human brain and therefore human actions have more limited possibilities for independent action than such philosopher/historians as Wilhelm Dilthey or Paul Oskar Kristeller might have assumed.

But, citing the human traits imposed by the realities of human genes, Mariana Tepfenhart, the reviewer of Ethnic Conflicts: their Biological Roots in Ethnic Nepotism (2012) by Tatu Vanhanen (pp. 167-168) warns that “because ethnic nepotism is encoded in our genes, it is expected that ethnic conflicts will continue in the future”. (p. 168). One could add that in
the recent past, ethnic rivalries certainly contributed to the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, despite the favorable light in which Anthony M. Stevens-Arroyo presents its post-1848 history in his article, “Austria-Hungary 1914: Nationalisms in a Multi-National Nation-State” (pp. 99-113). Indeed two of this empire’s successor states, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, collapsed after 1990, the one peaceably, the other violently, mostly because of ethnic conflicts.

The lead articles along with the article on the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the book review by Mariana Tepfenhart provide, on balance, rather pessimistic reading. As for the other articles, they can be interpreted from either an optimistic or a pessimistic point of view. Vytautas Kavolis’ “The Sociological Location of Art” (pp. 64-74) tells us that although art is defined as such by the beholder, an overly powerful beholder (i.e., sponsor) can skew the legitimate purposes of art. Thomas Kiefer’s “Collective Wisdom and Civilization: Revitalizing Ancient Wisdom Traditions” (pp. 65-98) suggests that while it is possible to revitalize and to profit positively from ancient wisdom traditions, the danger is that the wrong traditions, like ethno-centrism, might be what is revitalized rather than idealized conceptions of human solidarity. Lynn Rhodes, who discusses environmental precarity in her article, “Verge of Collapse? Survival of Civilization in the Anthropocene” (pp. 115-130) anticipates that civilization will survive but suggests that its survival is seriously threatened by a number of factors, particularly environmental deterioration. Bertil Haggman, however, author of “The Global Civil War: Will the West Survive” (pp. 131-136) avoids the question of whether or not the West will survive but predicts continuing local conflicts like the Russian attempts to dominate Ukraine, Islamic terrorism, and the like. So universal peace will not reign.

Only the final article, “Witchcraft in the Early Modern West” by Larry Gragg (pp. 137-148) ends on a note of quiet optimism, at least from the point of view of thinking people: “After generations of trying to eradicate witchcraft, secular leaders in Europe simply concluded that there was no reasonable way to try witches and repealed the statutes prohibiting its practice” (p. 148). Of course, European (and American) leaders remained irrational in other ways but at least the ending of the brutalization of women and men who were perceived as being different in certain occult ways ended. In this particular instance, civilization certainly took a major step forward.