

The Alienation of Transcendence

Original talk given by Ian Wallace

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I wanted to be able to have a feel-good talk, some easy-to-digest inspirational message about how we can “transcend” racism, how we can go beyond humanity’s tendencies toward “othering,” and pass into a realm above the exploitation and injustice that pervades our human world.

But these are not feel-good times. In exploring the concept of transcendence in the summer of 2020, I feel obliged to begin by connecting this idea of “going beyond” with the reality of alienation that is front and center in the lives of those who are suffering. As humans, we all suffer. In our suffering we become distinctly aware of our separation from others; the individual self is the very thing that suffers. Awakening from the dream of suffering is a realization that the self is only a tiny shard refracting the interconnected web of creation. Alienation is the separation of the self from the world around it. An isolated, suffering self, alienated from its surroundings, forms the dynamic opposition to transcendent oneness. The truth is in a balance of the opposites. By accepting *alienation itself* we find the key to transcendence.

We dwell as subjects with a body, and it is this experience which carries us beyond the ordinary. In meditation we become aware of our breath. Our brief lives are a liminal experience. We live for but a moment upon the threshold of the infinite. There is a paradox here: we are faced with an awareness of the catastrophe of the grave, and yet the opportunity for salvation presents itself in the midst of this loss. This salvation is the mystery of love.

Within our own cultural context there is a community of desperate hope and ardent resistance, the descendants of those women and men who were stolen from their homes in Africa. These are people whose bodies have been subjugated for generations. Their ongoing movement toward transcendence shows how people who are subject to brutal oppression have access to the most powerful form of love. To quote Cornel West, “The blues responds to the catastrophic with compassion, without drinking from the cup of bitterness.” The black community in the United States has demonstrated love, patience, persistence, tenacity, and compassion over the course of centuries of monstrous treatment. This is not merely in spite of the profound alienation experienced in the face of racism, but also as a result of the human spirit’s hunger to overcome adversity.

So this can’t be a feel-good talk, at least not strictly so, because troubling truths are being exposed in the process of transcending our old ways of being. Agreeing with the impetus for justice does not equate with the renunciation of white privilege. This is why I’ve titled the talk, “the Alienation of Transcendence.” It implies that in going beyond what we’ve known, we are cut off from the old comforts of our previous ignorance. It means that the movement above our previous levels of morality will almost certainly challenge our sense of self. To transcend racism, white people are being forced to call into question who we are, what we stand for, and how we operate in the world. We’ll return to a discussion of the way that transcendence causes a sense of alienation from our assumed identities.

But as a phrase, this title, “the Alienation of Transcendence” won’t get away without also having another meaning. In its second sense, it is transcendence which has been alienated from us. This odd sense of the phrase is my entrypoint for a

discussion of how we got here. And as I am always curious as to the evolutionary roots of our current predicament, I think that an examination of our deep history can give us insights into the constraining conceptions we have of our place in the world.

Our ancestors in prehistory were organized in bands of a few dozen to a few hundred individuals; groups of these bands were loosely associated with each other in tribes of a few thousand. The identity of an individual within this nexus corresponded with their biological success: being known as a caring and useful individual within the band ensured that reciprocity and care would be given in return; maintaining extended relationships within the wider tribe helped ensure the band's wellbeing into the future, and provided wider opportunities for reproductive partners for the individual and their progeny. This paradigm arose organically from the behavioral patterns of our primate ancestors. Chimpanzees and bonobos have food sharing behaviors similar to the reciprocity found within hunter-gatherer bands, and female chimps instinctively move to neighboring troops upon reaching sexual maturity. Language allowed for the development of more enduring extended networks of relationships between bands, creating a broader space for the development of identity within the tribe.

Here then is the opening of alienation within the community. The awareness of individuality allowed our ancestors to function within a complex interconnected human world while simultaneously prompting anxiety around their belonging within the group. This awareness of identity also developed into an anxiety concerning the group's contingency in the face of rival societies.

Two radically different transcendent experiences emerged in the face of these anxieties. One was the collective ritual practices that form the anthropological underpinning of religion. The other is war.

Religious rites developed to help individuals transcend the volatile forces that arise within a society when human desires clash. Imitation functions as the basis of learning, arguably the single most powerful plexus of human behavior. Through imitation, we learn what to desire. This mimetic desire, as René Girard termed it, demonstrates the inherent rivalry that naturally develops between individuals. In the articulated social structures of early human societies, the type of violent infighting seen among chimpanzees began to be subverted by ritualized behaviors. Scapegoating and the offering of sacrifices served to separate the locus of desire away from the individual. In order to transcend the violence of each other's animal presence, humanity began to alienate themselves from nature.

