

WELCOME TO THE DIMFORMATION AGE!

notes from the desk of Ned Mudd
reporting from the crawlspace of history

“Death, icy and irrevocable, is the genuine definition of reality.”

John D. McDonald

Perhaps due to an innate evolutionary quirk, *Homo erectus asphaltus* is hardwired to compress the vast array of known Cosmic data entering our brains into an algebraic simplicity. Good versus evil; treasure versus trash; saint versus sinner. Such a calibrated attenuation of consciousness has patently served us well, if our current population density means anything. And it does.

By reducing the complexity of the total flow of information “out there” into a quick mash-up, our species achieved a leg up on reality. Let’s face it: To reduce Nature into a Happy Meal takes the kind of brain only the most ingenious monkey can muster.

That we are a reductionist creature, by habit and/or design, is clear. The primate slice&dice manner of coping with an infinite universe of possibilities has been an invaluable tool in our quest to conquer all things material. From Lucretius to Nils Bohr is a shorter hop than is generally understood. But, at the end of the day, the question remains: Are the monkeys actually in control of the laboratory?

A recent issue of *Wired* magazine featured a fun piece by Jonah Lehrer entitled, “Trial and Errors.” While deftly illustrating the failures of the pharmaceutical industry to handle the complexities of causation, the article sidesteps into our species’ cerebral trick of blurring the lines between the seeming and the seen. Often, what we assume to be a matter of cause and effect is little more than a collection of “perceptual habits.” A sort of on-the-fly conflation of factoids and fantasy. This quirky trait is an adaptation, naturally selected on our long slog up the Stairway to Heaven. And, it seems to work, until it doesn’t.

As Lehrer says, “There’s a fundamental mismatch between how the world works and how we think about the world.” In other words, perhaps the old jig that seeing is believing isn’t as solid as we’ve been led to believe. If that reminds you of the teachings of Zen Master Huang Po, you’re a good little Grass-hopper.



Unless you’re dead, you’ve heard the pronouncement: I think, therefore I am. An utterly fatuous, not to mention useless, statement. Old Descartes should have said, “I notice my own thinking, therefore I think I am; but then again, I could be dreaming, or just stoned.” Bingo!

Monkeys in blue jeans superimpose a made-to-order post card reality on a Universe that actually resembles an atomic Lava Lamp. It’s a mental twist that propelled our species to the top of the food chain. In fact, we’ve been so successful, the food chain is in peril of collapsing, simply by virtue of being a finite resource. Neo-green claims notwithstanding, there’s nothing sustainable about seven billion

monkeys with cell phones.

It’s not reality that’s the issue, it’s our perception of reality that tailspins the apple cart. At root, we are Late Ice Age hunter-gatherers crammed into a digital hyperzone urban multiplex; too smart for the local bushmeat, too dumb for our own good. You’d think we’d get the picture when the nearest protein begins to suffer extinction due to over consumption. But, alas, such is not the case with *Homo erectus asphaltus*.

We need to talk about a guy from Alabama. That he’s a Harvard man is suspect, but if anybody has something interesting to say about the possible trajectory of our species, it’s E.O. Wilson. When he’s not studying ants, Dr. Wilson spends much of time trying to piece together what motivates *Homo erectus asphaltus*.

His latest theory involves an odd juxtaposition of two competing evolutionary forces operating discreetly amongst our jolly little chromosomes. The interaction of these tendencies is what makes us uniquely crazy. If Dr. Wilson is correct, it works sorta like this: The earliest humans profited from communal living. By camping in groups (as opposed to wandering around in the grass by yourself), we learned that cooperating in the hunt brings in more bacon. Along for the ride came sideways evolutionary steps, like societal give-and-take, cognizance of body language, haute cuisine, and eventually SUVs. Call it the altruistic gene component.

On the other hand, we also inherited a proclivity towards being selfish. Which is logical, as those most interested in success, tend to succeed most often, whether it’s in finding a mate or snagging an antelope burger. Simply put: With no ambition, it’s between you and the lottery.



Altruism versus self interest, group versus the individual, the Terminator versus Mother Theresa. In other words, much of what passes for culture in today’s grotesque version of the primeval tribal model is basically an unbridled clash of epigenetic traits inherited from a time when the competing forces of our DNA had room to act things out in relative ease. Flexibility was built into the system, thanks to a big wild landscape to move around in.

With split personalities built right into our genes, no wonder we’re a collective miasmatic mess. And to add insult to infamy, many of us tend to be armed, inebriated, and obsessed with an overriding compulsion to shop until we drop. Even if it kills us, if not our neighbors. (What to expect from a species derived from only two progenitors, one of whom was a clone?)

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Let’s face it, *Homo erectus asphaltus* isn’t terribly concerned with global warming, whale quotas, fair trade, polar bear habitat, or exotic species. Unless one of those lovely topics bounces off our bank account. We’re much more tuned into Super Bowl commercials than we are to whether the kids in Darfur are getting enough vitamin C. A situation that might change if we lived in Darfur. Group versus individual.

On top of that, it takes a special creature to premise their GDP on consumption. So, we come back around to how the world works as opposed to how we think the world works. Perception versus reality.

Madison Avenue’s engineers of modern culture understand the primate brain all too well. If monkeys can be made to perceive a need for the latest iPhone, by God, they’ll kick butt to get one. If that sounds implausible, take a gander at China’s upwardly mobile middle class. Then project forward 50 years. The monkeys are loose!

What does it all mean? Our present level of cultural evolution is one crosstie short of a train wreck. Billions of OCD monkeys with Visa cards is beyond any discussion of sustainability. Pandora has left the room. We’re on our own here.

Let’s rewind. Selfish genes tend to run amok. Most of the inhabitants of Monkey Island are just trying to swing through the trees without busting their ass. It’s a long way from sitting around the old campfire, the symphony of the wild coming to us in surround sound. Complete with a tribal elder spinning a mythic tale about the sadistic lion that loved human thighs. Easy information to process, vital to remember when the shit hits the fan. And very real.

The distant past got us where we are today. The question is whether we abandoned the good stuff in favor of a perceived reality handed to us by some Hollywood geeks wearing gold chains and Hawaiian shirts. And while social media might appear to be a virtual collage of the altruistic group gene, any nitwit knows better. A billion cyber-monkeys looking at each other on YouTube is anything but social.

Homo erectus asphaltus might have managed to step out of the wild, at least with one foot. But the axiom still rings true: “You can take the monkey out of the Pleistocene, but you can’t take the Pleistocene out of the monkey.”

Thus, the proverbial struggle of good versus evil, power versus the overpowered, and sanity versus Xanax, is merely an old song, replayed every day on Fox News. A carefully orchestrated fraud, creatively designed to sell products to a

species with an apparently insatiable appetite for Stuff. Turn it off and what happens? Nothing. Except the noise suddenly disappears.

Cause & effect or a collection of perceptual habits? Tribal cooperation or the selfish pursuit of material success? Who's driving the ship? Stay tuned.....

Until then, salut!



(for more information regarding E.O. Wilson's theory of everything, see Howard W. French's spiffy article in The Atlantic, November 2011. Also see Dr. Wilson's latest tome: "The Social Conquest of Earth," available at a local indy bookstore near you. And remember: Breathing helps.)

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