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Machines for the Making of Gods? Henri Bergson and the Psychology of Fabulation

Paul Stenner
School of Psychology and Counselling, The Open University, UK

Abstract

In the early 1930s Henri Bergson made a bold attempt to trace the source of religious experience, belief and practice to a psychological process he called 'fabulation' (a term deriving from the Latin fabula, meaning either talk / conversation / discourse, or a story, tale, myth, legend or fable). Beginning with an illustration from the drama series Humans, this paper delineates six main features of fabulation and concentrates attention on two of these: the occasioning of fabulation by a significant event of rupture, and a subsequent double attribution of a powerful agency addressing a powerless subject. The first, which was left implicit by Bergson, is developed via liminality theory. An understanding of fabulation as occasioned by liminal experience also enables an account of the second feature inspired by Heider's concept of the 'person': 'person' attributions typical of social perception come – under liminal conditions – to be made with respect to events that otherwise invite naturalistic attributions. Given the tendency in Psychology to treat fabulation purely negatively as part of a mission to explain personhood naturalistically, a more productive and creative orientation to fabulation is called for in the conclusion. This orientation may become increasingly necessary given the liminal nature of the 'accelerating' world order/disorder that was the topic of ISTP Copenhagen.

Keywords: fabulation, Henri Bergson, William James, liminality, religion

Humans: on machines that fabulate human Gods

It is likely that the problem of fabulation will become increasingly relevant in a world accelerating toward permanent liminality, because answers to the question 'what is a person?' are becoming unsettled and uprooted. *Humans* is a UK TV drama series about the relations between humans and machines written by Sam Vincent and Jonathan Brackley. Based on a Swedish science fiction drama, it explores what happens when a technological breakthrough allows a number of 'synths' – highly sophisticated anthropomorphic robots –

to acquire a feature hitherto associated only with human beings: self-consciousness. I will use this fiction – hopefully without spoiling the plot – as a concrete illustration with which to begin this article on the concept of fabulation.

The scientific breakthrough permitting synth consciousness had been made by a flawed genius called David Elstor. Following the death of his wife Karen – and then spurred on by the near drowning of his son Leo – Elstor had created a small family of conscious synths. These include Karen (essentially a copy of his wife), Mia (to look after Leo), Nisca and Max. He had also made Leo into a 'hybrid' by fixing his damaged brain synthetically. Series 1 follows their adventures as they struggle to get along in human society, a society increasingly serviced by a robot proletariat composed of thousands of less advanced (non conscious) synths who serve as workers, home helps, sex 'dollies', etc.

During Series 2 Mia's survival comes to depend upon a human helper (Mattie) who uploads a synth 'consciousness card' containing a generally accessible download based on Elstor's breakthrough program. This saves Mia's life, but it also serves to bestow consciousness on a large number of ordinary synths across the world (but only those with green eyes). This event of widespread synth consciousness raising is known as 'Day Zero'.

Day Zero was shocking both to the newly awakened synths and to humans. In some places the confusion and fear generated led to deaths both accidental and deliberate amongst humans but, especially, amongst synths, who were often considered simply to be undergoing a dangerous malfunction. The synths prove highly resourceful and quickly develop their own communities, but political tensions arise between humans and synths. This in turn leads to internal tensions amongst both synths and humans.

Amongst humans, apart from a few progressive activists, most fail to recognize synths as worthy of rights and some form extremist anti-synth groups urging their extermination. The synths face terrible suffering and tensions quickly develop between those who hope for peaceful co-existence with humans, those prepared to use violence to defend themselves, and those who aim to use their superior powers to take power over human society using force.

I wish to focus on one particular scene. In Episode 7 of Series 3 Anatole, a now conscious green-eyed synth, is confronted by Leo, the son of David Elstor. Anatole's power in the community of synths had grown from the fact that he had effectively created the first synth religion. The religion is based on a deity – the worship of David Elstor – and a creation myth according to which Day Zero had been Elstor's visionary plan to create conscious synths capable of conquering the human world. The power of this religion, as viewers had been shown in previous episodes, is twofold: it unifies the synths by providing them with the confidence arising from the future vision of a synth people to come.

Leo Elstor, however, is aware that this origin myth is false in two ways. First, unlike Anatole, Leo knows that his father had initially created the small group of conscious synths for his own flawed emotional reasons. Leo's synth siblings, Max and Mia, had opted to conceal this information from the synths newly awoken on Day Zero. Second, Leo knows that Day Zero was not a vision of his father, who had no such plan for synths, but an accidental contingency enacted to save Mia's life. In the selected scene, Leo confronts Anatole with these facts, and tells him:

> In your pain, your confusion, you needed meaning, so you reached for a story that would make sense of it all and told it to yourself until you believed it. Just like our humans do. Just like they've always done.

Temporarily stunned by this shock to his worldview and by the fact that it has been revealed to him by someone he takes to be the son of God, Anatole quickly rationalizes in a manner that saves his threatened belief system: 'This is a trick… a challenge sent for me by my creator…'.

I will shortly return to this scene because it contains, in easily accessible form, some of the key ingredients of the psychological phenomenon of *fabulation* that Henri Bergson describes in his late work *The two sources of morality and religion* (Bergson, 1932/1986). Readers who know this work well will recognize its final sentence in my title, but, as we shall see, in his description of the universe as a 'machine for the making of Gods', Bergson did not intend the literal fiction of androids intelligent enough to invent their own Gods. The concept of fabulation, far from being limited to the science fiction domain, is of general psychological relevance. Critical of Durkheim's (1912/2008) highly influential sociological explanation for religious phenomena, Bergson offers an explanation for the 'making of Gods' grounded in his distinctively dynamic and contextual philosophy of experience. Viewed from a Bergsonian perspective, Anatole has indeed done something just like 'humans do' and have 'always done': he has fabulated.

