

Biological Silence

What gave rise to this document with a somewhat unusual title can be traced to politics. This, of course, begs for an explanation. I began writing mid summer 2024 when the United States presidential campaign was starting to heat up. Actually it had been simmering for much longer, several years, in fact. The candidates now were being both followed and scrutinized *ad nauseam*, and as we approached election day, they have become inescapable. In addition to this three elements struck me: the obscene amount of money being spent, the never-ending rhetoric and what now seems to be a permanent campaign mode.

With this in mind I projected ahead to after the election when the new president is inaugurated. Unfortunately the day after signals the commencement of campaigning for the next election four years away. A bit of an exaggeration, but it contains some truth. In addition to all this we have local elections. Huge amounts of money are spent on them as well which made me wonder what would happen if we directed most of it to various ways for improving our society. Dream on, pure fantasy.

Although in an unexpected way the presidential election turned out to be the motive behind this essay, it made me think of an earlier article I had written. That's entitled **On Being a Mammal** or more precisely an examination of living beings technically identified as suckling their young, we humans obviously falling under this category. It might not seem as such, but political candidates are mammals. At their very root they, like the rest of us, are focused upon what keeps them in existence, that being common to all living beings and so obvious that barely we reflect upon it. In addition we have a multitude of layers which tend to hide this ur-layer, if you will. It'd take forever to go through them all, some obviously more interesting than others. Among the most notable ones where we spend the bulk of our time are those classified as psychological, sociological and spiritual. You could spend a life time on one and not come close to exhausting it's significance.

So for a change of pace I thought of viewing those candidates running for office as mammals. While they might not be suckling their young, that's how

they...we...are defined. Indeed it's a body-ish approach, in a way somewhat repulsive but at the same time pretty much on target. Such a viewpoint comes from being able to step outside our mammalian bodies not physically but mentally because a faculty other than our mind is at work. Although that adverb doesn't ring exactly true, I'll use it anyway because it's common parlance. In actuality I am referring to awareness pure and simple. No matter what we do, think or experience this otherly-ness is always with us. It isn't removed from our mammalian nature but is right there in the thick of things, suckling our young of course included. At the same time it's completely removed. So in a way this is what the article is about or more precisely, the mechanism behind what effects biological silence.

If you want to take this a step further, liken the focus upon mammalian existence to being a space traveler who visits another planet. Having discovered a new life form, one is fascinated with it and can't get enough. The best part about this experiment is that the local inhabitants don't talk back. It's all one way on our behalf. Such an image can go only so far. You can't think of those you're watching as inferior to yourself. That would be adding a value judgment. Instead, the vision needs to remain constant which is possible with practice. That might sound too much. Opportunities for such practice remain open seven-twenty-four, but don't forget. We're dealing with something rarely if ever talked about. I believe once it's put out there for all to see, everyone can't help but be enthralled.

For anyone theologically inclined, I extend this to being a kind of incarnation. That is to say, one not entirely dissimilar to Jesus Christ when he became man while remaining fully divine. Here is a conundrum of all conundrums that caused both wonder and controversy from the beginning and indeed one that can apply to the situation at hand. What keeps it on an even keel is that our insight into what it means to be incarnate does not denigrate those with whom we live. If that happened...even a hint of it...we have a sure sign something is not right. And so the Incarnation or God-becoming-human remains a pattern that can be applied in real life situations. Hopefully as this article unfolds such a claim may become clearer.

This approach serves to put into perspective much of what is going on behind

the scenes each and every day not just in the example of a presidential campaign, an event quite outside the ordinary ¹, but in all human activities. The first impression is that all such activities have an air of bodily-ness along with a keen perception of the passage of time. Let's take a simple example. Recently I had computer trouble and brought it to a place I hadn't frequented before. It turned out to be an unexpectedly pleasant experience, everything accomplished in one fell swoop.

