Origins of the Sacred: A Conversation between Eric Gans and Mircea Eliade

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Introduction

Where Eric Gans's hypothesis of the origin of the human reconstructs a scenic event oriented around an aborted gesture of appropriation, Mircea Eliade's work can be seen as endorsing the applicability—even universality—of certain elements of Gans's hypothesis through the comparative study of archaic, classical, and world religions. Through a close analysis of *Signs of Paradox* by generative anthropologist Eric Gans and *Rights and Symbols of Initiation*, *Images and Symbols* and *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* by religious scholar Mircea Eliade, I will contrast and compare the two thinkers by focusing on Gans's conceptualisation of the "sacred centre" and "paradox," and Eliade's study of the plethora of cultures found throughout the world, whose participants attempt to access, I argue, a kind of Gansian sacred centre.

At first glance, we see two entirely separate modes of theoretical discourse. On the one hand we have a historian of primitive, classical, and world mythico-rituals of religion, and on the other, an interdisciplinary intellectual who proposes a minimalist approach to the origin of humanity and consciousness. Despite the apparent differences, a recurring theme found throughout the works of both thinkers is the paradoxical necessity of the sacred centre and the emergence of the profane periphery. *Why* is it necessary? And in what *sense*? By utilising Gans's "originary scene" as the central theme of this article, I will compare the most general and explicit similarities and differences found in the works of Eliade and Gans: the sacred centre, the opposition of the sacred and profane, the necessary paradox of the sign, and the perpetuation of religious ritual re-enacting the sacred event of the emergence of language and consciousness. These themes are explicitly

tied to the notion of the sacred. One theorist proposes a hypothesis, while the other sets up a comparative reflection on the supposed universal religious revelations that lead Eliade to give early humanity the title *homo religiosus.* I contend that Eliade's way of viewing the world is a form of originary analysis.

First, an in-depth analysis of Gans's hypothesis of the originary event, in which he seeks to offer an explanation of the origin of the human. I will explain in the simplest theoretical terms the main ideas found in the originary hypothesis. From here, I will move on to consider the role "paradox" plays in Gans's hypothesis when dealing with the nature of language. Furthermore, through a close reading of Gans's notions of the sacred centre and the profane periphery, I will demonstrate how the paradoxical nature of the sacred works to feed into the emerging field of generative anthropology (GA). Moving on, I will closely analyse three carefully selected texts by Eliade dealing with the sign, the image, myth, and the description and function of ritual: *Rights and Symbols of Initiation*, *Images and Symbols,* and *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. From the analysis of these three texts, I will outline the main tenets of Eliade's work: the interpretation of the function of "myth," "ritual," and the "sacred/profane" opposition. Lastly, after dealing with these two thinkers separately, I will attempt to synthesise where possible the main contributions of both Gans and Eliade. Gans tells us that "the purpose of originary thinking is not to supplant other modes of thought, but to provide a common point of departure that persists as a link between them."[(1)] Like Gans, then, I will accommodate Mircea Eliade's ideas as accompanying Gans's formulations, and also, point toward Gans's notion that "all thinking is originary analysis."[(2)]

Part One: Eric Gans

The Originary Hypothesis

Perhaps language is the most definitive yet elusive human characteristic of all, setting us apart from all our known biological counterparts. We can talk and think about it, yet, we can rarely rise above it, or understand it from an external, transcendent reference point. So, what is language? Where did it come from? Does it have a primary function or singular purpose? Was the rise of language-based consciousness an instantaneous moment of noetic-linguistic, sign emitting lightning? Did language evolve in the gradualist, Darwinian bio-evolutionary sense proposed by Stephen Pinker in *The Language Instinct*? Perhaps we might endorse Noam Chomsky's idea of the genetic blueprint of Universal Grammar (UG), already hardwired into the brain at birth. Should we even bother to confront such an elusive intellectual riddle? Are we just clever animals—as many of us believe—who have invented knowledge, and after our star grows cold we will have to die? Nietzsche's implications suggest that knowledge is even more limited than Kant expected, and

reflections on origins are seemingly valueless.