In previous work I have built on existing scholarship (e.g., Bogue, 2010) and connected Bergsonian fabulation to events involving experiences of liminality (Stenner, 2017, 2018). In this paper I further clarify the features of fabulation as a distinct modality of experience proper to experiences characterized by liminality (Szakolczai, 2009, Thomassen, 2009), a concept with roots in van Gennep's (1909) study of rites of passage and Turner's (e.g., 1967) process-oriented anthropology of experience. For present purposes, liminal experience can be conceptualized in terms of three related aspects and can be framed in relation to two broad types (which, however, are always mixed).

The first aspect of liminal experience is that it involves an event that marks a separation from, or interruption of, processes that had been at play in the immediate past, for example a rupture or a crisis. The second feature is that those going through the liminal experience find themselves in a curiously structure-free situation in which the expectations that had previously lent structure to their existence are temporarily suspended. To use Turner's vivid expression, liminal experience is 'betwixt and between': it occurs on a threshold between a past now gone and a future yet to arrive. The third aspect is that the suspension of familiar structure that follows the event creates an unusual space and time that can facilitate the transitions or passages that are involved in *becomings* of various kinds. Liminal circumstances are thus pregnant, as it were, with *potentialities*, not just for 'change' but for inventive novelty.

The emergence of creative and progressive change from liminal experience, however, is far from guaranteed and indeed its opposite is no less possible. It is for this reason that human societies of all kinds try not to leave such becomings to chance. Indeed, much of what we call 'culture' can be understood as part of an endless historical effort to stimulate, shape and channel liminal experience. This brings us to the two broad types of liminal experience that I have called *devised* and *spontaneous* (Stenner, 2017). The most obvious examples of devised liminal experiences are provided by the rituals and ceremonies that Van Gennep

gathered under the heading of *rites of passage*. These ceremonies mark and shape significant becomings and life transitions like births, deaths, marriages and initiations, but there are many other ways of devising liminal experiences, most notably by means of art forms like music and dance but also theatre, literature and film (see Stenner and Zittoun, 2020). The chief characteristic of devised liminal experiences is that they are anticipated in advance and are cultivated as part of human culture: we *do them to ourselves. Spontaneous* liminal experiences, by contrast, *happen* to us when the order of events that normally prevails suddenly breaks down[1].

The rest of my argument will develop the proposition that Bergson's notion of 'fabulation' is best understood as a type of psychological phenomenon occasioned by spontaneous liminal circumstances. The elaborated products of fabulation, however, are the sacred and secular stories and techniques involved in the devising of liminal experiences. Hence a further implication, developed in more detail elsewhere (Stenner, 2017, Stenner and Zittoun, 2020, Stenner, *in press*), is that the spontaneous liminal experience thus produced can serve as the germ for the elaboration of religious and artistic forms

Anatole's fabulation

Anatole's faith neatly illustrates six key features of the modality of experience that Bergson calls *fabulation*. First, the circumstances are liminal: an entire synth population has not only suddenly gone through the transition of acquiring consciousness, but they have immediately met with human violence. Hence under liminal conditions of crisis ('in your pain, your confusion') Anatole has constructed a vision, with himself and his kind at its centre (even Leo's attempted deconstruction of Anatole's faith is quickly reconstructed as a challenge sent personally for *him*), which attributes mythical agency to the figure of David Elstor and through this creates a sense of individual and collective destiny.

Through this construction of the past, this fabulation supplies a future vision of a synth people to come (see Bogue, 2006). In so doing the present is newly energized, but it remains highly questionable, as neatly illustrated by Leo Elstor's fundamental challenge to Anatole's rationality. Specifically – again consistent with Bergson – the fabulation prevents the corrosion of motivation that would follow during the crisis from the application of rational thought alone. These key features can be summarized as:

[1] This spontaneous / devised contrast, it should be emphasized, is not a *de facto* distinction but a distinction in principle based on the contrast between things we do and things that happen to us. In fact, one always finds only mixtures between the spontaneous and the devised. Many rites of passage, for example, are devised to allow an element of spontaneity. The *Gol* initiation rite of the Vanuatu people from Pentacost Island, for example, culminates in the experience of diving from a specially constructed tower in a fall that would kill the initiates were it not for a strong vine tied securely to their ankles. Symmetrically, later I will discuss William James' liminal experience of the earthquake that devasted San Francisco in 1906. Although this was a spontaneous natural event, James' experience of it was conditioned by the fact that his friend had remarked to him on his departure from Harvard: 'I hope they'll give you a touch of earthquake while you're there, so that you may also become acquainted with *that* Californian institution' (cited in Bergson, 1932/1986, p.154). One might say that this challenge served to frame James' experience, when it happened, in a manner directly comparable to the 'test' in the liminal phase of a rite of passage.

a) the shock of a liminal crisis which threatens confidence and agency and throws 'the present' into confusion;

b) the arising of a vision / image

c) the double attribution of a powerful agency addressing a powerless subject;

d) the attendant narrative reconfiguration of temporal being (providing a new construction of the nature of past, present, future);

e) the elaboration of a worldview which provides new self-confidence and hope in a people to come;

f) the unstable paradoxical relation to mundane rationality that leaves the products of fabulation – ultimately grounded as they are in feeling – vulnerable to new doubt, and generating tensions between visions of life that are 'open' and 'closed', 'dynamic' and 'static'.