As I got into the car to go the shop suddenly, out of the clear blue, there came to mind that I was present to something which has a definite beginning, middle and end. After all, that's characteristic of how we operate as corporeal beings. Talk about reducing things to their simplest components. While the situation unfolded in accord with its threefold character, I could watch them fall into place despite being in an experience I preferred not to be in. In other words, I was watching the way a given sequence was being played out and coming to a conclusion. Also I looked at people in other cars and those walking by. They too were working according to the same pattern whether aware of it or not. Knowing that the pattern will come to an end has nothing to do with having special insight. We're dealing with a perception as common as could be but quite profound the more you consider it.

Actually all our experiences follow the outline just posited, some shorter while others are longer in duration while still others others are open-ended. You could say this most basic pattern remains with us throughout life. The flavors change but not the essence. When we're caught up in a pattern that's unpleasant we're disinclined to view its beginning, middle and end as the same. It might even seem endless but is not. Instead of the threefold sequence, our experience is just a lot of unremitting blah for lack of a better word. That's why practice-makes-perfect in lesser circumstances where a beginning, middle and end are more clearly delineated. Granted that my recent computer experience was essentially neutral. If it didn't pan out, there were plenty of other options. By focusing upon a given sequence of events—outlining it, as it were—we can more readily apply this pattern to others which take up a considerable amount of space and time of any given day.

¹ "Outside the ordinary"...sort of. News comes at us so fast and furious that we've become numb to anything unusual or outside the realm of routine experience.

At this point the image of a laboratory comes in handy. With this in mind we can take stuff from daily life and insert it into a controlled environment. One of the best ways to carry it out is—this may sound strange at first—is by pretending. Pretending isn't intended to be a parlor game we play for entertainment but a means to step aside from any given sequence and see what might be there.² It's a very real way of acting out a given scenario which makes the real thing come off more easily when it happens. Once we've become familiar with a given pattern, we can abstract it in the literal sense (*ab* = from + *traho* = to draw) as in the just mentioned example of transferring an experience into a make-believe environment, one that's completely open-ended.

If put into practice, this experiment reveals that we have an inbuilt, ready-made mechanism as how to handle real life situations. Most of the time we sleep-walk through them which means that at a later time they have the potential of coming back to bit us. An example. Recently I spoke with a friend who works as a nurse's aide assisting elderly people. I asked a fairly general question as to any wisdom she had picked up, having been at it for some forty years. Right away she noted that at the advanced stage of life the quality now being experienced mirrors how that person had lived during the bulk of his or her life. Off hand it doesn't sound special, but pressing her further, my friend who had some classical training, noted that unfortunately a lack of *paideia* plays a large part in how people comport themselves when older. By *paideia* she meant the broader sense of continuously having expanded one's interests, not necessarily in the academic sense. In sum this Greek word infers the benefits of the culture a person had been exposed to emerge throughout a lifetime. Indeed, *paideia* is a group effort *par excellence*. While it might sound as belonging to a certain class of people, in reality it applies to anyone.

Getting back to my friend, she noted that it's a genuine tragedy when she sees a person who had failed to engage in this accumulative work of *paideia*. He or she is stuck in the present which is just as empty as the past and even more

² Gregory of Nyssa (fourth century) speaks of sequence as *akolouthia*. It's an important word for him as tied in with his notion of continuous advancement in our love and knowledge of God.

frightful, forebodes an empty future close at hand. A person like this ends up not having known how to both quiet the mind and direct it to the finer things of life. Instead, one is filled with all sorts of wasted interests which turn out to be an ersatz type of compensation. At this point another Greek word comes into play, *lethe* or forgetfulness. It doesn't apply to any form of dementia but is a forgetfulness of from where one comes. *Lethe* thus is the opposite of *anamnesis* or recollection or being firmly rooted in remembrance of our transcendent source. Should we forget in this deeper sense, we're really lost.

At first glance the length of time it takes to acquire this accumulative knowledge represented by the word *paideia* seems long, too long for most folks, for it extends throughout the bulk of one's life. However, we get older, the very perception of time turns out to be fleeting and we wish we had known this earlier. No doubt about it. Later in life our perception has been altered. Rarely if ever could you be aware of this fact when younger, perhaps with the exception of those who are holy. For them time takes on a different dimension is more liturgical in character. Such a realization naturally compels us to ask if there might be something else at work. Perhaps what we see as concrete turns out to be illusory. Often we're moved to look for some kind of agent at work behind the scene, a puppeteer³ as in Plato's cave or the like but come up empty-handed. Still the durability of this perception is amazing.