Gods were initially placed firmly within the world, serving to inform and regulate the way human desire functioned. The gods and spirits dwelt within the stones and the stars, the herbs and trees, the wind and water, the animals and the ancestors. The transcendent numinous world of gods and spirits, demanding certain behaviors of human beings, alienated us from the web of creation. In no creation myth I am aware of are human beings considered as only one of the many animals, but always there is an alienation that separates the human being from the animal world.

According to this theory of evolutionary psychology, our ancestors developed this sense of alienation from the world as a form of social regulation. Through the development of the imaginal, we learned to commend our desire unto a transcendent exterior pattern. This transcendent realm functioned within our thought processes in

what psychologists term the superego. This long digression has felt necessary to explain the way that processes of alienation are fundamental to our ability to transcend the particular challenges we face.

An individual, dwelling with a sense of alienation from the world, could transcend the crippling anxieties of consciousness by engaging in ritual practices. The rituals of hunter-gatherers formed foundational beliefs which allowed for the emergence of state power through the alienation of the individual from the transcendent divinity of the emperor. The appearance of the state in history also required the modulation of the warrior class to serve the emperor's needs.

The inter-tribal warfare, rooted in territorial contingency, had developed within our ancient ancestors a transcendent sense of identity. Elaborate rituals and ceremonies accompanying the carrying out of war, pushing humans beyond their individual selves subsuming in their identity in the tribe. The alienation of the rival tribe is as deeply rooted as any aspect of human evolution. Here we find the recurrent presence of what Deleuze and Guattari describe as a "war machine," a system of behaviors inherent within human psychology and society that operates to alienate an "other," and through opposition to the "other" coordinates a collective identity that pushes beyond the confines of our isolation as individuals. In modernity, capitalism itself can be seen as a form of "war machine," alienating the "other" of the laborer from the collective identity embodied by consumerism.

Rooted in the acts of war performed between tribes over the course of hundreds of millenia, the evolution of the "war machine" also created the prerequisite force that functioned to facilitate the development of the state. Empires were able to evolve through the correspondence of religious beliefs and the political efforts to regulate

humanity's warlike stance against the alienated exteriority, although the "war machine" always functions outside of the full control of the state.

Key to the function of the "war machine" is the alienation of the exterior "other." Between hunter-gatherer tribes, the opposing force is denigrated and dehumanized through chants and songs that warriors use to prepare themselves for combat. The objectification and animalization of the "other" continued to function throughout history in the following contexts: between armies; between captors and slaves; between colonizers and indigenous peoples; between police and subjugated populations. So now we have the building blocks of what bell hooks terms the white-supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy.

Transcending whiteness is, then, also a process of transcending the entire paradigm of state power and capitalism. Where to begin? The first six of the seven principles of Unitarian Universalism show that transcending this current paradigm is something that we value as a community. I believe then that the seventh principle is what might bring us full circle: *Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.*

The transcendence of our animal limits was obtained by means of the Devil's own bargain, through processes of alienation we propelled ourselves to global domination. What would respect for the interdependent web of all existence look like? I believe that processes of alienation are not only inherent within the humanity, but are produced from the fundamental antagonisms within existence. Respect for the web of all existence must then include the healthy respect for the many challenges and problems which face us as beings. Thus transcending our role in systems of oppression does not imply that we are delivering ourselves into a world without

problems. Alienating ourselves from our assumed identities is uncomfortable, but a necessary step in moving into a world beyond injustice.

Transcending patriarchy means alienating ourselves from identification with cultural normalization surrounding what men and women are supposed to be.

Transcending capitalism means that, instead of being alienated from the products of our labor, we alienate ourselves from the void of meaninglessness by meeting the challenges posed by our curiosity, by our innate need to find a meaningful place and purposeful activity. The antagonistic nature of life will continue, but by going beyond systems of exploitation we can find intrinsic worth in our productive activity, and address the contingency of our material well being through communal responsibility.

Transcending racism means that our interpersonal and societal challenges will be met with a deeper level of presence and compassion which leave no room for historically rooted injustices. We must understand and alienate ourselves from inherited patterns of privilege. It doesn't mean that we won't continue to struggle with interpersonal and societal challenges, but the respect for our interconnectedness can guide us through the process of healing wounds which have gone long untended. The work of white Americans to transcend racism is to pass out of themselves, to leave our identities behind and live the love and justice we wish to see. Transcendence is going to take the ongoing work of being aware of our anxieties and practicing compassion in our relations with others. There will always be problems to transcend, but at this moment in history it is apparent that we have a particular responsibility to let go of white privilege. Perhaps the feel-good message wins out in the end, because as we alienate ourselves from our unconscious roles within paradigms of subjugation,

we are engaging in the ongoing process of transcendence that is central to being human.