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Alienation ends with the modern subject

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... within the capitalist system all methods for raising the social productivity of labour are put into effect at the cost of the individual worker; ... all means for the development of production undergo a dialectical inversion so that they become means of domination and exploitation of the producers; they distort the worker into a fragment of a man, they degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, they destroy the actual content of his labour by turning it into a torment; they alienate [*entfremden*] from him the intellectual potentialities of the labour process in the same proportion as science is incorporated in it as an independent power; they deform the conditions under which he works, subject him during the labour process to a despotism the more hateful for its meanness; they transform his life-time into working-time, and drag his wife and child beneath the wheels of the juggernaut of capital.¹

In the factory drowning in machine noise, we drill parts and mill parts to make machines that make more machines to make money.

At Burger King we feed fake frozen meat into the griddle, give service with a smile and then scrape grease and ketchup off the plastic seats.

Underground we slouch before phosphorescent screens entering streams of meaningless commands that are processed and ejected as unknown errors, exceptions, segmentation faults and warnings.

At five we leave work and wander through streets lined with strange stares. Our lungs hurt, our eyes burn and we chain into the rhythmic pulsing flows of the city machine as it processes bodies, traffic, voices and noise.

¹ Karl Marx, *Capital*, translated by Ben Fowkes, London: Penguin Books, 1990. FIND PAGE!

At home, or hunched in subterranean clubs and bars, we attempt to speak to our fellow man and woman, to communicate what we feel and want to mean. Our hearts rise to our mouths, we speak, it seems that our isolated minds are at last passing information. But then a week, two weeks later, there is a passing comment. It seems that we were not so well understood after all. This is the best case, we really hoped to say something to these people. Then there are our work ‘colleagues’, the people we speak to whilst remaining silent, blind to their hidden hopes and fears; until one day they are absent, smashed up like rag dolls by a concrete shock from height or poisoned in a secret room by minds bent lead-heavy by despair. There are the people we pass every day, weeping on the tube or hunched, silent, swept past in a lit bus through the night. I am also presenting my thoughts and feelings about alienation to you who are separate from me, alienated from me, reading me with a mixture of friendly and hostile eyes, giving my words a different spin in the web of meaning in your mind.

Modern life and work are not all bad. There are moments of divine madness when it all makes sense. We experience an exhilarating joy as we gaze down upon our city’s lights at night and sink in the lift to mingle with the urban motions; matching its dilations, contractions, inhalations, exhalations and secretions with the rhythms of our biological body. Dancers in the dark we sing along to the boom boom smash of the industrial process. But there are moments too, too many moments when it fails to make sense, when we walk along the unyielding streets, gaze upon the city’s grey eyes and cry at being so small, so lost in a world whose only face is brutal indifference.

As we flocked from country to city during the industrial revolution we despaired at the soulless towns and towering mills. We became alienated from our artificial environment and mourned the natural paradise that we had left behind.² Today this is changing: the ‘we’ that was once alienated from its surroundings is now becoming increasingly estranged from itself; increasingly constructed, grey and machinic. Although we still speak as if we were divine souls descended from Adam, in reality there is

² This paradise was of course never a paradise (which is why we left it), but a never ending cycle of hard work overshadowed by the ever present threat of starvation.

nothing left inside the modern human that could be alienated from the environment. Man and world have merged into a global industrial process and their brains, characters and consciousness have become limited and partial abstractions from the system as a whole. For some purposes we might consider the trunk in isolation from the tree, the cog separately from the machine, the person detached from the levers that they pull and push in the factory, but any talk about alienation can be immediately overcome by resituating these parts within the context which they have come from; the context that constituted them and gives them meaning. Our immortal souls have passed away; we are moving towards a vision of the world as a single machine, a conglomerated industrial process in which minds carry out some sub-functions.

We sing of the shepherd and curse modern living.

This paper will open up this vision of the end of alienation by examining three accounts of the 'I' that has traditionally experienced alienation. Every aspect of this 'I' has been minutely constructed by the modern world.

First Story of the 'I'

Some of our earliest days of life are spent as a flat sheet of cells several layers thick with a raised area in the middle. After three weeks of embryonic development, primitive neural tissue develops on top of this sheet and then folds to form a structure called the neural tube which becomes the brain's ventricles and the spinal canal. Stem cells within this neural tube divide and give rise to non-dividing neuroblasts, which mature into neurons. As they form, the neurons migrate away from the neural tube and become the brain's tissue. Guided by radial glial cells extending from the neural tube to the surface of the cortex, the brain builds up in layers; the innermost layers first, followed by the outer layers. The timing of this neuron generation and migration controls the thickness of the brain's layers. A small number of cells are guided into place by chemical signals.