This perception of having been manipulated becomes more evident after we've experienced a lengthy build-up to a given event followed by the sudden, almost surreal manner by which it disappears. The after effect? We're left trying to make sense out of what had flashed before our eyes but almost always never succeed in doing so. The benefit, should we be aware of it, is discovering how taken in we've been by these successive rises and falls of events. Indeed, the puppeteers as in Plato's **Republic** (Book Seven) are diligently at work projecting one image after another. Embarrassing as it may be, what's crucial is to just acknowledge it followed by getting up and walking out of the cave. We need to walk, not run, for running infers fear of being pursued which isn't the case. Rather, the persecution starts when this person decides to return to the cave.

³ In Greek its "makers of wonders," quite an apt description.

This is both easy yet takes some courage because it sets the stage for the task at hand, namely, to withdraw not so much from the projections upon the cave wall which are taken for reality but more so from the “makes of wonders” responsible for them. No question this is the most important challenge facing us in life whether we realize it or not. While the element of impermanence is something we acknowledge, when it does happen more often than not we’re taken by surprise. Obviously the momentary excitement generated by passing events keeps us constantly preoccupied. Despite our protestations, we can’t see beyond all this even when we acknowledge it staring us right in the face.

Trying to slow down the process of when a striking event comes upon us and the after effect it leaves behind looks easy on paper but is another thing to carry out. One way out of this conundrum is to become aware as much as possible of the repetitive nature of what’s transpiring. We’re so acclimatized to it occupying our mental space that like the cave dwellers of the Republic whose attention is focused upon images projected upon the wall we can’t conceive of an alternative. Thus no surprise that cave = life and life = the cave. While we’re all subjected to such alteration, describing it is a real challenge because it’s so intimate to our awareness and for that precise reason is little reflected upon. No small wonder that one man—just one among a countless multitude—got up and left the cave ⁴. As we know, his sympathy for the cave’s inhabitants was met with violence, so if we wish to be of assistance to them, we have to tread with great care.

To sum up then, not just the rise of an event and its disintegration is the topic of concern here but its constant repetition which reveals how stuck we are in such a rut. It doesn’t matter whether the event is earth-shaking or as prosaic as going to the store. The pattern of rise, momentary stability and fall, remains the same throughout. This is a big help to keep in mind should we get bogged down as often is the case. It turns out that everywhere we look this alternation is at work, something that’s almost universal. Once we realize this pattern—and it seems to be constant throughout—things look pretty much the same

⁴ In another article on this homepage I offered a reason why one man among the multitude exited the cave. The solution seemed good as any as far as I could determine. He simply won the lottery. Winning the lottery is by sheer chance and has nothing to do with one’s status of gifts. Obviously a lot of people are uncomfortable with this image, but it seems to hold some water.

regardless of the situation's character. This is the insight which had its roots in the computer experience noted earlier.

Actually that event turned out to be the “inspiration” for the current essay, parentheses more or less added deliberately because of its relative insignificance. Another source was having had spent considerable time and effort jotting down some thoughts about Plato's *Timaeus*, of approaching it from the vantage point of telling a story about creation and the human soul. Then I got unnecessarily bogged down and decided to opt out. I mention this because while insignificant in the grand scale of things, it represented an occasion when a given project goes south. It, of course, was marked by that just mentioned rise→constancy->fall sequence or *akolouthia*. No result seemed to be coming from my efforts, but when I moved on to write of this experience, looking at it from the outside, if you will, everything changed for the better. I'd say that in sum the listlessness of apparently not going anywhere dissipated while something new and refreshing was moving in to take its place.

