

The Personal is Political

by [Albert Norton, Jr.](#) (November 2022)



Thou Sayest So, Krishen Khanna, 1980

The problem with history is there's so darn much of it. We're supposed to learn from it, but how? We may draw opposite conclusions from the same event; that's certainly common enough. But another way to misapprehend the significance of history is to see it in tight little time spans rather than broad sweeps which allow for answering "why" rather than just how. How did we get to where we are today? How far back do we go, before turning around to retrace the steps that brought us here?

In the present age we retain a sense of individualism against an encroaching collective (or better, "socialist") perspective. Why did we form an individualist perspective in the first place, and if we resist a melding into the collective, why?

Once upon a time people lived in tribal groups for opposing purposes: cooperation, within the tribe, and antagonism, with those outside it. One's identity would be closely aligned with the tribe's. Your consciousness would be calibrated not just to self, but to tribe; not just "I," but "we."

So little was understood about the world. It was vast and mysterious. When the exigencies of survival allowed, people tried to explain their place in the cosmos. They pondered difficult questions—we should not suppose they were less capable of this than we are. How is there both the one and the many? How do we never step in the same river twice (as Heraclitus asked) and yet there is one river? How to explain ultimate causation, or the reasons we strive, or the distinction between seemingly hard unalterable facts, like physical things, and concepts and ideas and language, immaterial and yet inarguably real?

The confluence of these hard questions resulted in the creation (or identification?) of gods. The gods explained the apparent active force in concepts and ideas. An example. "Just do it" is, you probably know, a slogan for the Nike sporting

goods company. Nike was the Greek god of victory. Victory is the reciprocal of defeat; both must occur in the same contest. The opposition in the concepts produces their meaning. Neither is material but rather purely conceptual, meaning they exist entirely in the realm of the ideal. The war or sport or trial is conducted in the material realm, of course, but the *concepts* of warring, sporting, and trial, and of course victory, are immaterial. Defeat doesn't sound very ideal, but think of "ideal" in the sense of its opposition to material.

If you think about the various pagan gods of old, most are attached to ideals rather than material things. They seem to represent the ancients' attempt to explain what was otherwise inexplicable in material terms, which for them meant almost everything, including the weather. Even patron gods and goddesses relate to ideal. Hephaestus and Vulcan, for example, were more or less the same god; a god of various craftsmen. Plying one's craft is an activity, not a material thing, but more importantly, the glories and travails particular to the craftsmen were certainly an immaterial set of considerations to be given personality in the form of a god. So still an ideal.

The pagans sought to reduce ideals to a being with agency in order to explain animating force to the ideal. Victory is not seen as merely descriptive of a concept, it is understood as a movement unto itself that can be invoked for a desired outcome. It can be thought of as an animated being, but it's not, so the property of agentic self-generated purpose was imputed to an invisible god-being. This seemed necessary to explain movement, causation, and human motivation.

Nowadays we find explanations for most things in natural processes. Temperature gradients make the wind blow. Gravity makes water flow downhill. Pursuit of natural explanations for what we observe is called "science," by which we learn more about the material world, but also by which we may come to think the material world as all there is: "materialism."

Materialism had traction in some quarters even before monotheism burst out into the wider (Western) world in the first centuries A.D. The animating force, or agency, was supplied by God, omniscient and omnipresent. Plato's theory of ideal forms was infused into Christianity through the likes of Augustine. Aristotle's theory of causation was made significant through Aquinas. Monotheist explanation for animating force dominated for two millenia, but over time the flame flickered out among people who thought themselves too sophisticated for imaginary friends.

But where does that leave us in trying to explain movement, causation, and human motivation? Materialism by definition crowds out spiritual points of view, but puts us back into the quandaries people had before they started inventing the likes of Nike (the god, not the shoe). The questions again include how to explain the simultaneity of the one and the many; causation; life force; the appearance of both agency and determinism. We're back to early pagan times.

