

Perhaps the best way to introduce Generative Anthropology is to anticipate and try to answer readers' questions.

A “personal view”?

I've been re-reading Kenneth Clark recently,ⁱ and watching again his famous TV series, “Civilisation: A Personal View.” Even in 1969 his producers nervously added this subtitle, lest it seem that they, or Clark, were saying there really *was* something called “civilisation.”ⁱⁱ God forbid—think of everyone excluded! Well, there really is something called Generative Anthropology (henceforth, GA). What constitutes it is verifiable, and it does make claims to universal applicability. This is unlike Clark's otherwise excellent show, which should really have been called “*Western Civilisation.*” (Without subtitle—everybody's views are personal.)

Except those I will present below, of course, about GA. I expect, though, that certain aspects seem particularly salient to me, and that would be true, differently, for any of the other scholars who might have written this introduction. But if my emphases are misleading or, more likely, I miss things, I provide a set of other sources in the final section of this article.

What is GA?

A hypothesis which produces an heuristic.

Why should one care?

More or less grandiose answers are possible. Mine is: because it might be helpful.

How would we know?

Its validity is to be measured both by its internal plausibility and coherence, and by its explanatory or descriptive power for the world we inhabit.

Like the Copernican, Newtonian or Einsteinian hypotheses, its value lies in its capacity to help its own age formulate answers to the profoundest questions then emerging in a specific domain. Like each of these systems it may anticipate not so much being eventually disproven, as built upon and transcended. The domain of the famous models just mentioned was the physical cosmos. The domain of GA is the human.

Does GA explain everything about the human?

No. But it may be used to analyse and describe anything particular to the human.

Is GA a “personal view” of the human, then?

No. The main aspects of the model were proposed by Eric Gans, but it continues to be modified, extended and critiqued by others. Gans and these others agree upon some, but not all points.

Is it science?

The hypothesis is probably “unfalsifiable” in Karl Popper’s sense. It probably cannot be verified empirically, although paleontological and other evidence has steadily tended to corroborate GA’s primary postulates. GA notes, furthermore, the clear inadequacy of the evolutionary scientific explanations thus far advanced.

Is it religion?

Religions, like GA, usually offer accounts of human origin. GA hypothesizes something that might seem almost miraculous. Man, paradoxically, creates that which created him. Some who use GA thus feel it impossible to decide whether or not man created God or God created man, thus leaving the door open for a belief in a “supernatural” agency. But I’m not one of them. In my personal view it makes better sense to say that man created God, or rather, created himself and the sacred, and then retrospectively attributed his own creation to God.

What’s the hypothesis?

GA hypothesizes that the human emerged from pre-human life in a single *event*.

After that, one works out details. But GA strives to be minimal, to apply Occam’s razor. Like physicists working to assemble an account of the Big Bang using a combination of logic and features of the currently observable cosmos, GA carefully tries to build our picture of this “Little Bang” of human origin.ⁱⁱⁱ But new observations and better logic may always supervene. Changes may be made.

The single event hypothesized is the emission of the first sign. We hypothesize a nearly human hominid whose evolutionary development has produced ever heightened levels of mimetic behaviour, to the point where violent competition threatens the whole group and evolved dominance or pecking-order mechanisms are inadequate to resolve conflict.

The word “mimetic” requires me now to mention René Girard. Girard is rightly famous for elegantly formulating the principle of imitative desire in the geometry of a triangle. The object of desire, at one point, is desired by the subject, at another, in imitation of the desire of the model, at the third.^{iv} GA owes much to Girard’s mimetic theory. The GA hypothesis builds from Girardian triangles the geometry of a circle with a center and periphery (the triangles of imitation are like slices of a pie). The desire of each participant for the object at the center is mediated, intensified, by his or her imitation of the others around the circumference.

Girard, too, attempted to build an account of human origin. Its great problem was that it lacked, at the very origin, the component of the sign, of language. It argued that the intolerable intensity of mimetic desire and the conflict inescapably provoked—the crisis of many hands reaching with every greater urgency for the same object—was resolved through violence, the murder of a single victim, a scapegoat. But Girard offered no persuasive explanation of how that victim was designated, if there was as yet no language, no sign. GA, though, has certainly built upon his ground-breaking effort to understand the human through a theory of desire.

The GA event requires both the inchoate human community gathered in a crisis of mutually enhanced desire around an object, probably something to eat, *and* some means by which intolerable intra-specific violence was prevented or at least deferred. GA hypothesizes that this means was the first sign,

probably a motion to seize the desired object that was converted to a mere gesture, a pointing, out of fear of violence had the motion been completed.

This gesture, this sign, must have been imitated, by the circle of intensely mimetic animals. If it weren't, it wouldn't have been a sign—just a backing away, which may have happened many times before. But *this* time, instead of a common rush for the object or at each other's throats, the participants must all have at least hesitated, suddenly conscious not only of the object of desire, but of a virtual version of it in their own minds, as they registered both the pointing signs of the others, and the object to which that pointing directed their attention. This first moment of non-instinctual attention, this uniquely human consciousness both of an object in the material world and the now-human others whose mediation made it *significant*, may have been very brief. But it was remembered.

What I have just tried to describe is what GA calls the originary scene. We argue that all the fundamental aspects of the human must have been present on this scene, and that using the scene as a heuristic offers a superior tool for analyzing human culture.

So basic is this scene to our thinking that some of us have wondered if GA might not better be called "scenic anthropology." But I guess we're not going to switch to "SA" at this point. Sinister overtones, for one thing--it's hard enough to make our way in the current intellectual climate--Nazi stormtroopers we don't need.

So, we look very closely at what must have happened on the originary or first scene.