The next phase in this part of my journey consisted of being attentive to the actual point when we begin a task, albeit small or large, see it through and move on to another one. The starting point may be more difficult to locate than first imagined because sometimes any inception comes from several sources before they merge into one. Take again my recent bout with the *Timaeus*. I started off with a limited ability to read the Greek text, long time familiarity with many of the terms Plato employs which are very rich, and a desire to somehow make sense of them. Not only that, as noted above, I wished to see how Plato uses the *Timaeus* to tell a story about the human soul and the universe. Each of these efforts pulled something from here and then over there. Over time somehow they coalesced and *mirabile dictu*, gave rise to the creation of something new.

Shifting gears a bit, it's helpful to be attentive to the way we comport ourselves which rests upon two basic orientations regardless of whatever befalls us. The first is the mental one where we live 99.99% of the time, a bit of an exaggeration but not that far off the mark. More specifically, I mean the level where our mind concocts a limitless supply of images and designs...and then some. We may be engaged in an intricate procedure or the like yet at the same

time are barely aware of it. Our minds are literally elsewhere. To prove this, just watch yourself on a daily basis. Whoever claimed that multi-tasking was difficult. We do it all the time.

The second part is the most basic of them all which can go under the category of physicality or to borrow words from St Paul, this is where we live, move and have our being. Actually it's life...the real world...not a virtual one. All our actions are rooted here. Our awareness of this fact barely exists and if asked about it, we come across as embarrassed at not having a clue that we're right with it all the time. Note the power of our imagination—our image-making machine—of how it disguises our physicality. While we acknowledge it from time to time, more often than not we're elsewhere. This dualism is more remarkable the closer you examine it, of how such a state of affairs can exist.

Here's a simple almost Zen-like test whether or not we subscribe to the physical-ness of reality, one which everyone does. Take the act of eating food. Like other physical actions, eating is quite complex from beginning to end. When we do this, we're barely aware of the process let alone tasting the food. Instead, we spend time reading, listening to the radio or watching TV or are on the Internet. Yes, the taste of the food may strike us but does so momentarily. While eating is the most obvious example, plenty of others exist such as listening to music, washing ourselves and rarely listening to each other.

When you observe all these physical activities, what do they have in common? The answer of course is in accord with this essay's title. They are done in silence. This may seem an odd way to look at them but when you carefully consider them all, it is true. On this level no energy is wasted even though a lot of it is in the process of expenditure, indeed a paradox. I return once more to that computer incident. While the event was short...a total of 3 hours...99.99% of it, if you will, consisted in the expenditure of mental energy. At the end I was more mentally tired than in the physical sense even though the motions involved were the same as in other situations and which every human being on the planet was doing.

Just consider that situation, so typical of what we all do. A number of biological factors were busy at work: eyes paying attention to the road while

driving, lungs of course breathing throughout as they always do and ears attentive to various sounds. These are the more obvious among literally countless activities or actions at work consciously or unconsciously. Even St Bernard of Clairvaux noted this in his own way, that is, “food, sunlight and air are essential to bodily life.”⁵ That’s as bald a statement as you can get. In a larger context though without being explicit, Bernard was saying pay attention to our physicality (so I interpret it).

So when we look at any sequence—let’s keep in mind the helpful concept *akolouthia* found in Gregory of Nyssa—we see that it represents mental energy in the process of being expended. However, that’s the surface level where we’re focused most of the time while its reality is as thin as the earth’s crust. On the surface this crust looks firm but is flaky as could be when you consider the globe as a whole. Similarly while activity on the surface is what we identify with, what really counts is transpiring beneath. Our problem is that we don’t consider this level as real. Yes, we’ll acknowledge something there exists...actually is vital...but quickly move on. Sometimes the two represent a real tug of war which doesn’t have to be as such.

How, then, do we resolve this? We’ve bought the mental image model hook, line and sinker. Not only that, we’ve adopted it early on say from birth chiefly because everyone else is doing it, and we see no viable alternative. We take the mental model as unquestioned, and if something else is suggested, automatically it seems absurd. Actually it’s rootedness in our awareness makes any questioning a waste of time, a flight of fancy. I’d say it’s only by luck...sheer luck...that someone among us has decided to put their finger of this most common way of perceiving reality and make it known to the rest of us. Behold, the man who walked out the cave.