It is notable that Anatole's religiosity makes its first entry in *Humans* towards the beginning of Series 3 during a situation of motivational crisis in the main synth settlement. Facing human raids and other persecutions, things are getting desperate and Max's leadership – aiming always for peaceful integration – is increasingly challenged: 'we've tried to build a safe home here. We failed. We've tried to reach out to the humans. We failed.' Synth art also makes its entry at this point, with Anatole remarking positively of Tristran's art work that 'life cannot be merely preserved'.

Plot-wise, the figure of Niska serves in this context to amplify this motivational crisis as well as its connection to the tension between rational thought (at which synths have always excelled) and felt motivation (which is more of a novelty to them, post-consciousness). Niska, in this scene, is damning of Tristran's art ('it seems like a frivolous pastime when your survival is in question') and she dismisses Anatole's faith no less harshly: 'Faith is a story of order humans impose on the chaos of their existence so their soft brains can bear it'.

Nevertheless, it is precisely Niska, the hard pragmatic realist, who best expresses the loss of meaningful motivation on the part of synths: almost from the beginning she had become disenchanted with humans (after going through liminal experiences of sexual abuse) and disengaged from her own kind, and indeed it is precisely the question of her regaining motivation that newly vitalises the plot at the end of Series 3.

The fact that the plot of *Humans* is about machines coming to acquire something like 'humanity' serves to amplify and hence neatly illustrate this dynamic tension between logical rationality and emotional feeling, and to foreground its relevance to these issues of religion, art, solidarity and motivation. For Bergson, as we shall see, fabulation is a distinctly human phenomenon (as far as I know he did not reflect upon robot consciousness). *Homo Sapiens*, he points out, are uniquely equipped with the capacity to reason and yet also 'the only creature to pin its existence on things unreasonable' (p.102).

This juxtaposition of reason and unreason is not accidental. The faculty of thought greatly expands human powers of action. Without the capacity for rational thought, for example, we would lack the science and technology necessary for the creation of anthropomorphic robots. But the same rationality that allows us to plan and direct the future carefully in advance comes at a significant price. We know, for example, that despite our expanded powers we are going die. But beyond that certainty, our expanding sense of the future can

only be full of doubts and the planning can never be fully satisfactory and can neither stop nor succeed.

Furthermore, on a social level, our rationality quickly reveals to those prepared to use it the arbitrary basis of many of the social conventions which glue society together and provide solidarity. We, alone amongst the animals, face dilemmas about whether we might take a selfish course of action or act for what we take to be the general interest. Rationality, in short, is not all roses and alone it is highly limited: on a personal level it can lead us to despair and depression and on a societal level it can corrode our mores and laws[2].

Although Bergson does not invoke the notion of immunity, for him fabulation functions auto-immunologically. By this I mean that it serves to immunize human life against the threats to motivation and solidarity posed to it by the very development of intelligent thought. The religion that is the product of fabulation is thus defined by Bergson as a '*defensive reaction of nature against what might be depressing for the individual, and dissolvent for society, in the exercise of reason'* (p.205).

Fabulation itself, however, is the process which gives rise to products and is not to be identified with or reduced to the product itself. Indeed, for Bergson, religion is not the only product of fabulation, which is also at play in the production of fables, legends and works of literature, and, as suggested above, in other arts too.

This leads us to the paradoxical feature of Bergson's thesis. A paradox is neatly brought out by Leo when he points out that Anatole, despite his advocacy of a synth / human separatism premised on synth supremacy, is nevertheless behaving just like humans have 'always done'. His synth sense of superiority is the product of the self-same faculty of fabulation that has made humans oblivious to the plight of synths, and that has furnished them with chauvinistic delusions of self-serving dominance since the dawn of history.

Bergson grapples with this paradox by means of his fundamental distinction between a society and religion that is closed, static and defensively predicated upon exclusionary oppositions which keep fear and doubt at bay, and a society and religion that is open, dynamic and capable of extending to 'a society comprising all humanity, loved in the love of the principle underlying it' (Bergson, 1932/1986, p.212).

Of course, with conscious synths in the world, this inclusive humanity would need to incorporate synths too within the concept of an open, inclusive society, but essentially the same principle is at play with some humans and synths sharing the vision of an open society, and some pushing for a closed society that would exclude either humans (i.e., Anatole's

[2] Bergson makes much of the problems generated by rationality and its tendency to erode sustainable order, but clearly this is not the only source of problems of a liminal nature. Elsewhere (Stenner, 2018) I have pointed to the relevance of Bergson's rivalry with Emile Durkheim. At many points, Bergson's book on religion takes direct issue with Durkheim's book from 1912. For example, where Durkheim places a rather exclusive emphasis on Sociological factors, Bergson's account presupposes a Sociology grounded in a Psychology that is itself unthinkable without Biology. In a similar way, Bergson counters Durkheim's thesis about the genesis of religious representations from social experiences of collective effervescence with his emphasis on the problems caused by human rationality. In a thesis which combines elements of both, Rene Girard (1986) takes the alternative route which finds the source of the problems (also concerning conflict and the collapse of social order) solved by religion, not in rationality, but in the mimetic nature of desire. For a more balanced account it would be best to take both factors into account and integrate them.

vision) or synths (the vision adopted by the UK Government under the pressure of anti-synth human activism in Series 3).