When the sign was emitted, and then imitated, and all parties hesitated to act on their desires, the object of desire was effectually proscribed, made taboo, made sacred. The sacred can only exist in combination with those virtual versions of the object in the minds, the new "spirits" of the now-human participants. As the attention of the participants *oscillates* between the sign-version and the object it designates, that prohibited object seems to take on the combined power of the desires and threats of violence of all concerned. It seems both to repel appropriation, and yet to be ever more desirable.

In fact, the word "desire" is perhaps not all that useful to describe the appetitive impulses of the pre-human world, mimetic or not. One of GA's contributions to a better toolbox for understanding of the human is to redefine "desire" as the "appetitive mediated by the sign," an experience fundamental, and limited, to the human.

And human culture, everything built out of that first sign, GA argues, whatever else it does, retains its primordial function: to defer the violence generated by human mimeticism.

The single, first event must have been remembered, and repeated, because it was effective in delivering both less violence and the object of desire, probably nutritious. Subsequent repetitions, GA argues, can firstly be thought of as ritual, re-establishments of the scene with its temporary injunction against appropriation through the force of the communal power we now know as the sacred. Such rituals, as on the first occasion, must have been followed by feasts, the *sparagmos*, the human reward then and ever after for deferring, delaying immediate gratification, for forbearance in the name of the sacred. Ritual, GA designates as "institutional representation" as it "re-presents" a version of the originary event. By contrast, "formal representation" like language itself, is independent of that context, "portable" as it were, but still creates significance, which is also to say, is still *scenic*.

What else is implied, or can be used, from this model of the scene?

More than I can say. But let's start.

The participants experience strange new passions as they stare at the centralized object, which lies under sacred interdiction, but is also possessed of significance, an object now not just of appetite but of fascinated desire. GA identifies these new passions as resentment—the sentiment of exclusion from centrality—and love, that not-immediately-appetitive attraction to something made significant by the human sign. Both passions can only occur in the interval of deferral made possible by the sign and are thus unique to the human. These passions oscillate, or struggle.

Forever?

No. Resentment is at least temporarily discharged in the ripping apart and consuming of the object in the *sparagmos*. Love recurs whenever the scene is recreated, either communally or within the internal scene of individual human attention. But they will also return in unstable combinations.

What else?

Morality, ethics, firstness. GA identifies as the basis of morality the implicit recognition or promise of equality in the equal sharing of the sign by those around the periphery. The violent pre-human anger directed at conspecifics who actually reached for the object becomes moral anger on the scene, indeed, a resentment of the transgression or usurpation of centrality by anyone who refuses to abort the motion to appropriate, who violates the sacred and the equality it promises.

But someone has to go, and someone *had* to go first. Someone made the first sign. And, someone must always go first if humanity is to survive, let alone flourish or progress. Any such going first, any means of deferring violence and resentment but also of breaking the stasis of the moral moment when all hesitate to act, GA thinks of as “ethical.” Morality is eternal. Ethics change, to solve the problems created by the last set of solutions and by the ever intensifying charge of mimetic desire that characterizes human culture. Obviously, it doesn't always go smoothly. We lapse ever and again into violence, and may yet do so to our complete self-destruction. But so far, human culture has gradually allowed more and more of us to survive and flourish.

The aesthetic. In the moment of oscillation, when attention moves back and forth between the sign representing the desired object, and the object itself, or rather, an imagined appropriation of the object, GA locates the aesthetic, a fundamental human experience. However briefly at first, but often now for much longer intervals, we experience in the deferral of actual appropriation both the peace of contemplation and the sorrow of longing. The object possesses for us that complicated and elusive quality, beauty.

A pointing at something one was about to grab doesn't seem much like “language.”

It's the most basic form of language, what GA calls the “ostensive.” Very gradually, linguistic forms proliferated and were put to new uses, adding to the imperative, then the interrogatory and finally, the declarative. GA feels the great mistake philosophy has made, thus far, is to assume the eternal existence of the declarative and not to account for the earlier forms. The philosopher Jacques Derrida may represent a partial exception to this tendency, and he too has had a role in the development of GA.

What about political implications? Does GA have a politics?

No. GA offers specific ways of analysing political events and processes. There are a range of political views in the GA community, and with them some of the tensions one might thus expect. Like an extended family at Christmas or Thanksgiving, GA scholars at our annual conferences tend to stay away from certain topics, unnecessary for the purpose of the gathering. This is healthy. The point of the conferences, and of the GA Society, is to further refine our new way of thinking, explore its uses, and communicate to and learn from other scholars with congruent interests.

While no explanatory account of anything is entirely innocent, GA is finally more descriptive than prescriptive. Political contentions are mostly produced by the tension between the imperative of moral equality, and the ethical productivity of firstness. But GA does not in principle favour one or the other, even if some scholars who use it may. We don't need political discussion to develop GA. But some of us do use it in overtly political analysis and even political advocacy.

GA remains (in the personal view of any reasonable person!) the best tool of cultural analysis now available, partly because its foregrounding of desire enables it most effectively to block out the static in modern thinking, including political thinking. René Girard once said that "all modern thought is falsified by a mystique of transgression."^v The GA modification of this brilliant aphorism would be that one can't effectively do anthropology unless one recognises the scenic character of the human, thus taking imitative desire—or in the GA version, love and resentment—into account. Everyone's, including one's own. Language and the other fundamental components of the human need to be grasped in their most minimal, foundational forms before human culture, or its politics, can usefully be discussed.

ⁱ In particular, his classic study, *The Nude* (Princeton, 1956).

ⁱⁱ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civilisation_\(TV_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civilisation_(TV_series))

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap0501/gans-2/>

^{iv} The classic account is first formulated in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (Johns Hopkins, 1965; translated by Yvonne Freccero from *Mensonge Romantique et Verité Romanesque*, 1961).

^v *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford, 1987), 287.