

THE FIRST IDEA: HOW SYMBOLS, LANGUAGE, AND INTELLIGENCE
EVOLVED FROM OUR PRIMATE ANCESTORS TO MODERN HUMANS.
By *Stanley Greenspan* and *Stuart G. Shanker*. Cambridge: Da
Capo Press, 2004, 512 pp., \$25.00.

The First Idea, a story of rich subplots woven by Stanley Greenspan and Stuart Shanker, proceeds by way of ongoing juxtapositions, especially of the authors' models of aspects of individual human development and their new ideas about human evolution. Greenspan brings

to this project a lifetime of practice, research, and writing about human development. Similarly, for Shanker this book has been years in the making; he has worked as a philosopher and psychologist with interests ranging to artificial intelligence, human and primate languages, and more. Together the authors take the reader on a fascinating tour of ideas.

Traditionally, human evolution has been the concern of apparently disparate fields of knowledge. Greenspan and Shanker hope here both to unify these fields and to add what has been missing. Discussing issues in child development, primate research, archaeology, linguistics, and biology (especially neuroscience), they show how current ways of understanding ourselves often miss the developmental perspective and consistently overlook the significance of emotion.

One appeal of this book is its unabashed attempt to pose and answer basic questions. How did humans evolve? Was there a “first idea”? If so, how might that have evolved, when, and under what conditions? What might be the relations and comparisons between human evolution, primate evolution, and human and primate development? A second appeal of the book is in its repeatedly sharp challenges to current theory in a number of academic fields of relevance to psychoanalysis. These challenges hinge especially on two crucial concepts: first, that understandings of humans and their development are often simplistic and mechanical, lacking attention to broader complexities and the centrality of interactions in life; second, that there are significant problems with the ways we have thought about emotion and its role in human life.

Greenspan and Shanker challenge conventional understandings of emotion that so often treat it as a separate entity, split off somehow from other aspects of perception, thought, and behavior. Their review makes it clear that such compartmentalizing is not merely the residual of old ways of thinking. The authors specifically critique modern neuroscientific writings about emotion, (e.g., Ledoux 1996; Damasio 1999). They outline an alternative view, really an attempt at a comprehensive model of emotional and intellectual growth. This model is explicated in a step-by-step sequence and then summarized in a clear table, an expository mode the authors use as well in their proposed outlines of primate and human evolution, brain development, group development, and even human history.

Human history? In a brave and ambitious turn (a Freudian one), the authors venture forth from the confines of their own disciplines to

offer their thoughts about areas traditionally seen as the domains of others. Stopping on the way to offer a model of “Developmental Levels of Groups, Societies, and Cultures” (p. 321), the authors go on to present “A New History of History” (p. 375) and in a fascinating last chapter bring their insights regarding human development and evolution to bear on some of the current and likely future developmental and evolutionary challenges we will face as a species. The field of inquiry into these “evolutions” ranges from early monkeys and apes through human history to the present; and from neuronal pathways and genes to babies and their caretakers and on to groups and societies. At every juncture the authors offer what they believe is a significantly new “lens” through which to view these disparate subjects. This lens is their theory of “functional emotional development.”

The theory adds a heretofore missing emotional perspective to the thinking of other writers and combines cognitive, linguistic, and perceptual perspectives into Greenspan and Shanker’s own ideas about emotional development. Theories of development and evolution are cogently presented here and extended as the reader is led through a series of comparisons, such as how development progresses in human and in nonhuman primates; how steps and stages in human evolution parallel steps and stages in individual human development; and how these stages, moreover, offer a structure for understanding the progression of human history.

These stages, also called “functional emotional developmental levels,” range from the most basic processes of attention, to the beginnings of interpersonal engagement, to “two-way intentional, emotional signaling and communication,” and on to increasingly complex chains of representation and social interrelation. Part of the fascination of *The First Idea* is that it ranges so widely over so many topics. Yet it has the virtue of being structured as well, making it a collection of distinct but usefully interrelated papers. The book has the feeling of an introduction, really a reintroduction, to numerous areas of research. Reading its subtitle, I was particularly interested in learning “how symbols, language, and intelligence evolved from our primate ancestors.” I wondered what the authors would have to say about what an idea “is” and how ideas evolved.

It’s clear what the authors don’t think, a good example of which emerges in their discussion of linguistic theories of the origins of thought and language. They don’t think of humans as machine-like

computers which at some point suddenly “evolved” an amazing new component. Citing Chomsky (1966, 1980) and Pinker (2002) as modern linguists favoring a genetic “big bang” / “language instinct” theory, Greenspan and Shanker argue against the view that mutations and selection account for the major share of humans’ great leap forward with the acquisition of language. In their careful delineation of gradual and apparently continuous developmental progressions and in their reviews of current findings regarding nonhuman primate intelligence, the authors raise reasonable doubts about assumptions of a total dichotomy between human language and nonlinguistic forms of intelligence.