Once they have reached their correct position, the neurons start to mature and form connections. They grow dendrites and extend their axons to link up with the dendrites and form synapses. This growth of dendrites and axons towards each other is guided by tropic molecules. Synaptic development begins at the fifth month of gestation and continues after birth, reaching a peak after 7 months. At this stage approximately 10^{14} connections will have formed in the human cerebral cortex.

At the age of 7 months, genetics has done its work of building the brain cells, guiding them approximately into position and connecting them up into a semi-ordered pattern. A unique genetic code to some extent results in a unique person, but genetics only prepares the ground for the development of the behaviour and identity of each individual. This happens between the age of about 1 and 10 years when a substantial proportion of the semi-random genetic circuits are pruned away to reveal the adult brain. Synapses and neurons that are not part of functional neural networks die off and at the peak of synapse loss in humans, as many as 100,000 synapses are lost per second. Approximately 42% of synapses are eliminated in this way from the human cortex.

The outcome of this synaptic pruning depends critically upon the interactions between the child and its surroundings. The world activates certain neural circuits and the rest die off. If the child is deprived of environmental stimulation at this stage, then the wrong synapses die or too many die and they are left with a stunted soul that has a limited capacity for perceiving and grasping reality. We only have to look at Kaspar Hauser, the wild boy of Aveyon, Vladimir in *Land of Silence and Darkness* to see what happens when babies are left at the mercy of their genetic algorithms. When we are born, world experiences pour in through our orifices and activate circuits, patterns, currents, flows. The child resonates to the touch of the world and preserves its traces. The shocks of the city, the screaming jet across the sky, the mournful wail of the factory siren are all encoded as circuits within its system. The machinic world stretches its tendrils through our eyes, through our ears, through every fibre of our nerves and builds a thousand miniature machines within our nervous tissue.

We would like to think that this soul sculpture leaves us with a homunculus in our heads, a tiny chap destined for heaven. But these imaginary skin sacks within skin sacks can be extended ad-infinitum. We also like to say that Harry has learnt to walk, Susie has learnt to talk and Sally can recognise mommy, but these responses to stimuli were not sculpted by little Harry, Susie and Sally. They are not responsible for their achievements, they did not *learn* to walk, talk and recognise mommy. All that happened was that certain circuits were activated at an early age and continue to operate. Harry, Susie and Sally's souls have fled; the neural machines in their minds interface with the other sub-processes in the global industrial system. Computers pass streams of data amongst themselves and display it on a screen. Light propagates from the screen to the neural machines in Sally's mind. She presses a button, pulls a lever and the assembly line rolls on.

Synaptic pruning continues at a diminished rate into adulthood and associations build up linking circuits together. If some of the neural machines in your mind are activated sufficiently, other neural circuits will respond differently to the word "alienation" in the future. As these circuits consolidate and conglomerate, you and I form part of a single system, a global process in which there are only the dilations and pulsations of air, nerves, fingers and throat; manufacturing, processing and pumping information back and forth; in and out of sacks of flesh in rhythmic repeating cycles.

Second Story of the 'I'

Overall, the system of manipulated personalisation is experienced by the vast majority of consumers as freedom.³

Paradoxically we are induced, in the name of everyone and out of a reflex of solidarity, to buy an object that we immediately use to differentiate ourselves from other people.⁴

I pose in a hip bar with a bottle of Smirnoff Ice. I am handsome, smooth and cool with Levis Jeans, Ray Ban shades, Calvin Klein underwear and an Armani jacket over my shoulder. A slinky chick sidles over and asks

³ Jean Baudrillard, *System of Objects*, p.153

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.179

me to account for myself. Who am I? What do I do? What brings me here? A wriggling rabbit from the hat, I place my personality upon the table: I am a city analyst into fast cars and women, I am a single dad who likes Lacan, Zizek and weight training. I am an electronic engineer into fishing and travelling. I am a teenager who enjoys hanging out, popping pills and partying.

What are you wearing today? Perhaps you have constituted your identity by wearing jeans and a t-shirt, differentiating yourselves from your cord- and tweed-wearing fellows. You have long hair or short; perhaps you wear lipstick, rouge or mascara. All of these choices are picked from the palette of options available within the patch of culture-language that we inhabit. Although a million people wear the same t-shirt we continue to claim it as an expression of our own individuality.

What do we do for food and leisure? We prefer brown rice to white, shop at Waitrose rather than Sainsbury's, choose British beef on the bone over Argentinean cubed steak. We pick Shakespeare because we know him or choose Stoppard because we want to extend our personal list of 'playwrights we like'. We watch the latest Hollywood blockbuster, make 'art' films our consumer choice, or select from the system of books on the basis of reviews, covers, or our 'hot list' of authors or genres which constitutes the individual 'taste' in literature that we have developed so far.