Stemming from the French literary and cultural critic, René Girard, whose work on mimetic desire and the "scapegoat mechanism" were formative to his thinking, Eric Gans, Emeritus Distinguished Professor of French and Francophone Studies at UCLA, has pursued a line of non-metaphysical philosophical thought he calls "generative anthropology." Flying against the predilections of academe—at least in the humanities—Gans has proposed a "minimal hypothesis" that attempts to answer fundamental questions about human consciousness and language by placing the ostensive sign at the very centre of human origins, of the origin of the human *as* (a) human. "Generative anthropology" essentially attempts to figure the human in the most elementary terms possible.

For Gans, the origin of language begins with a scene—a desired object, a scenic centre. We might say that the original scenic centre begins with the fresh meat of a dead, non-human animal. As a preliminary example—although it matters little to speculate on the exact details of what the first scene was, as long as it was a *scene*—several members of a hominid group are standing around the animal carcass, where all members of the group share the same triangulated mimetic desire for food. Since not all of the members of the group can acquire the same animal at the same time all at once, an outbreak of violence would inevitably occur. At this instant begins what Gans calls the "aborted gesture of appropriation." One member of the group emits a sign or signal that re-presents the central object of desire through a symbol that at once points to the scenic event and at the same time defers mimetic desire for the object. That is, then, an aborted gesture of appropriation that functions to defer violence, and forms its own referent. The first sign is an imitation of an object but paradoxically becomes its own object in the instance of its emergence. This, Gans claims, is the event of the emergence of human consciousness. Once mimetic desire has reached a critical mass of the first symbolic representation, Gans claims, no "alpha" animal can possibly attain the hierarchical model of violent, physical control or dominate the group's desire for the central object. The alpha male can no longer dictate who receives the first form of subsistence simply because: this first sign, or gesture of appropriation, does not, and cannot intend directly its referent. Rather, for Gans, the sign is an imitation and symbolic re-presentation of the central object of desire. It is intangible, and so becomes a paradoxical, sacred mystery. From "horizontal" mimetic violence comes the "verticality" of the sign. Gans writes:

> The gesture of appropriation is an act that directly intends a worldly result; its temporality is that of the practical world. In contrast, the sign does not intend its referent directly, but through mimesis of its formal

closure. The sign is an object, a product, a whole imitating another whole. The sign points to its referent, but in order to do so, it must be cut off from the possibility of attaining it, must mimic the object's closure in its own. What is new about the human sign as opposed to the most complex animal signals is that it is the product of a formal consciousness. The sign is a form in that it turns back on itself in order not to appear to be pursued as a gesture of appropriation.(3)

Indeed, through the aborted gesture of appropriation, violence becomes temporarily deferred, as long as the sign refers to its sacred referent. The sole cause and paradoxical function of the original gesture/sign is to defer violence through ever-new, reciprocal emissions of itself. And, rightly so, Gans exclaims: "The gesture is aborted as appropriation but pursued as representation."(4) What we have here is a sign that becomes an object on its own, existing of itself while pointing to its referent at the centre. Our proto-human ancestors, through the emission of a sign, have managed to temporarily defer violence, and in the act separated themselves from exclusive dependence on biological ancestrality. The following points, I argue, are the most basic elements that constitute the originary hypothesis: (1) There was an original event of some sort, comprising more than one proto-human; (2) This original event was catalysed, or triggered by a mimetic crisis at a critical moment/instant; (3) The outbreak of violence was *deferred* through an aborted gesture of appropriation; (4) The first sign and the signs that followed were rapidly disseminated among the first language users.

Because we are so unused to origin models, it becomes extremely difficult to imagine this first gesture, sign, signal, or grunt—just as confounding as the contemplation of the possibility of the moment of cosmic creation. Yet, the hypothetical postulates proposed by Gans are logical and convincing—they cannot be ignored. Gans talks of the first truly human thought: "The thought that gives rise to language is the thought-not-to-appropriate the object."(5) The sign is paradoxically removed from the object of desire while at the same time attempting to give the object life by emitting the first anthropocentric metaphor, and, in so doing, creating an intangible sacred centre where "the object has now become the centre of a *scene*."(6) This is why Gans designates the first sign to be the sign of God. The first gesture is in and of itself unreachable; it points to an object of desire as a sacred centre and yet has no physical properties of its own; its function is to defer violence (ethics); it is a *thought*. The proto-humans have now successfully become separated from their primate cousins by diverting mimetic action into mimetic thought. Gans writes: "What is done in this circumstance is no longer to behave, but to produce a sign."(7) This is a fundamental idea in generative anthropology. We diverge from evolutionary patterns of behaviour and *sign* our way