The authors also reject prevailing understandings of emotions that seem to picture “them” as components or subcircuits in a big computing machine. The argument that Greenspan and Shanker put forward is that *all* of mental life is emotional, that the stages of development reflect advances in emotional “signaling” and emotional interaction as much as in “perception,” “cognition,” and “language,” and that in all our experiences emotions play a central “orchestrating” role. The authors’ concept of functional emotional development thus emphasizes the idea that our emotional orientations aren’t just colorings added in to perceptual-cognitive-linguistic structures and patterns but rather are aspects of progressively complex and sophisticated forms of interaction with the world. “Emotion,” like “thinking,” progresses along both evolutionary and developmental lines. For example, humans and primates are said to begin at the functional emotional developmental level referred to as “shared attention and regulation,” at which point the baby attends pleasurably to “sights, sounds, touch, movement, and other sensory experiences” (p. 88). The human baby then from two to four months on moves ahead to “engagement and relating” and to the beginning of relationships and intimacy. From four to eight months on there emerges “two-way intentional, emotional signaling and communication” (p. 88), with its reading of and responding to emotional signals and the beginning of cause-and-effect thinking. As “ideas” mature and become more complex and extensive, “emotions” likewise are transformed. Central to Greenspan and Shanker’s view is the idea that social interaction is always a basic determinant of human experiencing and that increasing levels of sophistication in the “thinking” determinants of such interaction involve increasingly sophisticated, complex emotional organizations and interactive possibilities. Such ideas don’t seem so new or revolutionary to a psychoanalyst, but the authors’ critiques of

the work of many contemporary researchers make clear how commonly even sophisticated thinkers lapse into simplified models of human experience and, more specifically, how commonly developmental perspectives seem to disappear from models purporting to reflect various aspects of the “structure” of human experience.

Greenspan and Shanker consistently avoid reductionistic approaches to conceptualizing human experience and again and again bring us to various “firsts.” Was there in evolution a first moment for language? Is there in development a kind of coming-into-existence of ideation, a sort of leap ahead, an advance from reflex to reflection? Greenspan and Shanker’s first premise and central focus is functional-emotional-developmental. Functional emotional phenomena accompany development at all stages. They both precede and accompany language.

In the narrower sense of “first,” the authors begin to address the topic raised by their subtitle, “How Symbols, Language, and Intelligence Evolved from Our Primate Ancestors.” Was the “first idea” the first “symbol”? Did “symbolic function” then move “ideas” to a higher plane? “According to our hypothesis,” Greenspan and Shanker state, “an idea is an image that has been freed from a fixed, immediate action and is invested with affects or emotions (i.e., intent) to give it meaning” (p. 37). This freeing and fixing, arising from infant interplay via emotional signaling with caretakers, gave rise to humankind’s “first idea” and gives rise to the first idea in every individual baby. To my mind, however, precisely *how* an image acquires emotional meaning and becomes a symbol remains an unanswered “first idea” question.

If we reflect on the authors’ terms (“emotional signaling,” “perceptions,” “fixed actions,” “emotional meaning,” “symbols”) and look for definition or specificity, we encounter what Lacan (1977) called the problem of the “incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier” (p. 154). The expressions have meanings, of course, but they slide. “Emotional signaling,” for example, seems on the one hand to aptly capture something about emotion and its interpersonal or social aspects, yet on the other hand the phrase changes its meaning subtly with each new application. When we speak of emotional signaling between babies and their caretakers and then of emotional signaling as it enters later into social and individual life, does the phrase really keep the same meaning? The problems involved are daunting. Certainly in ordinary speech we speak of ideas and signaling, of perceptions and

action patterns, even of meaning, as if these were entities. But what kind of entities? For Lakoff and Johnson (1980) they are metaphorical concepts. And, as we learn repeatedly from the study of human languages, single linguistic “entities” aren’t just namings but rely always on oppositions, on systems of meaningful elements. The terms of our debate, then, are to be grasped not as first or fundamental ideas but as elements in exceedingly complex systems and transformations of information. The contribution of Greenspan and Shanker may well turn out to be related not to a finding of a “first idea” but rather to an effort to relate what is understandable about early perceptual-emotional-behavioral “systems” to later perceptual-emotional-linguistic-behavioral systems. The challenge seems to be to account for and represent theoretically progressive levels of complexity and reflectiveness.

The First Idea, though not primarily concerned with issues of analytic practice and technique, does offer an approach to therapy. Using examples from their experience with autistic spectrum developmentally disordered patients, the authors show how greater attentiveness to emotional signaling phenomena can have profound effects on “cognition” and “behavior.” They show, for example, that work with some autistic spectrum patients on the details and steps forward in the area of emotional signaling and responsiveness can lead to the development of new psychic competencies, which in turn enable further development.

One might hope, and the authors seem to, that if we can help the autistic, we might even be able to help our politicians! In the book’s final chapters Greenspan and Shanker focus increasingly on the broader social world, exemplifying beautifully the emotional-developmental principles presented throughout the book. In their chart of the stages of “emotional and intellectual growth” for example, they speak of “the ability to broaden one’s nurturing and empathic abilities” as an achievement of middle age and of “the ability to use true reflective thinking of an unparalleled scope” as a potential achievement of further aging (pp. 88–91). In their “New History of History” and “Future Evolution of Humanity” chapters the authors bring to bear just this kind of sophisticated thinking and mature wisdom on the most fundamental problems of human history, of our times, and of the future we face. If there is a “first idea” here (now in the sense of centrality of importance), it must be interconnectedness. Indeed, the whole book is an impressive illustration of the theme. Just as we now live in an increasingly global and interconnected world, the authors take us into an intellectual and

professional world of richly interconnected domains, where earlier tendencies to stay within one's own professional boundaries and in one's "field" have given way to more interactive scholarship. In a wonderful, kaleidoscopic way, questions posed and answers broached shift around continuously as we hear from child researchers, primatologists, archaeologists, linguists, neuroscientists, and of course psychoanalysts. Each attempt at a "first" opens more questions. Our thinking and even our feeling, I believe the authors would say, are evolving.

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