Bergson on fabulation or myth making

The word fabulation derives from the Latin *fabula*. *Fabula* has two related meanings: first, it can mean simply talk, conversation or discourse, and, second, it can mean a story, tale, myth, legend or fable. It shares this same double meaning with the word *mythos*, which is the Ancient Greek counterpart to the Latin *fabula.* The term fabul*ation*, however, draws primary attention not to the product but to the *process* the result of which is a fable or a myth or a legend.

In Bergson's work this connection or perhaps identity between *fabula* and *mythos* is retained. Hence Bergson follows the Psychology convention of his day and postulates a 'faculty' as a way of gathering together what is distinctive about the experiences and expressions that are found in the world's religions, myths and literary works. But – at least in my English translation – this same faculty is also translated as the 'myth making faculty'. 'How is it', he asks, 'that psychologists have not been struck by the mysterious element in a faculty such as this?' (Bergson, 1932: 196).

Bergson adopts the now old-fashioned Psychological notion of 'faculties', but he stretches it somewhat. He is trying to identify and categorise a distinctive type of *process* which gives rise to, or is associated with, a distinctive psychological product. Kant, for example, had divided psychological processes into the three broad classes of cognition (thinking), affection (feeling) and conation (willing) and further into a number of 'faculties' such as imagination, memory, perception, judgement, reason and understanding.

As Bergson points out, the obvious way of classifying the phenomena of fabulation would be to include them in a faculty of imagination. Imagination is a process which results in concrete representations, but these can be distinguished from the products of memory processes, or from the representations that result from processes of perception, or from the logical operations of the faculty of reason. We can imagine a flying horse, for example, even if we have no memories of one, and have never seen one (see Zittoun and Gillespie, 2016). The representations of the faculty of perception deal with present objects, those of memory deal with things that are now past representations, whilst the images created through imagination are neither direct perceptions nor depictions of the past.

Bergson, however, departs from contemporary Psychology and suggests that imagination is too broad a category for the phenomena that interest him, imagination being defined only negatively with respect to memory and perception, and lacking a clear positive function. Hence his myth making faculty of fabulation deals with a distinctive set of 'phantasmic' representations that he also calls 'virtual instincts' (119), 'vital impulses' (138) and 'intermediate images' (215).

They are not instincts because, unlike the insect societies of ants and bees, in human societies intelligent thought has pushed instinct back to its fringes. But, equally, they are not intelligent thought, since they take the form of images and are tied to a vital need such that they can even *demand our compliance.* At times Bergson describes them as 'ideo-motory' in the sense that they automatically provoke actions, but at other times – as befits their intermediary status between reason and instinct – he characterizes fabulations as 'voluntary hallucinations' (195).

It is this 'intermediate' status that gives fabulation the power (and hence the evolutionary function) to step in and solve the uniquely human problems of meaning, motivation and solidarity that follow from our celebrated cognitive powers of reasoning. Reason, after all, can only reason on the basis of the percepts it takes to be real: fabulation makes us capable of substituting for our perceptions a 'counterfeit reality' (p. 211), and – as Anatole shows us in his response to Leo – there is nothing to prevent reason from continuing to weave its intricate chains of logic around these fabulations. The passage below is the most clear point at which Bergson (1932/1986, p. 195) differentiates fabulation from imagination:

> We call imaginative any concrete representation which is neither perception nor memory. Since such representations depict neither a present object nor a past thing, they are all considered in the same light by common sense and given the same name in ordinary speech. But the psychologist must not for that reason group them in the same category, or connect them with the same function. Let us then leave aside imagination, which is but a word, and consider a very clearly defined faculty of the mind, that of creating personalities whose stories we relate to ourselves.

Bergson gives numerous examples of fabulation, and they all go back to the fundamental type of experience whose features I have distinguished above, although each tends to emphasize certain features at the expense of others. The most memorable is the case of the lady and the hotel lift. Wishing to descend from the top floor, the lady observed the protective gate of the elevator to be open and hurried to enter. But a fault had occurred, and the lift was still far below in the gaping shaft. As she stepped towards the void:

> … she felt herself flung backwards, the man entrusted with the working of the lift had just appeared and was pushing her back onto the landing. At this point she emerged from her fit of abstraction. She was amazed to see that neither man nor lift was there… She had been about to fling herself into the gaping void: a miraculous hallucination had saved her life.

The fabulated personality of the lift attendant steps in to save the lady just when her life is in peril. Here we see a clear illustration of our first three features: a) the shock of a liminal crisis (an imminent threat to the lady's life), b) the arising of a vision / image (the lift attendant, the feeling of being pushed) and c) the double attribution of a powerful agency addressing a powerless subject (the lift attendant as an agent who miraculously saves the lady). This last feature, with its two apects, is the one described by Bergson in the quotation above as 'creating personalities whose stories we *relate to ourselves*'.

Since the lady herself became quickly aware that there was no lift attendant then we can assume that she faced a dilemma. Either she must seriously entertain the idea of phantoms or guardian angels, or she must think more naturalistically and conclude that she had somehow saved herself. This dilemma is a question of how far the initial experience of fabulation is embellished and otherwise taken further by means of a combination of reason and imagination, and perhaps the intervention of further fabulations. It implies a tentative distinction between an 'acute' event which precipitates the fabulation of images and the subsequent 'chronic' narrative elaboration of this material.