into deferred meaning. Again, Gans attests: "unlike even the most stylised of animal behaviours, the sign is intended to make present a referent other than itself."(8) As far as we know, what lies specifically in the human arena, inaccessible to non-human animals, is the *re*-presentation of an object, perhaps failing to reflect the platonic perfection of the "object," the *Idea*, but to defer its true essence. Gans tells us that: "the freedom of signing as an act of representation distinguishes it from imitation as a new, human variety of mimesis. To imitate is not to represent."(9) And so, the act of representation transcends mere animal imitation through the emission of a sign whose paradoxical function is both to defer potential communal violence caused by the mimetic desire of the object, and at the same time, to immediately consecrate the object as a "sacred centre" that is impossible to grasp except through the material intangibility of the first sign. As Gans argues, this is the birth of God—the inaccessible sign.

Signs of Paradox

Moving on from the basic apparatus of Gans's originary hypothesis, it is important to briefly consider the way Gans looks to paradox when deciphering the birth of language, consciousness, and the first (cogitative) humans. Gans considers the notion of paradox to be complicit, in fact, absolutely necessary, for language to "work." In fact, language cannot purposefully function without its structural foundations based upon paradox. For instance, Gans tells us: "Paradox is a structure of language; it cannot be conceived without the sign. But neither can the sign be conceived without paradox . . . The sign that is in the world represents the world it is in; the sign that stands above the world remains within the world of the sign."(10) For Gans, paradox precedes language itself by maintaining itself in a perpetually deferred form. One might consider the following statement as Gans's first definition of paradox in the terms of the hypothesis:

> Paradox itself is paradoxical; that is what makes it paradox. It cannot be reduced to lowest terms, only deferred. But neither is it ever present before our eyes; it is always in a state of deferral.(11)

If language is the vehicle that spins on endlessly as deferral, then paradox is the engine that allows it to do so. For Gans, paradox is "older than language itself."(12) Without paradox, Gans argues, the "openness" of language would not be possible. Instead of an enclosed system of finite symbols, paradox allows language to stem out into an infinite combination and recombination of symbols of perpetual deferral. Gans confirms this by stating: "The paradoxical foundation of our systems of representation is a sign not of failure but of openness."(13) The linguistic efficacy of

mimetic paradox is its ability to perpetually defer, and in the process, recreate the original sign. For Gans, paradox is the machinery that has churned out every facet of human thought since the creation of language. He indicates that: "Because mimetic paradox presides at the creation of the *vertical* human sign from the *horizontal* continuum of worldly experience, it stands at the centre of a constellation of categories—irony, comedy, tragedy, evil, and so on—that are conceivable only in a universe of speakers of (human) language."(14) It appears that these categories do not exist outside the realm of human language. Paradox, through its paradoxical nature, has generated the entire gambit of human endeavours and conceptions.

For the purpose of this article, it is important to have a brief understanding of Gans's notion of paradox—although we will return to this issue again, later. For Mircea Eliade offers a galaxy of examples pertaining to the central importance paradox holds within the cosmic myths and religious rituals found across world history from a large selection of disparate cultural groups. According to Gans, all machinations of revelation and religious crisis emanate from the paradoxical nature of the sign. In fact, according to Gans, *all* truth is in nature paradoxical.

The Sacred and the Periphery

The fact that the sacred is scenic has been observed by many different writers.

The sociologist Émile Durkheim is considered among the first to seriously recognise the distinction and philosophical implications of the dichotomy between the sacred and profane. Later, thinkers such as Rudolf Otto, and into the twentieth century, René Girard and Mircea Eliade began a series of investigations on mythological development between the sacred and the profane. However, the use to which Eric Gans puts the distinction is of note and requires citing for the purpose of distinguishing between Eliade's and his own musings.

