

On Jabberwocky and the Specifically Human

by [David Solway](#) (December 2023)



Hesitation– Paul Klee, 1906

The text, said Aldous Huxley, is the pretext. We read not only to learn or process information. We also read—or at least we

did once upon a time—to revel in the sheer opulence of language. “‘Twas brillig, and the slithy toves/Did gyre and gimble in the wabe,” is how Lewis Carroll’s [Jabberwocky](#) begins. Humpty Dumpty parses the words for Alice and explicates their *portmanteau* nature, but the pleasure resides not only in sense-making but in the sensual flair and appetite of our potential engagement with the language—the beauty and numinous power of words. It is what Rabelais in [Gargantua and Pantagruel](#) called Pantagruelizing, defined as drinking to your heart’s desire while reading of the fearsome exploits of his towering humanist, Pantagruel.

All our activities may be viewed in the same light. We do things not merely to get them done but to embroider our personalities around them: in talk, exchange of pleasantries, jokes and shared reverie. What is *specifically* human is what is civilized, that is, what remains after function has been subtracted. Packing for a trip, washing the dishes, receiving a massage, for example, are activities that may all be accomplished more or less mechanically.

What is specifically human is the excited talk about the forthcoming trip while the bags are being packed, perhaps badly; the chatter over the dishes, though several may break; or the tickle in the massage. Indeed, as Aristotle points out in [On the Parts of Animals](#), “man alone is affected by tickling,” which sets him laughing due “to his being the only animal that laughs,” his face turning ruddy with pleasure. No doubt that is how we derive the expression “tickled pink.” In other words, what is *essentially* human is what is gratuitous, the whole range of being which is not function-related, the non-utilitarian, the element of play taken in the widest possible sense.

“Play only becomes possible, thinkable and understandable,” explains Johan Huizinga in [Homo Ludens](#), “when an influx of mind breaks down the absolute determinism of the cosmos. The very existence of play continually confirms the supra-logical

nature of the human situation.” Huizinga concludes that “we must be more than merely rational beings, for play is irrational.” Play is what makes us truly human, and *homo ludens* is at least as accurate a description of who we are as either *homo sapiens* or *homo faber*.

The philosophic distinction going back in part to Plato’s [*Parmenides*](#), sometimes phrased as the opposition between Reality and Necessity, is the appropriate discrimination here. Necessity refers to the domain of activity in which the purposes of subsistence are exclusively served. It is what we may call the economic sphere of confined exertion—that of which John Travolta, playing the archangel Michael asked to revive a dead puppy, says, “It’s not my area.” Reality is the realm of spirit or of the non-replaceable, in which the sense of being is enhanced in the circuitous attainment and expression of either joy or wisdom or both. It is what John Donne is getting at when he [writes](#): “On a huge hill/Cragged, and steep, Truth stands and he that will/Reach her, about must, and about must go.” [Similarly](#), Emily Dickinson: “tell all the Truth, but tell it slant—/Success in Circuit lies.” And so, [Polonius](#): “By indirections find directions out.”

Celebrated logician Willard van Orman Quine in [*The Ways of Paradox and Other Essays*](#) reverses the terminology when he writes that empiricists argue that “necessity resides in the way we talk about things, not in the things we talk about.” The term “necessity” is used rather casually here and is synonymous with “freedom” or “reality.” The Platonic distinction holds.

To be human is to live in this mixed or hybrid dimension. To be specifically human is to let the accent fall on Reality at the expense of Necessity without, of course, eliminating the latter—otherwise we become naïve utopians for the limited time in which we are permitted to survive. But to emphasize Necessity at the cost of Reality, as is so often the case, is to approximate to animal or vegetable existence, with a little

“spirit” left over to deposit in those isolated time capsules we call leisure or entertainment. Thus, we fall below the level of the truly civilized, the freedom to be other than cogs, stovebolts, breakers and circuits. The play’s the thing, the locus of freedom in the act of digression.

Philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer was having none of it. In an 1839 essay “[On the Freedom of the Will](#),” he wrote: “You can do what you will but in any given moment of your life you can will only one definite thing and absolutely nothing other than that one thing.” This is obviously a physicalist oversimplification dear to a convinced determinist for whom the past is paradoxically determined by the future, as if he were plying a [quantum eraser](#). How else could we know that the “one definite thing” is fixed in time but by backward reasoning?

Much more credible is University of California cosmologist Richard Muller who in his 2018 volume [Now: The Physics of Time](#) has no doubt that the plenary exercise of free will is the fundamentally human, anti-entropic trait *par excellence*. “If humans regularly do highly improbable things that are not predictable based on external influences,” he reflects, “then such behavior constitutes free will.” Freedom of the will means not only that we are free to choose but also free to digress, to achieve outcomes that are not determined by mere utilitarianism, *free to be improbable*.

The infallible sign of the merely utilitarian attitude to life is irritation. We tend to get irritated when function is impeded: when the suitcase spills its contents, the car breaks down and the doorjamb attacks the toe, when, as [Martin Heidegger](#) wrote, we are confronted by “the failure of equipment.” True wisdom is a stranger to irritation and it is precisely this refusal to be irritated that is the principal element in our picture of the Wise Man. In ordinary life it is when irritation is embellished by humor, wit or the imaginative curse, or is immediately deflated by self-mockery,

that the specifically human, the civilized, has once again asserted itself.

But it asserts itself whenever we express the contingent side of our being: whenever we hum for no reason or make atrocious puns or avoid the cracks in the sidewalk or impersonate people or make rubber lips in the mirror or recite long passages of bardic improvisations or pretend to be what we are not at the instant in order to amuse or even to instruct. It is then that we are essentially what we are.

The play is the display. This is why fashion in even its most absurd, outrageous or parasitical forms remains one of the chief expressions of the civilizing imperative. As Gilles Lipovetsky explains in his fascinating study, [*The Empire of Fashion*](#), the rule in fashion, especially in the modern age, “is one of free, untrammelled creation ... the spectacle of astonishment.” It has less to do with clothes than with the “ecstasy of newness,” that is, with “continuous creation ... detached ... from the inertia of social demand.”

Similarly, in the modest arena of the quotidian, the significant deed is not the thing done or demanded but the thing said or simulated in the act of getting the thing that is demanded done. It is the unplanned, spontaneous ricochet of original intention, the collapse of the parenthesis. One recalls poet Dana Gioia’s whimsical remark in a fine poem, “[Starting Over](#),” that “even the wind and air can cultivate/a sensuous lack of purpose.” In the specifically human dimension, certainly, purpose is the stalking horse of freedom. [Alice](#) succeeded in reaching the looking-glass hill only when she stopped trying to reach it and let a little aimlessness, a little Jabberwocky, gallumph into her life.

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David Solway's latest book is [*Crossing the Jordan: On Judaism, Islam, and the West*](#) (NER Press). His previous book is [*Notes from a Derelict Culture*](#), Black House Publishing, 2019, London. A CD of his original songs, [*Partial to Cain*](#), appeared in 2019.

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