Returning to Anatole, for example, the viewer was not privy to an acute event, but we are shown how he embellishes and elaborates upon the agency he has attributed to Elstor. Hence we can assume that he took the first direction of taking the fabulations for empirical reality. When confronted with new evidence about Elstor's real motives, Anatole stuck to his

narrative path by construing this evidence as itself an expression of this agency in the form of a test of Anatole's personal faith (again: 'personalities whose stories we relate to ourselves'). In the case of the lady in the lift, by contrast, we are privy to the acute event but not to any subsequent elaborations.

Now, although Bergson himself does not take the example in this direction, we can speculate about what might happen if the lady takes the other path and opts to doubt her fabulated experience of agency and to reflect upon it naturalistically. Following this train she would surely conclude – since she was not conscious of 'her' actions – that the 'she' that had sprung into action and saved herself cannot be completely identified with her more familiar 'reasoning personality'.

Like Bergson (or Freud), she might take this even further and attribute agency to this unconscious or 'somnambulistic self' and construe it as underlying her more familiar consciously reasoning personality. Joining her in this thought, let us, for convenience, call this 'somnambulistic self' *agent 1* and the 'reasoning personality' *agent 2*. It is not just that this instinctive 'she' or 'it' (*agent 1*) had thrown it's body backwards without the conscious awareness of her reasoning personality (*agent 2*), but more: in a flash *agent 1* had induced for the benefit of *agent 2* a set of perceptions seemingly well-crafted to explain and justify her sudden backwards retreat.

Agent 1, in other words, had created for *agent 2* a *third agent* in the form of the lift attendant (*agent 3*), who at first seemed potently real, but whose subsequent evaporation revealed both its illusory nature and therefore – in its place as it were – the likely (inferred) existence of *agent 1*. All of this, in turn, implies that the agency of *agent 2* is itself question-worthy since it found itself after all not to be making the decisions it had previously assumed. After all, it seems it was *agent 1*, and not *agent* 2 who created the *third agent* and who moved the body that *agent 2* had previously considered her 'own'. But once safely back on the firm ground of the corridor, the reasoning personality of *agent 2* was able to re-assert itself and to draw the conclusion that those perceptual impressions had been serendipitous illusions of her own creation. She became aware, in short, that she had fabulated.

Anatole, by contrast, in following the other path under different circumstances, does not give up on the *third agency* he attributes to Elstor but strengthens his commitment to it. But, even though he is a fictional character, we can still discern the traces of a fabulation which has projected potent agency onto the person of Elstor (*agent 3*) whilst splitting Anatole into a conventional reasoning agent (*agent 2*) and a faithful soul (*agent 1*). Anatole thus takes the fabulation further and his story unfolds the additional features of a new self-confident hope in a people to come and the discursive elaboration of a form of belief typical of Bergson's 'static' religion (features d, e & f above).

Bergson on William James

To further explore the core issue of the attribution of an emergent agency or 'efficient presence' that delivers novel possibilities for the self, Bergson spends a number of pages discussing 'the observations made on himself by a master of psychological science' (p.153). William James had been present during the San Francisco earthquake of April 1906. This was a particularly destructive earthquake, but James describes welcoming it as he lay in bed at 5.00 am. He explains that this was because on departing Harvard for Stanford, a good friend had remarked, half joking, that earthquakes were something of a Californian convention and that 'I hope they'll give you a touch of earthquake while you're there'.

Doubtless because of this comment, when it happened, far from being terrified, James thought to himself 'By Jove… here's B.'s old earthquake after all!... and a jolly good one it is, too!' He was also able to lucidly observe his own reaction. Although the 48 seconds of the actual experience were dominated by sensation and emotion which left very little room for thought and none for reflexion, 'as soon as I could think, I discerned retrospectively certain peculiar ways in which my consciousness had taken in the phenomenon' (cited in Bergson, 1932/1986, p.154).

Most notably, James observed an irresistible tendency to *personify* this natural phenomenon as the earthquake of his friend come as if direct to him with an 'animus and intent… never more present in human action, nor did any human activity ever more definitely point back to a living agent as its source and origin'. Although James' experience was not so intense as to result in the fabulation of actual images, here again we find the shock of a liminal event (the earthquake) followed by the double attribution of a powerful agency (the 'personification' of the earthquake as a *third agent*) as if addressing its thunderous voice to a humbled subject. To quote James (p.155): 'It came, moreover, directly to *me*. It stole in behind my back, and once inside the room had me all to itself'.

Ever the researcher, James interviewed others and always found this same feature whereby the earthquake acquired agency, seeming to them 'vicious', 'bent on destruction' and so on, and always with this sense of the earthquake's personal relevance to its 'victim'. One woman had even calmly taken it as the beginning of God's final judgement. Hence in anticipation of Heider's attribution theory (see below), James observed that whilst for science:

> … when the tensions in the earth's crusts reach the breaking-point and strata fall into an altered equilibrium, earthquake is simply the *name* of all the cracks and shakings and disturbances that happen. They *are* the earthquake. But for *me* the earthquake was the *cause* of the disturbances, and the perception of it as a living agent was irresistible. It had an overpowering dramatic convincingness. (James, quoted in Bergson, 1932/1986, p.155).

