

Review of: "Necessity Was the Mother of Human Cultural Invention"

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

Gerald Loeb's thought-provoking paper is based on the assumption that human instincts are not only suppressed but need to be regulated by humans as though they were wayward pets needing to be perpetually leashed. However, I am not convinced that human instincts have become as vestigial as Loeb implies. Indeed, while anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz have argued that human beings are made via enculturation (i.e., we are all born as human animals and then transformed as human beings), C. G. Jung has speculated on the importance of the "shadow self" – that realm of repressed and atavistic behaviours and thoughts which lurk behind the conscious stage of our everyday lives.

Even if human instincts are suppressed, I would argue that they provide the basis of culture, even as light and heat are generated from cold and inert coal. In other words, rather than being an apparent impediment to our "civilised" selves, instincts still propitiate and facilitate new insights. For example, Victor Turner (1969, 1974) has shown that liminal-based rituals allow people a symbolic and physical space to temporarily express suppressed emotions or other non-sanctioned behaviours, and where ludic activities become the order of the day. Furthermore, liminality provides an important mechanism for the generation of ideas while maintaining the conservative veneer of cultures. In this way, I would argue that instinctual behaviours, albeit contoured by symbolic behaviour, are the *elan vital* of culture – the raw substance of our cultural being.

Perhaps Loeb's thesis would be strengthened by examining the *menos* of the Homeric Greeks and the Norse berserker, the latter of whom I have speculated probably continued genotypes for attaining frenzied states which elicited hysterical strength and analgesia, making them formidable warriors during battle. The lone berserker who reportedly killed between 30 and 40 Anglo-Saxon soldiers at the Battle of Stamford Bridge in 1066 testifies to this kind of unalloyed instinctual behaviour of the Norse Vikings.

Next, not all instincts are alike. As Franz de Waal notes, pro-social emotions such as empathy are not the province of humanity but are found throughout nature. Empathy is instinctual. Humans certainly did not develop it. Unsurprisingly, history has showed us that where empathy is suppressed, humans resort to the greatest brutalities and atrocities. In this case, the suppression of instinct, that is, empathy, often leads to human psychopathy and not vice versa.

On a parting note, David Abram's book, "Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology" (2010), elaborately discusses the significance of being in touch with our animal selves in order to be attuned with the rhythms of nature.