What do we do about the big decisions in life? We do what comes naturally: get a partner, get a job, get married, have babies. Perhaps we choose a career in philosophy or life as a bum chasing God from city to city, from chemical state to chemical state.

The world weary sun keeps rising, but it has seen it all before. Each of our lives tells the same story. Each of us manufactures an identity by selecting a collage of elements from the systems of difference surrounding us. We stroll down the aisles of culture-language and make choices between the prefabricated options on offer. We call the motley collection that ends up in our trolley a 'personality' and guard it as something precious. Surprisingly enough, we are actually interested in the 'personalities' of others – we ask

about their taste in music, food, or books – although this is generally just a mechanism for fine tuning our own system of choices.

It might be objected that we are ‘creative’ individuals capable of shaping our own personalities. Unfortunately, as any artist will tell you, creation *ex nihilo* is one of our less impressive cultural myths. Every artist has their own shrine stocked with a pantheon of ‘greats’ from which they ‘mix and match’ techniques and ideas to create their own ‘individual’ style. The *Aeneid* takes elements from the *Odyssey* and then follows this with an *Iliad* with a Roman political agenda; the *Georgics* is a collage of material and styles taken from Hesiod, Callimachus, Lucretius and Varro of Reate. This is not to say that Virgil’s work is bad, or could be better. This is the nature of artistic (or any other) ‘creation’. The situation is no different for scientific or philosophical writings: this section was assembled using work by Baudrillard, Lewis, Dawkins and Foucault. For the most part we are choosers between well worn rules; at other times, when we are feeling ‘creative’, we seek fresh rules from an obscure source to live by.

So far, I have covered our choice between the limited options on offer at *Culture-Language*. We also need to analyse *why* we choose one thing over another, why we prefer t-shirts to spangled skirts, spats over baseball caps. Some choices may have a biological basis – I choose to eat rather than starve because I get hungry. Other more evenly balanced choices may be selected at random. Some decisions are made on the basis of previous choices or they are guided by values that have already been assimilated from the culture-language system. All of these reasons for choosing come from outside of us. Our biological bodies are thrown into a particular culture-language context; our minds absorb this local culture-language and make further selections from it on the basis of material they have already assimilated.

In the examples that I gave at the beginning of this paper, we experienced alienation because our self-identities were not fully expressed in our environment. My ‘true’ identity as a healthy fit body was suppressed in a city lead-heavy with pollution. My ‘true’ identity as an expressive joyous individual was repressed in a factory that subjected me to repetitive meaningless toil. However, once it is realised that our identities are wholly determined by the culture-language system, then there is no longer any personal ‘I’ left

who could be alienated. Our personalities were manufactured by the external world and whether these personalities are alienated or not is no longer our concern. Put another way, 'we' no longer have selves that are distinct from commercial off the shelf identities; there is nothing left in us that is capable of alienation. Culture-language might continue to worry itself about alienation but our personalities are automatons already and so it scarcely matters whether they are integrated into a factory or farming system. The twists and turns of our subjectivities *are* the culture-language system, viral memes that infect minds, propagate to other minds and cast off our husks when we can no longer sustain them.

Third Story of the 'I'

In driving a car, I am not sitting like a back-seat driver directing myself, but rather find myself committed and engaged with little consciousness. In fact my consciousness will usually be involved with something else, in a conversation with you if you happen to be my passenger, or in thinking about the origin of consciousness perhaps. My hand, foot and head behavior, however, are almost in a different world. In touching something, I am touched; in turning my head, the world turns to me; in seeing I am related to a world I immediately obey in the sense of driving on the road and not on the sidewalk. And I am not conscious of any of this. And certainly not logical about it. I am caught up, unconsciously enthralled, if you will, in a total interacting reciprocity of stimulation that may be constantly threatening or comforting, appealing or repelling, responding to the changes in traffic and particular aspects of it with trepidation or confidence, trust or distrust, while my consciousness is still off on other topics.