To begin, how does one conceptualise the phenomena of the sacred? One might argue that the only foreseeable way is to posit that the sacred might exist in the total absence of the profane. Nevertheless, to understand the basic relationship between the sacred centre/profane periphery requires a geometric exercise. Consider a circle. The closer we get to the centre of this circle, the closer to the sacred we seem to get. Naturally, the further out we travel toward its never-ending circumference—its periphery—the less sacred and more profane we become. Take for example the Pascalian idea: "an infinite sphere, the centre of which is everywhere, the circumference nowhere."(15) Within this infinite sphere, for Gans at least, the sacred and the profane simply represent *to be* and *to do*. This definition is *not* one that mirrors pre-modern, monotheistic distinctions of the sacred. Instead, Gans contends that: "*To be* is to be in the centre, at the locus of significance; *to do*

is to act on the periphery."(16) One could deduce that the sacred for Gans, then, is the luminous central object that is pointed to through the emission of the intangible sign. At the origin of the re-presentation of a central object, the originary scene, we have the emergence of a sacred centre, and, consequently, a periphery.

According to Gans, since the emergence of the centre, there has always existed an intractable tension between centre and periphery. Accordingly, Gans sets as the goal of thinking *itself* to reduce the tension between the sacred centre and profane periphery. He posits that "the aim of thinking is not to reproduce the originary unity that obtained during the emission of the sign, but rather to reconstruct it in such a way as to reduce the tension between periphery and centre, subject and object. Thinking deconstructs the figures by means of which the sacred centre defers the establishment of reciprocal relations with the profane periphery."(17) So how does one describe the machinery that mediates between the tensions that exist within this dichotomous phenomenon? Gans claims that the sacred only emerges as a consequence of its function of deferring mimetic conflict over the central object. Nevertheless, without some form of fearful reverence or intangible, mysterious *power* produced by the emission of the sign, the central object loses its sacredness. Gans tells us: "The central object is sacred only insofar as its inaccessibility defers mimetic conflict, but this deferral is effective only because the quality of the sacred is attributed to the object rather than to the peripheral humans whose mutually repelling desires render it inaccessible."(18) So, essentially, we can posit that the sacred is found *as* the source of the emission of the sign. The strange phenomena of the emergence of the sign, then, will produce the causal effect by which violence is temporarily averted—this is what defines the sacred. For Gans, the sign creates the central scene in which the sacred becomes possible. However, the sign itself is not sacred, rather, for Gans, it appears that the instant unison between an appearing object and the emission of the transparent sign is what creates the re-presentation of the central scene. Consider the following passage from *Signs of Paradox*:

In the originary scene, the referent is ontologically primary; the sign is merely a transparent means of indicating what is already there. But once we put aside the *transparent* sign, we discover that there is no object there for us to be with, that our real desire was not for the referent at all but for the centre of the scene of representation that the sign brought into existence. The referent vanishes, to be restored through the renewed mediation of the sign.(19)Therefore, once the central object has ceased to appear as the referent of the sign, the central locus calls forth the mediation of a new sign. The *sacred* is the forever-lost original scenic centre (the mediated object of desire appropriated through an abortive gesture), only surviving in the memory of the forever mediating sign. This is precisely what Gans means when he refers to the sacred in the following way: "Sacredness is

experienced as really inherent in its incarnation; the return from the latter to the sign is experienced as the effect, not of the paradoxical sign-referent relation of signification—in which the referent is always already inhabited by the signing relation—but of the obstacle of sacred presence."(20) Again, the sacred is the experience of the ethereal, intangible object at the instant when the sign has been emitted. The sacred is the central, always present central scenic object. Gans contends that to contemplate the esthetic qualities of the sign in the presence of the sacred is a "complement of the sign's desiring prolongation toward the centre."(21) This, then, brings us to the work of Eliade.

Part Two: Mircea Eliade

The Sacred and Profane

Religious scholar Mircea Eliade approaches the origin of the human, not through a rigid hypothesis based on a putative originary scene, but rather, through the close study of the vast collection of origin myths, rituals, and religions developed throughout the world over the course of history. According to Eliade, the early human was explicitly a religious animal (*homo religiosus*). For him, the primary goal of *homo religiosus* is to stay as close to sacred space as possible, at all times, through myth, mediated by ritualised events. It might be said that Eric Gans's hypothesis can be 'tested' through the reading of the mythologies, cosmologies, and belief systems of a multiplicity of religious complexes, rigorously cross-examined in Eliade's literature.