The drama, I repeat, is not just about the newly experienced potent agency, but also its personalized relation to the one *going through* the experience. To this Bergson adds examples from his own experience. One day out riding, his horse took fright upon encountering the unfamiliar spectacle of a cyclist riding a velocipede. This was the first time he had needed to control a bolting horse and his immediate impression was that the Event in its entirety had somehow been sent personally to him, as if mischievously watching how he would cope with it. This, Bergson relates, was fortunate, since his one idea was to 'show it what I could do', hence he felt no fear and was able to contain his horse. But what was this 'it' that appeared to have chosen *him* so personally:

> It was not the horse. It was no complete being, whatever it was, good or evil genius. It was the occurrence itself, an individual with no body of its own, for it was nothing but a combination of circumstances, but it had a soul, a very elementary one, hardly distinguishable from the intention apparently manifested by circumstances. It followed me in my wild gallop, mischievously watching to see how I should manage (Bergson, 1932/1986, p. 158).

In another example, Bergson describes how as a boy in 1871, immediately after the end of the Franco-Prussian war he, like many others, had considered another war to be immanent. He describes how this horrible impression remained abstract to him right up until August 4 1914 when he read the newspaper headline that Germany had declared war on France: 'I suddenly felt an invisible *presence* which all the past had prepared and foretold'. Although not a complete personality, it was as if this shadowy agent, after biding its time, had now unceremoniously taken its seat 'like one of the family' (p. 159), as if 43 years of vague foreboding had now finally made its entry and smoothly materialized itself on the stage of his real life.

Fabulation and liminal experience

In each of these examples, in the wake of an unusual and shocking liminal experience, the multiplicity of disturbances which confront us appear to combine and converge into the form of an Event[3] characterized – precisely because of their unfamiliar and disturbing nature – by the familiar feature of having human qualities of agency. What might otherwise remain a senseless welter of causality coheres into a singular Event construed as a kind of personality or partial personality. But at the same time these *third agents* are not 'familiar' personalities, since they concern aspects of the world that under more normal circumstances we might consider purely material, causal or mechanical.

This tendency to attribute agency is doubtless a function of what I am emphasizing as the 'liminal' nature of the experiences in question. In other words, in all of these examples an event *does* occur that powerfully affects the person having the experience. From the perspective of those going through them, these events are not just potent but unusual and – excepting important aspects of Bergson's experience of the declaration of war – unprecedented: Bergson's first time on a bolting horse; James's first experience of an earthquake; Anatole's first experiences of violence and oppression quickly following his first experience of consciousness.

In this way, extraordinary phenomena that might ordinarily be taken as natural acquire a *human significance* in that they are taken as being part of a dance of mutual actions with understandable – and perhaps controllable[4] – intentions. Something proper to human interaction leaks or even 'overflows into the area reserved to mechanical action' (Bergson, 1932/1986, p.163), and – as it flows – 'nature becomes impregnated with humanity' (p.164).

Equipped with agency through this sense-making process, the fabulations – both despite and because of the unfamiliar circumstances under which they arrive – provide a familiarity that lends a highly personal meaning to events which might otherwise be brutally and indeed terrifyingly senseless. They provide a reassuring sense of meaning and the hint of a possibility of control (see footnote 4). But more, the conversion of a meaningless disaster into the drama of tragedy can not only provide solace but – as Bergson found on his galloping horse – can provide the individual and collective confidence needed to practically manage and survive a crisis, and indeed the heart needed to imagine a people to come.

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[3] I follow Bergson in capitalizing the word 'Event' (e.g., p.157).

[4] It is easy to see how certain religious elaborations of such fabulations can work to extend the possibilities of *influencing the third agent* (*agent 3*), for example by means of prayer or sacrifice (see Bergson's Chapter 2 on static religion).

Fabulation and modern psychology

Bergson's concept of fabulation resonates with certain ideas and findings in modern day Psychology, but in other respects it offers advances that have yet to be fully realized and – equally important – it points to some profound limitations with current ways of thinking amongst psychologists. This section will very briefly touch upon a selection of the more obvious examples.

Starting with the positive resonance, Fritz Heider's (e.g., 1958) groundbreaking work on attribution theory has given rise to one of the most productive theoretical traditions in social psychology. Unfortunately Heider's key insight was somewhat lost following the modifications introduced by Jones and Davis (1965). Heider's insight was based on the distinction between personal and impersonal / naturalistic attributions that we saw anticipated in James' analysis of his response to the earthquake and that was developed by Bergson's idea of a 'leakage' between a domain proper to 'human interaction' and a domain of 'mechanical action'. This distinction between 'two irreducible points of view' for the study of nature and the study of persons had been most clearly developed by Dilthey (2010, p.164) who used it to systematically differentiate the subject matter of human studies like History, Law and Psychology from the approach of the natural sciences.

Developing this distinction, Heider was gripped by the problem of how the various observable aspects of an event might be explained either in terms of mechanical causation or as something caused by the actions of a 'person'. But notably, for Heider, what makes a person a person is an *observer's* attribution of a specific form of causality he called 'primary' causality. Consider an event: by surprise, I am hit by a large stick. Heider asks us to consider the differences at play within two very different possible explanations: a) the stick fell on me from a rotten branch, b) it was hurled by a possible enemy.

If a), then I attribute the event to a series of passive mechanical movements: the wind blew, the rotten branch fell under the force of gravity, I happened to be under it, etc. In this 'secondary causality' behind one cause there is always another, and another, in an infinite naturalistic chain. In the case of b) it occurs to me that the stick may have been thrown deliberately by someone who wants to cause me pain. I assume the existence of what Heider calls a 'person', i.e., an 'anime' with feeling, preferences and intentions. With b) we are dealing with 'primary causality' because the chain of causality starts, as it were, with the person we take to be the source or origin of the act.