Once this has been pointed out, is there room for another model? Indeed there is, for what we’re dealing with is as old as the hills in the way it has afflicted humanity. It seems that at some point recognition of the repetitive nature of our experiences reaches a critical point. We know that something somewhere somehow isn’t quite right. While this may be a prolonged painful experience in essence it’s one that pays dividends because it represents the first step

⁵ **On the Love of God.** I forget the precise reference.

pointing us in the right direction.

Looking at how people have dealt with this situation down the centuries leads to the conclusion that most likely they had access to a religious source. One such example which fits this bill is Psalm Nineteen: “Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth and their words to the end of the world” [vss. 2-4]. I can’t let such a treasure go unexamined, so will leave that to a bit later. The three verses indeed are a real treasure and are expanded below as a kind of supplement.

After we’ve opened ourselves to become acquainted with the pattern discussed in terms of a beginning->middle->end, we’re in a better position to see that it’s not the by-all and end-all which we once thought it had been. Here’s an easy, even familiar experiment to help out. We’re all familiar with our planet’s position in the larger scheme of things, starting on earth and projecting ourselves out to zillions of light years away. And more stuff still seems to be there. That’s just one side of things. The other side is that all this space is silent in an absolute manner. Who knows, there may be cataclysmic crashes or the like near stars or black holes, but I believe lack of an atmosphere in space keeps even these colossal things quiet.

The absolute silence whose best physical image is interstellar space also pertains to non-biological stuff which comprises our environment. Then there’s the far more congenial silence on the physical or biological level which despite its comparative transitory nature partakes of space’s infinite silence. Furthermore, it has no need to articulate itself. And so the two silences work hand in hand to mirror each other. So despite our innate chattiness we have a biological silence present among the workings of our physical bodies. At this level the complexity of functions is staggering. It has a way of showing up our chattiness as irrelevant, even intrusive. Thus the silence present among the galaxies is the same silence present among the atoms and sub-atomic particles comprising our very existence. And these comprise our bodily organs which function silently.

This twofold infinity is available for anyone who’s open to cultivating a sense of wonder as Aristotle famously associated it with the practice of philosophy.

Here we're getting to what the title of this short essay is about, silence as closely allied with wonder which is available to wherever we direct our gaze. Even the so-called heartlessness of the inorganic realm can speak to us. Thus we move about in silence, as it were, where our mental faculties have no role to play in our hunger, pain or a host of other things that are transpiring automatically. If you focus on this a while, you're bound to have a conversion.

By conversion I mean we willingly and joyfully abandon our mental faculties for the biological ones and become, if you will, a vegetable person. At first it sounds weird, really weird, but the more you consider it, it makes a lot of sense. Should you be religiously inclined—and who can't help be as such at this level—you discover that awareness of your biological functions in and by themselves forms a type of praise. It'd be no surprise that such was the chief source of joy in the Garden of Eden. Obviously we don't tie into it as much as we can, but it's always there. That's the real beauty of biological silence.

Is it really possible to live like this? Posing such a question elicits a Zen-like response. We're doing it all the time because we're biological all the time. Being mindful of it contributes to minding our own business, of not paying attention to the plank in the other person's eye. That, of course, is essential to maintaining biological silence. What a relief to be freed from those burdens we've taken on usually unconsciously!

The practice of this special type of silence cuts through all our mental crap (pardon the word). Seriously. While I'm writing this in a relatively stable condition of good health, I have sufficient aches and pains which in an instant could intensify and blot this out. Nevertheless, being aware of the fact that anything could go wrong is itself a strange kind of comfort. We know such things are bound to happen, and to be aware of them is itself a huge step in the right direction. stration with computer related issues, is the place where all this might come in handy. In sum, silence or the potential that it's beyond our grasp allows physicality to come to the fore.