In The *Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, Eliade tells us that: "The first possible definition of the *sacred* is that it is *the opposite of the profane*."(22) There is a lineage of scholars who have proposed this before him. But, for Eliade, designating the act of attempting to manifest the sacred, he uses the term *hierophany*. He argues that using this term "expresses no more than is implicit in its etymological content, i.e., that something sacred shows itself to us."(23) Throughout this text Eliade cites a far-reaching range of examples, from the most elementary hierophanies—i.e., manifestations of the sacred in some inanimate object—to what Eliade deems 'supreme' hierophany—for example, the incarnation of the monotheistic God in Christ for Christians, or a shaman in trance. In any case, what the sacred—or, the absence of the profane—reveals to us is "the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural profane world."(24) For *homo religiosus*, once the sacred has manifested itself in any object, the object becomes something entirely different. For Eliade, much like Gans, the sacred centre has a real world function, that is, the invocation of the centre provides a fixed point of reference, and all other events stem from this central

point. Consider the following statement from *The Sacred and Profane.* Eliade writes:

It is not a matter of theoretical speculation, but of a primary religious experience that precedes all reflection on the world. For it is the break effected in space that allows the world to be constituted, because it reveals the fixed point, the central axis for all future orientation. When the sacred manifests itself in any hierophany, there is not only a break in the homogeneity of space; there is also revelation of an absolute reality, opposed to the nonreality of the vast surrounding expanse. *The manifestation of the sacred ontologically founds the world*. [my emphasis][(25)](#)So, instead of an aborted gesture of appropriation—that is, the emission of the sign to defer violence and re-present the sacred—Eliade uses the term *hierophany* to designate a fundamental religious experience (*mysterium tremendum)* that consecrates the human world around an invented centre, momentarily forming and obliterating the profane periphery, creating what Eliade deems an "absolute reality." The Hierophany, for Eliade, is the analogue to paradox in Gans's understanding of the term. It is the recognition of the essential opposition between the sacred and profane, or the real and unreal, or sacred time and profane time that concerns Eliade in his mission to find common ground among every archaic culture under his examination. He tells us that "the polarity sacred-profane is often expressed as an opposition between real and unreal or pseudoreal."[(26)](#) One could attribute the profane to a historical time as opposed to a sacred cosmic time in Eliade's literature: "that is, a primordial time, not to be found in the historical past, an *original* time, in the sense that it came into existence all at once, that it was not preceded by another time, because no time could exist *before the appearance of the reality narrated in the myth*."[(27)](#) For Eliade, the hierophany is symptomatic of the appearance of the sacred space whose consequence is the rupture between sacred and profane, and at the same time, the emergence of an origin myth. It is the mythico-ritual, Eliade argues, that reflects and re-enacts the originary event of the first hierophany.

Reactualising Origins

Eliade argues that the phenomena of mythico-rituals, found across every documented archaic society he examined (of which there were hundreds), share a common, fundamental theme in the sense that they carry out the "*reactualisation* of cosmogonic act(s) shown both by rituals and in the formulas" that are recited during ceremonies.[(28)](#) This is based on the supposition that the *power* of something lies in its origin. In fact, Eliade contended that the archaic mind considered the *origin* of any object was what contained its true source of power. In other words, the way a thing was created gives understanding and insight into the true nature of the object. Few academics have challenged Eliade's view of the connection between the sacred and origins.