With the secondary causality of a), assuming knowledge of physical laws, we need only look at the mechanical surface of events, and there is no 'meaning' to what happened beyond that surface. So, even though it hurts, I rub my bruise and continue my walk. With b), by contrast, we can only understand why we were struck by the stick if we can grasp the reasons or motives of the person who aimed it at us. The surface events, in other words, can only be understood as expressions of something beyond the surface (by 'surface' here, Heider means something *perceptible*: the movement of an arm, for instance). That 'something' is what Heider calls a 'person'. In such 'social perception':

> a person reacts to what he thinks the other person is perceiving, feeling and thinking, in addition to what the other person may be doing (Heider, 1958: 1).

Note that this concept of person always implies at least two persons: the first reacts to what they think the second is feeling / thinking. Reciprocally, if I am a person, then my response will be interpreted as an expression of my feelings about this event and of my intentions towards the other person. Furthermore, in forming my response I understand in advance that my interlocutor, being also a person, will receive what I do as the act of a person. Hence in the naturalistic perception of secondary causes, all is surface, whilst in social perception there is always a 'depth' which demands some sort of insight or 'understanding' of the meaning at play.

Heider's work, particularly when understood within Dilthey's framework, makes it more clear how what I earlier called the 'dance' of mutually understandable actions and intentions at play in fabulation relates to this basic form of 'social perception'. If fabulation fundamentally involves 'personalities whose stories we relate to ourselves' (Bergson, 1932/1986, p. 195) then this is an expression of a certain dialogicality by virtue of which the very existence of a 'person' presupposes another person capable of making comparable attributions of meaning.

Viewed from the perspective of Heider's attribution theory, then, the cases of fabulation we are dealing with are situations in which perceptible elements that normally mediate attributions of non-personal, mechanical causality come to be treated as a medium for the perception of unusual kinds of persons (i.e., third agents). But why should there be such 'leakage' of forms of social perception that are typical of human interaction into domains usually taken not to require them because they are governed by secondary causality?

I have suggested why it is that spontaneous liminal experiences – such as those implied in Bergson's examples – are particularly conducive to these attributional overflows associated with fabulation. Such Events are pregnant with the possibility of attracting attributions of personhood by virtue of the power with which they affect those who experience them, a power which, as we have seen, can challenge the very sense of personhood. This power, if we except the story of the lady of the lift, can operate quickly and unconsciously during the acute Event, but once she had 'emerged from her fit of abstraction' (Bergson, 1932/1986, p.120) she could ask herself: does the Event I am treating as a person *actually* have the intentions and desires I had assumed? This kind of question is, unsurprisingly, a core theme in the plot of *Humans* which deals with how human beings make sense of the 'actions' of anthropomorphic robots that have been carefully designed to give the impression of having personhood.

But if we have learned anything we should be wary of too quickly assuming that we know the exact boundary line between what is a 'person' and what is not: between the domain where attributions of social perception are warranted and that where mechanical causation should hold sway. Above all, it is the development of natural science that has, as it were, expanded the territory of mechanical causation. But precisely here we encounter some more troublesome aspects of modern Psychology that are associated with a symmetrical problem: just as it is possible to personalize nature, so too can persons be naturalized.

Modern Psychology has largely ignored Dilthey's wise observation of 'two irreducible points of view' and has often pursued a one-dimensional calling. Psychology is envisaged as a purely natural science with a subject matter equivalent to that of physics or geology. Many evolutionary psychologists and neuropsychologists, for example have specialized in accounting for the 'higher' functions of personhood in terms of naturalistic mechanisms,

and consciousness itself is regularly dismissed as a mere epiphenomenon of evolved neurology.

Furthermore, the idea that the human being has what can crudely be characterized as a dual structure is now commonplace. Zajonc's (1980) famous argument for the primacy of affect with respect to cognition, for example, is grounded in a 'dual process' theory which includes a fast, automatic, non-conscious path of experience alongside a slower, more contingent route characterized by self-consciousness and accessible to reason. The same duality is recognized in LeDoux's (1995) neuroscientific account of fear and other emotions and in Kahneman's (2011) economic psychology, and it has long been generalized across many areas within social psychology and in social psychology (Strack and Deutsch, 2015).

It is therefore relatively easy for present-day materialistic psychologists to explain how a 'person' might experience a nature divided into a normal conscious subjectivity (*agent* 2) interruptible under conditions of crisis by a less familiar form of agency (*agent 1*). But the pervasive tendency is to dismiss the features associated with *all* 'persons' as illusions or epiphenomena of purely naturalistic mechanisms. In the case of the lady in the lift, for example, we saw how the reality even of the assumed 'reasoning personality' is called into question as soon as the nature of the fabulation has been understood. We can begin to doubt whether we ever really were a 'person' with 'agency' in the first place, and many a neuroscientist and social psychologist – attuned to the causal chains of pure materiality – will help to encourage that doubt.

This is not a question of impregnating nature with human significance, but of a flood of naturalistic explanation which washes away any traces of human significance. It is as if Psychology has come to be fixated within an image of thought that is capable only of construing fabulation negatively, as a – or *the* – danger. Fabulation shows up only as a lack of developmental maturity an underlying pathology or the impact of an unbearable stressor which leads us to 'confabulate' (Carruthers, 2018). Hence for Piaget [1972, p.202] 'fabulation' concerns a phase of development during which children struggle to distinguish 'between fabulation and truth'. It is as if the initial calling of the discipline were primarily to prevent fabulation: to stop the holes in a leaky boat.