Christians aren't wrong to label the current climate of ideas "pagan." Usually it's because we wring our hands over the collapse of hierarchical value structures that Christianity would reinforce. The world really is going to hell in a handbasket. But there's more to it than that. Pagans didn't believe in the gods in the way Jews and Christians "believe" by endeavoring to identify with God. Theirs was an earthy this-world perspective, in which belief meant ritualistic practice to reinforce social norms, not the soul-level identification with deity that observant Jews and genuine Christians strive for.

Immanence means the presence of divinity in the material world, but it also has a more limited sense: the formation of ideals through expectations created and reinforced socially. This was the order of the day in pagan times. It was a this-world perspective, except for deference to the necessary animating forces behind ideals, personified in the form of

gods like Nike. Transcendence, in contrast to immanence, means God apart from this world, in a spiritual realm, making this world possible. The shift from paganism to monotheism, over time, was a shift in the direction of transcendence.

Now we witness the shift from transcendence back toward immanence. People haven't taken up the worship of the 2,000 or so Egyptian gods, or those of Greece or Rome or India or pre-Christian Europe. Nor have we taken up a new set of gods to explain the animating forces of movement and life force. Instead our immanence takes the form of social value formation through collectivist and materialist process philosophy. As the world has become smaller there has been some movement in the West in the direction of monist Eastern spirituality, but that also is a movement from transcendence to immanence. The shift from an emphasis on transcendence back toward immanence is the sense in which we return to paganism.

Materialism faded from prominence along with paganism, but re-emerged with Enlightenment religious skepticism and scientific progress. It manifested in the existentialist turn to the subjective, by which our purpose and motivation was to be self-generated: "just do it." This was unsustainable, however, because it is bootstrapping of the first order. We are meaningful therefore we generate meaning, but there is no Source of our meaningfulness.

Naked materialism puts us back in pagan times, rejecting transcendence as if we'd never heard of God, and searching for meaning in immanence, but this time without gods as labels to apply to varieties of inexplicable ideal. We therefore look horizontally, rather than vertically, for a substituted form of immanence: truth and values formed in postmodern process philosophy. These consist primarily in forms of deconstruction, however. Critique tears down but does not rebuild. Hence our current crisis of meaning.

But one element of process philosophy gives the illusion of

building up, and it is the through-line of critique from the French Revolution to Marx to the existentialists to the philosophical pragmatists. It is collectivism, in which the inadequacies in explanatory power among immanent paganism, religious monism, and materialism are dissolved in the communitarian impulse. It amounts to giving up on trying to explain ourselves, by losing ourselves in the unified whole of society.

A vivid illustration is provided by the Indian mystic Ramakrishna (1836-1886) describing an oceanic feeling as the essence of religious ecstasy. A salt doll goes to measure the depth of the ocean but melts away entirely in the water, and is then unable to measure the ocean's depth. This feeling of oneness equates to ultimate socialist collectivism; religious ecstasy coinciding with dissolution of self into the collective. One might describe this as a desire for ultimate immanence; but instead of referring to the presence of the divine in the world with us, the word is used instead to refer to the feeling of social unity overwhelming us in flooding brotherhood and communitarianism. A utopian vision of loving social envelopment is confused with God's love.

This is why both immanence and transcendence are subsumed in the *polis*; ultimate collectivism in which our point of view is shifted from the one to the many; the individual to the city or state or world. Your very consciousness is to be subsumed into social consciousness. Our self-conception has to come to rest, however; it can't be an ever-flowing thing. The shift back from self to tribe is again a shift from "I" to "we." You're a salt doll to be dissolved into oceanic feeling. But that ultimate collective is necessarily brought about through centralized coercive power. You may call it fascism or communism; they now amount to the same thing. This is the endpoint when "the personal is political."

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Albert Norton, Jr is a writer and attorney working in the American South. His most recent book is [Dangerous God: A Defense of Transcendent Truth](#) (2021) concerning formation of truth and values in a postmodern age; and *Intuition of Significance*, a 2020 work weighing the merits of theism against materialism. He is also the author of several award-winning short stories, and two novels: *Another Like Me* (2015) and *Rough Water Baptism* (2017), on themes of navigating reality in a post-Christian world.

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