Now simply subtract that consciousness and you have what a bicameral man would be like. The world would happen to him and his action would be an inextricable part of that happening with no consciousness whatever. And now let some brand-new situation occur, an accident up ahead, a blocked road, a flat tire, a stalled engine, and behold, our bicameral man would not do what you and I would do, that is, quickly and efficiently swivel our consciousness over to the matter and narratize out what to do. He would have to wait for his bicameral voice which with the stored-up admonitory wisdom of his life would tell him nonconsciously what to do.⁵

As I mechanically cut and stack wheat in the fields my mind is occupied with nothing in particular. A kind of empty awareness has taken hold. Then a problem arises: the blade of my scythe breaks and I am forced to take action. My consciousness shifts from its blank semi-conscious state to full conscious awareness. A narrative appears in my mind describing the problem: "Now where did I put my spare scythe blade, oh yes in

⁵ Julian Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, p. 85.

the storehouse, but perhaps I should borrow one off Jonas to save time. Yes that's what I'll do: borrow a blade off Jonas". A solution to the problem is found and I walk over to where Jonas is working, borrow his spare scythe blade and return to the semi-conscious state of working.

Our meek lives of sleep, food, work and pleasure are mostly dissipated in a blank semi-automatic state. They would be spent entirely this way were it not for the development around XXXX b.c. of the bicameral stage of consciousness. According to Julian Jaynes, this bicameral mind was in the animal state for most of the time, but when a problem arose it experienced hallucinations of voices that narrated its experience and planned what to do. This voice was not the voice of the owner of the mind, but the hallucinated voice of the god-king that continued to control the subject in the absence of the authority figure. The development of this hallucinated voice meant that the command of the god-king was no longer limited to the people around him and the population could be controlled without him being physically present. Jaynes illustrates this with the example of a person who has to build a fish weir upstream of the campsite. It would be difficult for a pre-bicameral man to achieve this because there would be nothing to keep him to it. He would soon get distracted and stop building the weir. This task could only be achieved if the man had language that could bring him back from his moments of forgetfulness. Jaynes argues that at the early stages of our evolution we would not have had the volition to repeat this language to ourselves voluntarily and it would have had to appear as a "repeated 'internal' verbal hallucination telling him what to do" and keeping him at the task of building.⁶

Once people could be directed to carry out tasks whose purpose extended beyond their immediate environmental stimuli, the great work of the early civilizations became possible. Their layered hierarchies centring on a single figure were readily controlled by the hallucinated voice of the god-king. The bicameral minds of these people were completely immersed in their environment and the instructions from outside appeared in their minds just as if the god-king was speaking beside them. There were no personal ambitions

⁶ Ibid., p.134. Unfortunately I do not have the space to go more fully into the many strands of evidence that Jaynes brings together to support this rather strange hypothesis.

which could be thwarted; no private grudges, no inner space and no alienation either, since only the external voice was capable of detaching itself from its environment and rationalising about private problems.

When the bicameral mind broke down the alien voice of the god-king became the private voices of each individual and the notion of different experiences, different personalities came into being. These separate narrating voices could try and fail to communicate, fall out of step with industrial rhythms; sniff the city air and wonder why they have to choke to breathe it. However, as the one god became many and the hallucinated voice faded into thought, the 'I' remained the 'I' of the other; an internalised voice of conscience that cries "guilty" and imposes the ethical demands of society upon us. Our consciousness, our sense of self, is an external authoritarian intervention and yet we timidly suffer from it; hoping, one day, to satisfy the dictatorial demands that it places upon us.