Eliade's primary theory of the myth-ritual suggests that when a *hierophany* is experienced—whether collectively or independently—it is what is considered to be the reliving of the origin of a community's religion; it is a harkening back to the initial point of reference—a sacred centre. After the originary event, the myth is then played out in ritualised acts, in order to attain what Eliade has coined an "Eternal Return" to the sacred: to keep as close to the sacred as possible, and away from the profane. This is not to be confused with Nietzsche's thought experiment of the Eternal Return, which posits the hypothetical question of the heaviest burden, but rather, a return to the original primordial Time where the sacred and profane split through the original hierophany. As an example, we have the widespread shamanic rituals of Tungusic peoples where the shaman attempts to attain the original hierophany itself in order to renew the cultural myths of the community. Eliade had proposed a separation of two realities, that of the sacred centre and the profane periphery. The profane is considered the everyday mundane, but, for Eliade, the sacred centre "is at once an image of the world (*imago mundi*) and a world sanctified by the presence of the Divine Being."[(29)](#) To give one example of many, I will briefly cite Eliade's final observation of the Australian aboriginal myth ritual of Kunapipi in Arnhem Land, a mother goddess who gave birth to the first, original humans. He writes: "To perform this ritual is to reactualise the primordial Time, to become contemporary with the Dreaming Period, the novices participate in the mystery, and on this occasion the entire community and its cosmic milieu are bathed in the atmosphere of the Dreaming Period; the cosmos and society emerge regenerated."[(30)](#) This idea of the regeneration of cultural values and myths through a hierophany (again, that is, a total absorption into the sacred centre through hallucination inciting the onset of the *mysterium tremendum*) is complementary to Gans's originary hypothesis. It is the perpetual deferral of meaning through the sign toward the sacred centre that allows for creativity; thus the lack of stagnation found throughout cultures as Eliade contends. Ultimately, Eliade claims that for the initiate "the meaning is always religious, for the change of existential status in the novice is produced by a religious experience."[(31)](#)

Furthermore, Eliade even goes so far as to claim that the mentality of *homo religiosus* (that is the driving force of human existence, to recreate, re-present, re-enact the centre) is to take action and thought into everything as if it were the first time—a beckoning, or invocation back to the original event. He remarks on "the belief that a state cannot be changed without first being annihilated—in the present instance, without a child dying to childhood. It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of this obsession with the absolute beginning, the cosmogony. For a thing to be done, it must be done as it was done *the first time*."[(32)](#) Thus, we see the saturation of the originary myth in ritualised events, ubiquitous among archaic, classical, and in many instances, world religions. He justifies this claim by stating: "This discovery that man is part and parcel of a sacred history which can be

communicated only to initiates constitutes the point of departure for a long-continued flowering of religious forms."(33) For Eliade, the sacred becomes the premonition and fall into human history.

Yet, not only in myth rituals is the originary event invoked, but also through initiation rituals. Again, through the rigorous comparative study of a large number of geographically disparate societies, Eliade observes that, in fact, it is a fundamental need observed in the archaic religious attitude to perpetually re-create or return to the sacred in order to denounce the more mundane aspects of profane life. However, it is not only in the archaic mind where we can observe the desire to abolish the profane, but all the way up to the present day. He writes:

It is the case of the religious need for periodical abolition of the norms that govern profane life—in other words, of the need to suspend the law that lies like a dead weight on customs, and to re-create the state of absolute spontaneity. The fact that cases of such ritual behaviour have been preserved down to the twentieth century among peoples long since Christianised proves, I believe, that we are here dealing with an extremely archaic religious experience.(34)We find in Eliade's literature the incessant repetition of the importance of the *origin*, or absolute beginnings widespread across cultures, particularly archaic ones. He also reflects on the cognitive value of the religious attitude toward myth rituals that incite the temporary abolition of profane life. In Gansian terms, we might situate Eliade's claims toward ritual, and religious practices in general, as the minimal requirement to defer conflict through a repetition of the originary event. In other words, for Eliade, the ritual is a re-actualisation or re-enactment of the original, *scenic* event. It is the recitation, habitual reliving, or re-enactment of the myth, for Eliade, that leads us directly to the sacred—the human. He writes:

To show something ceremonially—a sign, an object, an animal, a man—is to declare a sacred presence, to acclaim the miracle of a hierophany. This rite, which is so simple in itself, denotes a religious behaviour that is archaic . . . solemnly showing an object signified that it was regarded as exceptional, singular, mysterious, sacred.(35)Eliade remains consistent with Gans's originary hypothesis by focusing on the objects that are consumed and communally signified through ritual scenes. Eliade, much like Gans, also contends that we can only really know natural objects by inventing them as significant, scenic (sacred) centres. He acknowledges that the myth ritual, particularly in archaic societies, is the representation of a shared, immaterial centre.