This talk about silence is fraught with difficulties because for most people it infers absence, a profoundly unsettling lack which hovers in the background waiting to pounce. A vague analogy would be when we've completed some kind of project. We enjoyed the effort put into to it and after some time come to the

conclusion that nothing more can or should be done. Emptiness looms directly ahead. Why not instead attach a word to this condition with positive connotations? Let's take the Greek word *pleroma* which means fullness or completeness. It precludes the tendency to tack on something unnecessary to what we've accomplished. *Pleroma* also avoids our tendency to become prone to undo tinkering. Although this verb sounds somewhat harmless, over the long run it has profound negative implications because it means interfering where there's not need for it.

I've linked our biological make-up...our physical-ness...with silence because when you look at any working of our body (for example, breathing), there's no mental activity sustaining it. Breathing is going on all by itself without interference from another source. Spread that out to our entire body, and you have something really wonderful. After you've been attentive to this and have extended it to other living beings, you wonder how we've become so screwed up in our thinking. Yet this thinking, so long a part of our identity, continues to accompany us. I venture that never we will be able to escape its clutches. Just getting as far as we have is sufficient in itself. We will advance, of course, but never be set free of mental bondage. Hopefully this sets the stage for the Supplement below.

Supplement with regard to Psalm Nineteen, vss. 2-4

Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth and their words to the end of the world.

These verses present a paradox. First we have speech associated with the transition from one day to the next, the verb being *navah* or to gush forth, to bubble. Actually *navah* is a rather forceful verb implying that speech or *davar* requires a lot of energy to make itself known. Not only that, it has to be done on a daily basis. As for *davar*, it's equivalent to the Greek *logos*, word-as-expression. As for night, the verb associated with knowledge or *dahath* (another way of expressing intimacy) is *chawah* or to breathe out. *Chawah* has some of the force associated with *navah* as noted but because night is involved, it's not as forceful, more low key. It too is done on a daily basis, and being

hooked up with “day,” we have a twenty-four hour cycle.

Taking verse one literally, it’s as though both day and night are endowed with a certain liveliness, for they are unceasingly active. Also both follow a predictable pattern or succession, day-to-day and night-to-night; despite being radically different, they form a unity as well as a balance.

So after this rather dramatic presentation, the next verse comes across as a contradiction. That is to say, there is neither speech nor words, ‘*omer* and the plural of *davar*. The former is derived from the common verbal root ‘*amar* or to say and comes across less forceful than *davar*. Included with both is the singular voice or *qol* proper to both. It seems that all three suddenly have vanished or have been taken up into silence, their native home. If that weren’t enough, things get even weirder.

Although the voice of the two isn’t heard (*shamah*), it extends throughout the entire earth as well as to the world’s end. Note the two words ‘*erets* and *tevel*, earth and world. The former connotes the people who live in a give place whereas the latter is a poetic noun meaning the inhabited world thereby implying that some parts which aren’t inhabited don’t count. As for the end of *tevel*, the noun is *qetsah* also as extremity. That could be taken as the four cardinal points to which the collective voice or *qol* proper to ‘*omer* and *davar*. Thus their *yatsa’* or going forth doesn’t necessarily have to be confined to something that’s heard.

One could ask two questions. First, how long does this *yatsa’* take? Although sound is implied, that would mean the speed of sound. However, the ‘*omer* and *davar* at work here transcend this limitation and reaches its goal as soon as *navah* or gushing forth and *chawah* or breathing is effected. The second question pertains to what would happen once this *yatsa’* has been accomplished. Does it hang around throughout the entire earth or ‘*erets* and dissipate once *davar* or word has reached the end of *tevel*? Something like a back-wash takes place as when water which forcefully rushes forth hits a barrier and returns with pretty much the same force. This creates a back-and-forth motion which is self-perpetuating.

The value of these three Psalm verses rests in the fact that it demonstrates the

physical mechanism of a reality larger than ourselves, not in the sense of being impersonal but of inviting us to participate in it. Thus the expression involved as noted primarily through *‘omer* and *davar* is a kind of larger word which is quite different from our normal way of viewing speech. It seems to be a kind of awareness presented for our imitation, wholly natural for us to adopt.

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