Conclusion

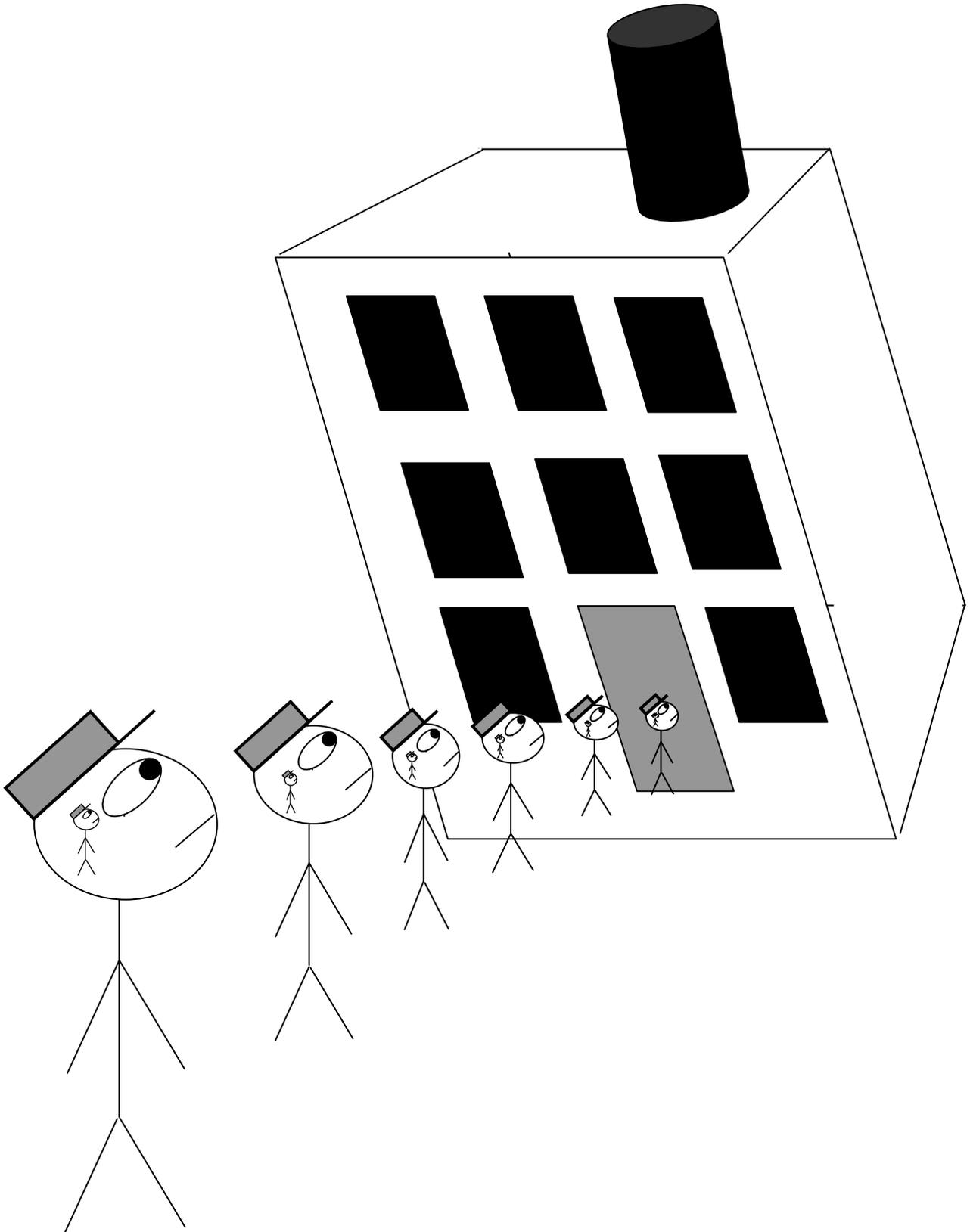
There is no alienation in the modern world because there is nothing left inside us that could be alienated. Gradually we have come to understand everything that was once our soul as a machinic product of a machinic world; the transcendental ego that once surveyed the scene has slowly faded away. The world built our brains, our personalities and our consciousness. Any alienation of brains, personalities and consciousness comes about through the interaction of the alien with itself. It has nothing to do with us. There is no us. There are only assemblages of neural machines, biological bodies hosting culture-language, narrating memories in human heads. Machines interface with machines passing streams of matter and data between machines. Culture-language picks our personality. We watch the ancient voice inside us as it worries, desires, hopes and dreams on.