Part Three: Return to the Sacred

The study of the sacred is ambitious, but it remains an ambition necessary for us to realize. The French sociologist Roger Caillois is to be credited for writing:

[W]ith regard to the sacred in general, the only thing that can be validly asserted is contained in the very definition of the term—that it is opposed to the profane. As soon as one attempts to specify the nature and conditions of this opposition, one comes up against serious obstacles. Elementary as it may be, no formula is applicable to the labyrinthine complexity of the facts. Examined in a certain perspective, the sacred finds itself rudely contradicted by a mass of facts arranged in baffling sequence. Should one begin with a multitude of monographs on the relationship of the sacred to the profane in each society? This would be the work of several lifetimes, if the research includes a sufficient number of cases.[(36)](#)In just two lifetimes, Gans and Eliade have illuminated the mysterious, necessary paradox between the sacred and profane. Gans's hypothesis on the origin of language, the opposition between the sacred and periphery, and an examination of the human in its most minimal terms, offers nothing short of a new anthropology. Eliade's comparative study of *homo religiosus* in archaic societies, all the way up to the modern age, I argue, works to bolster (even endorse) Gans hypothesis: that is, the religious rites and mythico-rituals performed almost ubiquitously among disparate cultures function to consolidate the reverence of the mystery of the intangible sacred centre, mediated through language. We might argue that the only thing missing from Eliade's originary analysis—if we can call it that—is his failure to place religion in relation to what Gans calls the "basis of representation," *language*. After all, language is the arbiter, gatekeeper, paradox, and origin of the sacred. As Gans notes: "As I have claimed, and I see no reason to retract this claim, we can and in principle must be able to situate in our hypothetical scene of origin all the essential characteristics of the human: ethics, art, religion, and of course, language."[(37)](#)

Although Eliade never explicitly places emphasis on the origin of language and the sacred, he does make passing comments, such as the following:

Attempts have been made to explain the *origin* of symbols by sensory impressions, made directly upon the cerebral cortex, by the great cosmic rhythms (the path of the Sun, for instance). It is not our business to discuss that hypothesis. But the problem of *the origin* seems to us to be, in itself, a problem badly stated. Symbols cannot be reflections of cosmic rhythms *as natural phenomena*, for a symbol always reveals something *more* than the aspect of cosmic life it is thought to represent.[(38)](#)Eliade somehow anticipates Gans's originary thinking through designating the symbol as revealing a "whole reality" that cannot be accessible by any other means of knowledge. He also describes the symbol as designating the

human:

the symbol arises, from the beginning, as a creation of the psyche. This becomes still more evident when we remember that the function of a symbol is precisely that of revealing a whole reality, inaccessible to other means of knowledge: the coincidence of opposites, for instance, which is so abundantly and simply expressed by symbols, in not *given* anywhere in the *Cosmos*, nor is it accessible to man's immediate experience, nor to discursive thinking.(39)Although Eliade places emphasis on the Jungian "psyche," he fails to designate the origin of the psyche itself, and so falls just short of Gans's hypothesis. Nevertheless, both intellects reflect a theory of the origin of the human; both formulate models that accommodate and encompass *all* cultures available and that attempt to conceptually universalize humanity back to our origins. Ultimately, however, Eliade's comparative study on religions reveals that aesthetic techniques, whether they be from the domain of art, dance, or music and song, allow, through the dissemination of myths and rituals, for the aesthetic contemplation of the original aborted gesture. This makes possible the contemplation of the sacred, however minimal, even today.

Thus the *meaning* of the first sign that was established in the originary scene serves in both Gans's hypothesis and Eliade's study of what he deems *homo religiosus* to invoke and embody the originary moment through stylized mythico-rituals. It is then the act of deferring mimetic violence through the re-presentation of the originary scene that is always invoked to dissolve profane existence and return to the sacred, the emission of the sign, the source of all things human. The human, therefore, for both Gans and Eliade exists through the scenic re-presentation—through symbolic ritual—of an object of desire inevitably transformed into the sacred, through the emission of the aborted gesture of appropriation. Language, then, is our primary form of intelligence, which is arguably discharged *culturally* rather than biologically. And, as we have seen from both Gans and Eliade, language stems from the paradoxical nature of the contemplation of the origin. The paradox, then, at the very least, is that the only way we can know an "object" is to infer, modify, and observe it through the mediation of language.