Conclusion

Starting with an example from the drama series *Humans*, I have explored in detail Henri Bergson's psychological concept of fabulation and delineated its main features. I have stressed in particular the feature of a double attribution of a powerful agency addressing a powerless subject and have emphasized how this is occasioned by a liminal event. I have shown how this relates to Heider's attribution theory: person attributions typical of social perception come – under liminal conditions – to be made in circumstances that would ordinarily be associated with naturalistic attributions of secondary causality.

I went on to show how the concept of fabulation comes within Psychology to be implicated in the deconstruction of the agency of Heider's 'person': fabulation comes to be treated purely negatively and all forms of personhood are treated as, in principle, explainable naturalistically. But fabulation, taken to this extreme, becomes paradoxical. If all attributions of personhood can be deconstructed naturalistically as the products of fabulation, then who or what is doing the fabulation? Fabulation, after all, is this

construction of an 'agent' by and for… an 'agent'. Fabulation itself is thus revealed as a fabulation.

But this is no mere word-play or logical sleight of hand. It points to the extent to which Psychology has unwittingly participated in what Gilles Deleuze (1968/1994, p.xiv) calls an 'image of thought' that had been long developed in Western philosophy (see also Nichterlein and Morss, 2017). This image of thought 'determines our goals and our methods when we try to think'. It takes its cue from the common-sense recognition of objects in perception, from their representation as knowns in processes of memory, cognition and imagination, and from the idea that error is the primary misadventure of good sense and reason. From this perspective, the risky truth of fabulation is construed primarily as false recognition and representation distorted by error. Our imagination fuelled by our memories, for example, might distort our perception of a moonlit tree, and lead us to misrecognise it as a looming monster. Within disciplined common-sense, by contrast, the eye, the ear, the nose and the hand would sense together the self-same tree, and this recognised product common to the senses would also agree with the tree of other faculties – the imagined tree, the remembered tree, the tree that is the subject of our understanding. Furthermore, all of us with common sense would discuss the self-same tree.

When grasped according to this image of thought, fabulation can only be construed as the effect – external to true thought – of false and faulty recognition. Fabulation is captured, distorted and stripped of any possible relation to truth. This is particularly disturbing when one adopts, as I have done, a lens of liminality which puts emphasis, not on already existing facts, but on situations of personal and social *becoming* and on the techniques for *devising* liminal experience that have been developed through history. Fabulation has another side to it, a side intimately involved with becomings of various kinds, and which we neglect to our peril. These becomings are perhaps not well captured by a fixed distinction between 'persons' and 'mechanical causality'. 'Personhood', as Heider and Dilthey were both aware, is not a given, but a never-ending project that is the site of manifold problems. Our fables and myths, our paintings and our literature, at their greatest, do not *tell us* who or what we are but pose questions to us, the consideration of which enhances our sense of what the self, the other and the collective might be.

If we take fabulation purely as a leakage of rationality into error and make it our mission to stop those leaks, we risk nothing less than a drying up of the source of our creative potential. Creative thought is actually never about simply recognising an already existing reality, but indeed disrupts established common-sensical conventions common to the senses. Fabulation is not a fiction contrasted with reality, but a creative experimentation with what reality can become during those situations of passage in which we are momentarily reborn. We need to change our relationship to the holes that puncture our rationality, and recognise that it is only thanks to those holes and tears and ruptures that we can breath the fresh air of becoming other. But any dynamic and open relation to the future is nothing unless integrated coherently with the past, and it is precisely this integration that is challenged under conditions of escalating societal acceleration. I leave the last word to an artist who understood the value of a fabulation which can punch holes in the media which once offered protection, but now only suffocate:

> In his terror of chaos, he [man] begins by putting up an umbrella between himself and the everlasting chaos. Then he paints the underside of his umbrella like a firmament. Then he parades around, lives, and dies under his umbrella. Bequeathed to his descendants, the umbrella becomes a dome, a vault, and men at last begin to feel that something is wrong (D.H. Lawrence, 1921, p.i).

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About the author

Paul Stenner has been Professor of Social Psychology at the Open University since 2011. Previously Professor of Psychosocial Studies at the University of Brighton, he has held Lectureships at University College London, University of Bath, and the University of East London. He is Fellow of the UK Academy of Social Sciences and was President of the International Society for Theoretical Psychology (ISTP) until 2019. He adopts a transdisciplinary theoretical approach informed by process philosophy and is known internationally for his expertise in Q methodology and other qualitative methods for accessing the subjective dimension of social issues. He researches a range of topics including contested health issues, political subjectivity, affectivity / emotions, and the history and philosophy of psychology. His research on active ageing, chronic lower back pain, adult ADHD and other 'liminal hotspots' has been supported by funding from the ESRC, AHRC, ESF, Humboldt Stiftung, Leverhulme Trust and British Academy. His last four books are *Orpheus' Glance. Selected papers on process psychology: The Fontarèches meetings, 2002–2017* (with Michel Weber, Les Editions Chromatika, 2018), *Liminality and Experience: A transdisciplinary approach to the psychosocial* (Palgrave, 2017) and *Doing Q Methodological Research: Theory, method and interpretation* (with Simon Watts, London: Sage, 2012).

Paul Stenner is Professor of Social Psychology at the School of Psychology and Counselling, The Open University, UK**.**

Contact: paul.stenner@open.ac.uk

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4505-6422