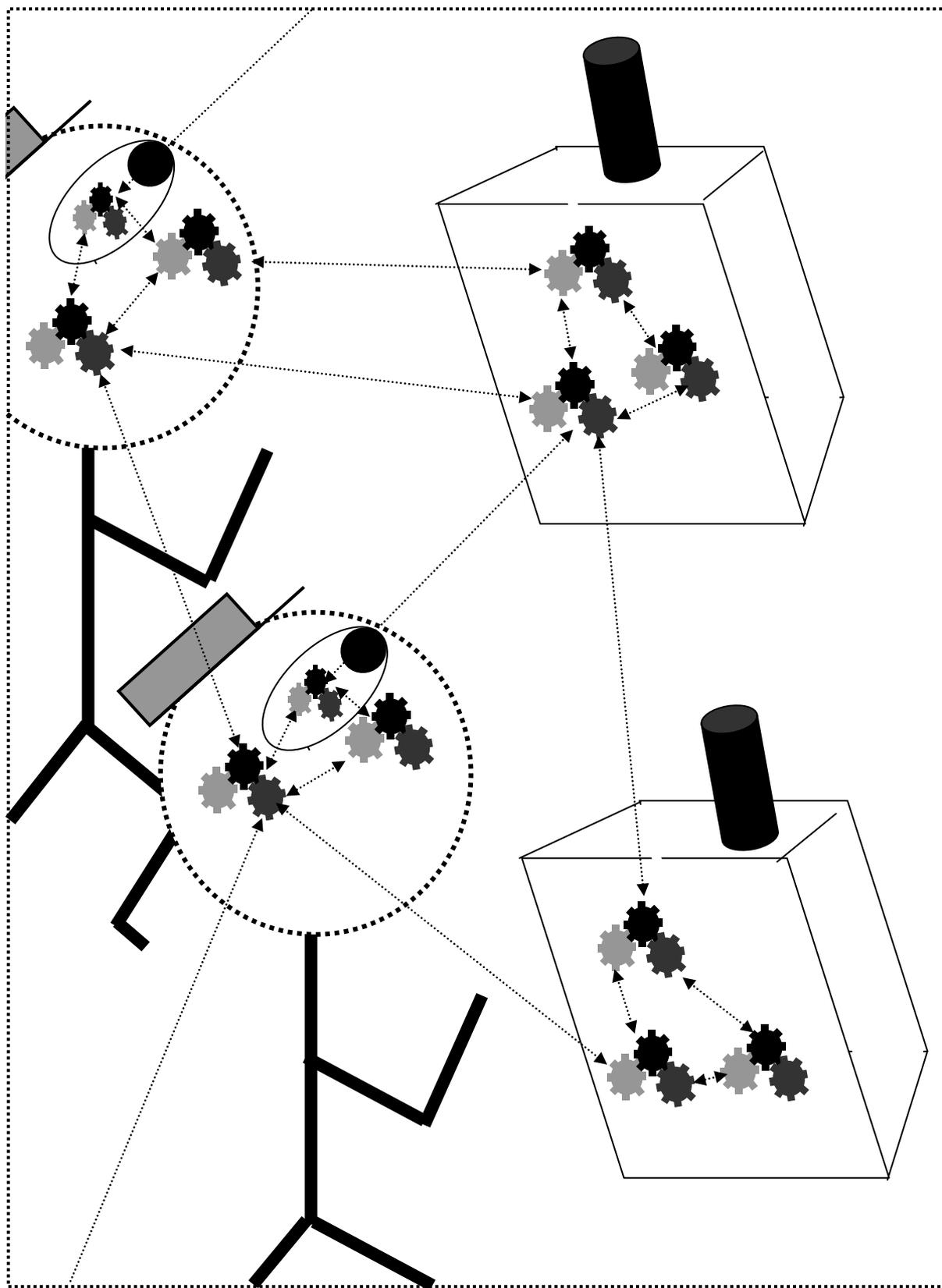
There is no alienation in the club-footed pigeon hobbling to peck scraps from a rusty can; no alienation in the rat as it sneaks past the oily canal dripping gloom in the night. There is also no alienation in the man who is modern enough to spurn the