In many respects Gans and Eliade make universalist claims. To say the word 'universality' invites suspicion; yet, for Gans and Eliade, it is quite a useful tool in generating the minimal elements required to trace out the origins of the human. A largely desacralised West crowing scientific materialism and the emerging green "religions" reflects the human need for the sacred, myths, and origin stories, not just to explain the human, but to give a reference point—a kind of "universal" anthropology. All other things left aside, we can safely say that both Eliade and Gans have deemed the "sacred," at the very least, a product of some memorable,

original, human event. If Gans provided the hypothetical structure of the human, Eliade minimally observes the rituals that reflect the originary scene. He writes: "For any culture is limited by its manifestation in the structures and styles conditioned by history. But the Images which precede and inform cultures remain eternally alive and universally accessible."(40) These are above all two separate reflections on the same object of desire. On the one hand, we have Eliade reflecting on the desire to re-enact the originary scene. On the other, we have Gans expressing the explicit importance of the origin as a structural agent and minimal hypothesis to understanding the human. For Eliade, the sentiments of *homo religiosus* lead him to imagine a mythical origin. For Gans, it is not some *deus ex machina*, but rather, a formal closure produced by a sign to defer what would otherwise be a crisis charged by mimetic desire. It is the communal expression and collective understanding of the *sign* that creates the sacred centre. Eliade, then, offers useful analogical terminology for Gans's hypothesis. The latter's hypothesis, I argue, might be considered the *imago mundi*, or what Eliade conceived of as the original human centre, spreading out into the periphery—the source of 'all things.'

Originary thinking, or generative anthropology (GA), is not a form of social contract theory, but rather a heuristic tool. Gans affirms this; he writes: "Generative anthropology, which is originary thinking founded on hypothesis rather than revelation, explicitly locates the deconstruction of the object of thought within the minimal configuration of the originary scene. It thereby comes qualitatively closer than its predecessors to the unreachable ideal of intellectual self-generation: to be a way of thinking that includes paradoxically within itself the content of any conceivable metathinking about it."(41)

Our understanding of the sacred, what it is, transcendence, sacrificial violence, or some otherworldly phenomenon, is based on the scene of representation. For Gans, this is the primary goal of generative anthropology: to think minimally in terms of an originary scene. For Eliade, the universal mythico-rituals of seemingly disparate cultures rely on the sacred through representation. Both Gans and Eliade think in hypothetical, scenic terms—of origins. In the words of Gans himself, these thinkers bear the mark of a "critique of phenomenological immediacy."(42) Without a point of origin, without an immediate sacred centre, we have no point of reference to re-present the scene. In some ways, the scenic centre promotes a human ontology for both the social sciences and humanities. The first principle of generative anthropology is the definitive scenic origin as the source of all human activity. Gans writes: "originary thinking—practiced throughout most of history exclusively in the religious sphere—privileges the ostensivity of central Being, its presence. Generative anthropology is a new way of thinking, but only in the sense that it thematises an activity that has gone on since the origin."(43)

Notes

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3. Ibid. Gans, E. p. 30. (back)

4. Ibid. Gans, E. p. 98. (back)

5. Ibid. Gans, E. p. 98. (back)

6. Ibid. Gans, E. p. 24. (back)

7. Ibid. Gans, E. p. 20. (back)

8. Ibid. Gans, E. p. 21. (back)

9. Ibid. Gans, E. p. 25. (back)

10. Ibid. Gans, E. p. 35. (back)

11. Ibid. Gans, E. p. 35. (back)

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17. Ibid. Gans, E. p. 96. (back)

18. Ibid. Gans, E. pp. 92 – 93. (back)

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37. Ibid. Gans, E. No. 440. (back)

38. Ibid. Eliade, M. pp. 176-177. (back)

39. Ibid. Eliade, M. p. 177. (back)

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