

THE EGO

I'm not trying to say here that primal peoples don't possess any self-consciousness or sense of individuality. They do, of course – if they didn't perceive themselves as separate from the world, life would be impossible; and if they didn't perceive themselves as separate from each other, they wouldn't have individual names at all, or a word for "I" in their languages. It's a question of degree. The point I'm making is simply that our sense of self-consciousness and individuality is more developed than theirs.

The most simple way of putting this is to think in terms of the ego. Ego is simply the Latin word for "I am," and refers to the part of our psyche which thinks, the "I" inside our heads which makes decisions and plans, deliberates, worries and imagines, and which – most frequently – chatters away randomly to itself, sending an endless stream of memories, images and thoughts through our minds. The ego is also the part of our psyche which our powers of reason and logic stem from. Reason is the "I" inside our heads which talks to itself carefully and deliberately, in order to solve problems. And the basic difference between us and native peoples is that we have a stronger sense of ego than they have.

And this, finally, brings us to the point where we can suggest what the change which the idea of the Fall refers to actually was. We can assume that prehistoric unfallen peoples had the same less developed sense of individuality as primal peoples, and that this was the essential difference between them and the invading patrilineal peoples who conquered them from the fourth millennium onwards. These Eurasian peoples were the first human beings to develop a sharpened sense of ego – and since they are our ancestors, they've passed this down to us.

The Fall, then, refers to a change which occurred in the psyche of certain human groups around 6,000 years ago. It was the point in history when these peoples developed a strong and sharp sense of ego. The Fall was, and is, the intensification of the human sense of "I" or individuality.

The term "Brain Explosion" has been used for the extremely rapid growth of the human brain during our evolution, when it became a third larger in the space of half a million years. And here I'm going to introduce the parallel term the "Ego Explosion," to refer to this sudden and dramatic change within the human psyche.

HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

There is also some concrete archaeological evidence for this Ego Explosion. From around 4000 BCE – concurrent with the desertification of central Eurasia and the emergence of male domination, materialism, social inequality and intensive warfare – there are many signs of a new kind of sharpened individuality taking over.

We can see this in changes in burial practices. During the fourth millennium BCE, as the Saharasia peoples began their migrations, the old practice of communal burial started to be replaced by individual burial. The Old World peoples had been buried anonymously, with no

markers and no possessions. But now people were buried with identity and property, as if their individuality mattered, and as if they thought it would continue after death. Chieftains were buried with their horses, weapons and wives, as if it was impossible to conceive of such powerful and important people ceasing to exist, as if they were bound to return to life at some point. As the Swedish archaeologist Mats Malmer has written, these new burial practices (and the new emphasis on private property linked to them) are part of a “surprising change [that] occurred in Europe, a new social system ... giving greater freedom and rights of personal ownership to the individual.” Referring specifically to the beginning of the third millennium BCE, he calls these new European peoples “the first individualists.”

Texts and inscriptions from the fourth millennium BCE also show a greater emphasis on individuality and personality. For the first time, people’s names are mentioned and their speech and their activities are recorded. We learn about who did what, why kings built temples and went into battle, how goddesses and gods fell in love and fought with one another. As Baring and Cashford write, “We become aware not only of the personality of man and woman but also the individuality of goddesses and gods, whose characters are defined and whose creative acts are named.”

The new myths which appeared throughout Europe and the Near East during the third millennium BCE (as Saharasian peoples invaded and conquered these areas) also suggest a new sharpened sense of individuality. Whereas earlier myths had been based around the Goddess and nature (or symbols of them), now they became stories of individual heroes pitting their will and strength against fate. According to Joseph Campbell, these show “an unprecedented shift from the impersonal to the personal.”³⁹ Many of these heroes actually battle against symbolic representations of the goddess of the earth, such as serpents or dragons, suggesting a new sense of separation and alienation from nature as the ego became more developed. In the Sumerian myth the Enuma Elish, for instance, the earth goddess Tiamat – represented as a serpent – is killed by the sky god Marduk. Marduk takes her place as the creator of life, and now gods and goddesses – and by extension human beings – are “outside” nature, detached from their creation rather than an organic part of it.⁴⁰ Whereas earlier human beings – and primal peoples – felt deeply interconnected with natural phenomena, now nature is something “other,” to be tamed and exploited.

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