soul that has been forced upon him and embrace Huxley's vision

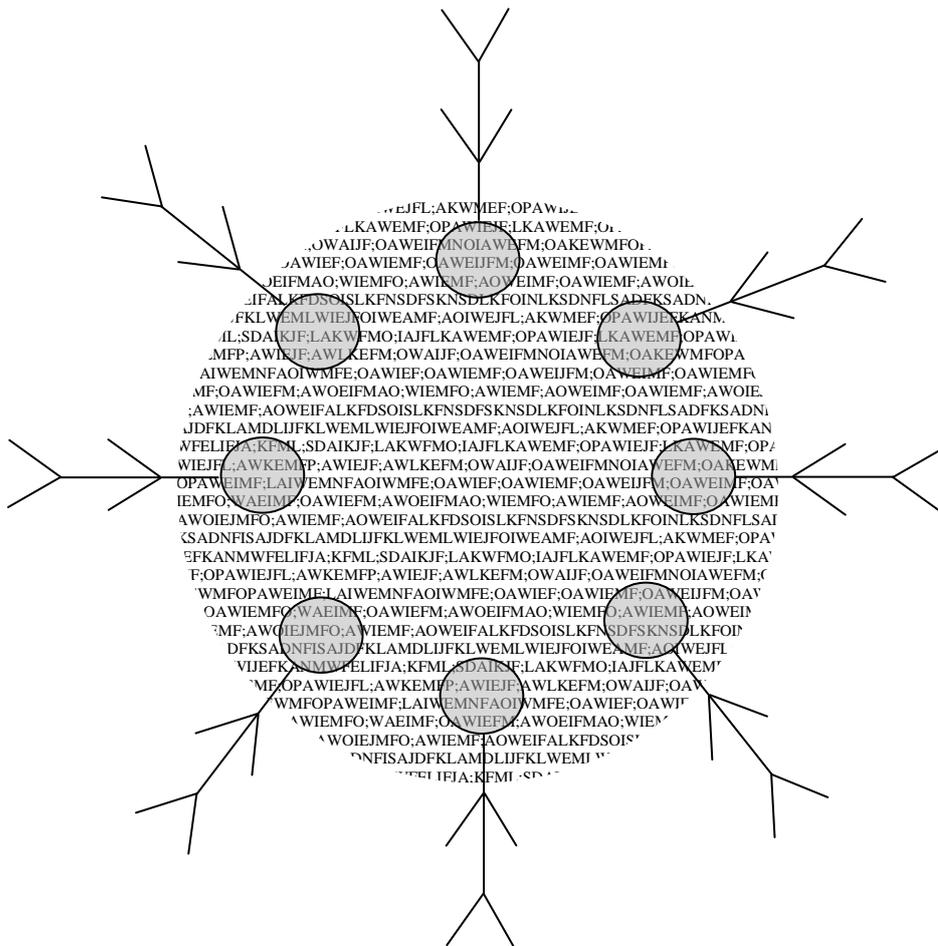
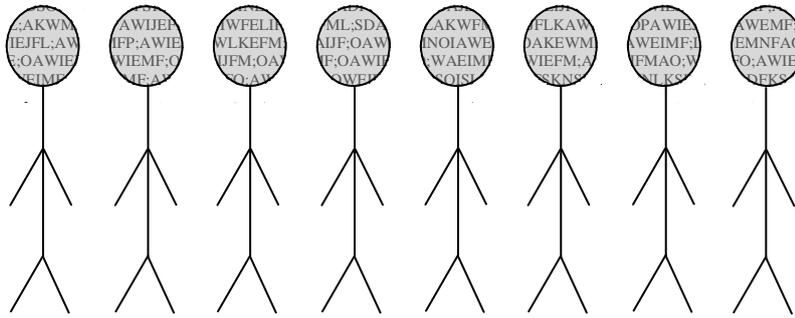
of a brave new world in which the illusion of the self has ended and the manufacturing of the individual has been pushed to its logical conclusion.

This paper will not end alienation in the modern subject. It will not fuse you with the world, merge you with the flow of becoming so that you are no longer alienated. Some of the culture-language machines in your mind will keep ticking and sustaining your illusion of alienation. All that I have hoped to do in this paper is prise open a space, a vision within which your alienation is not 'yours' any longer. It is a by-product, perhaps a waste product, of the narratising voice of the culture-language system which has parasitised the brain labelled with your name. This vision may eventually expand until you are alienated no longer.

Figures

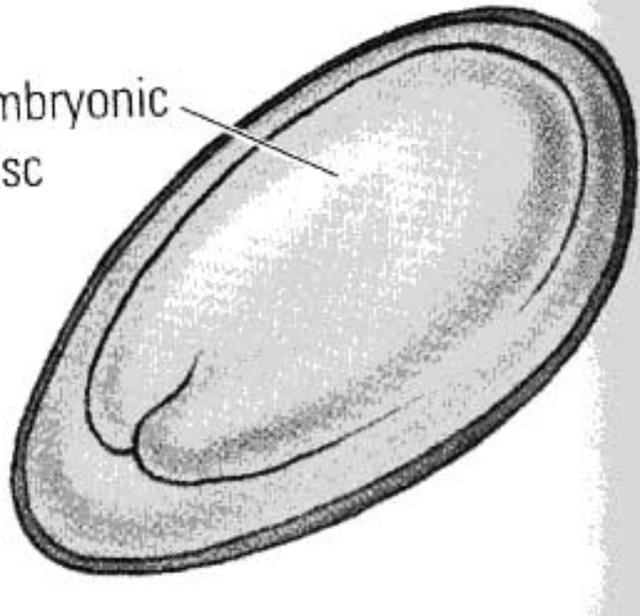






Day 15

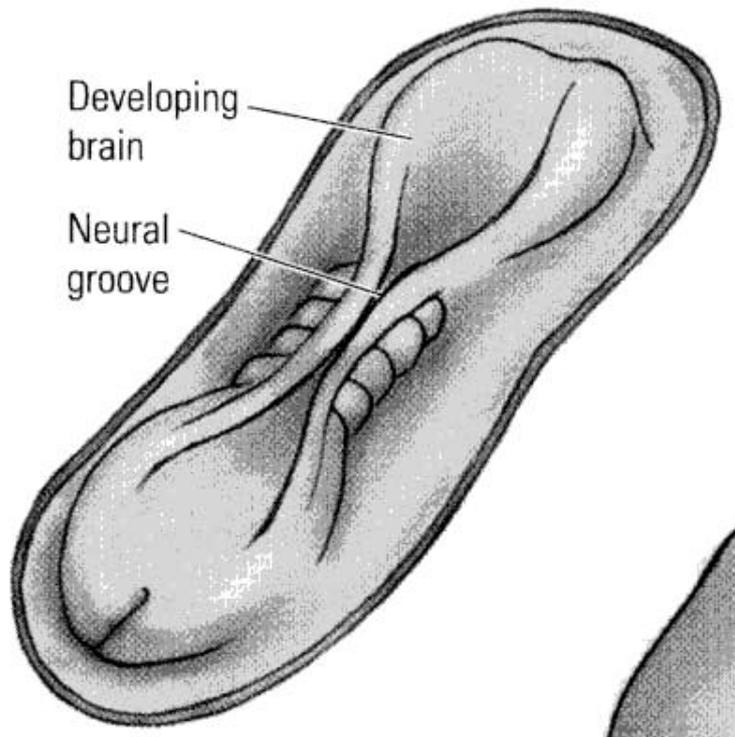
Embryonic
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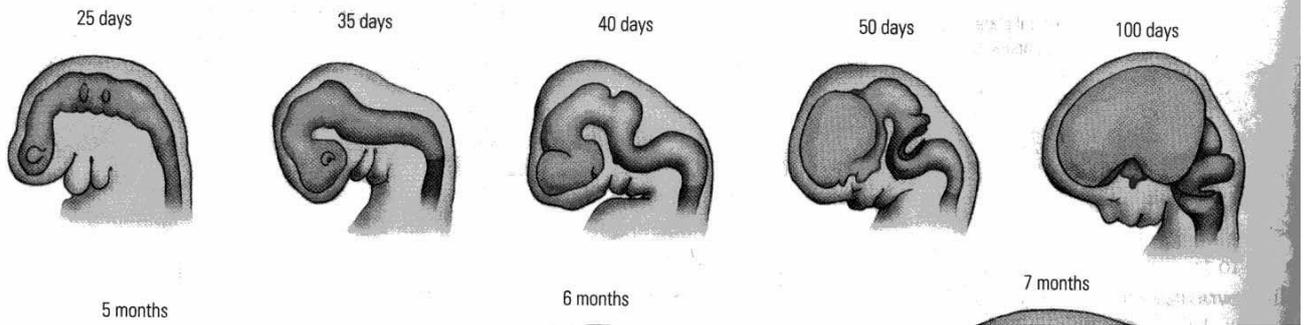
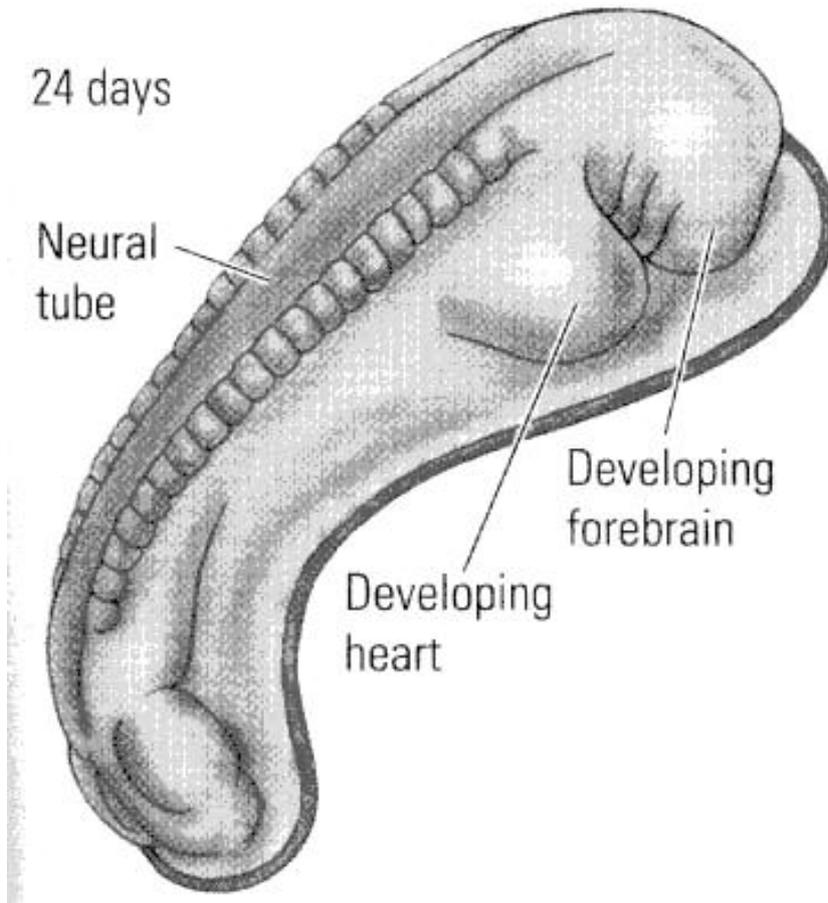


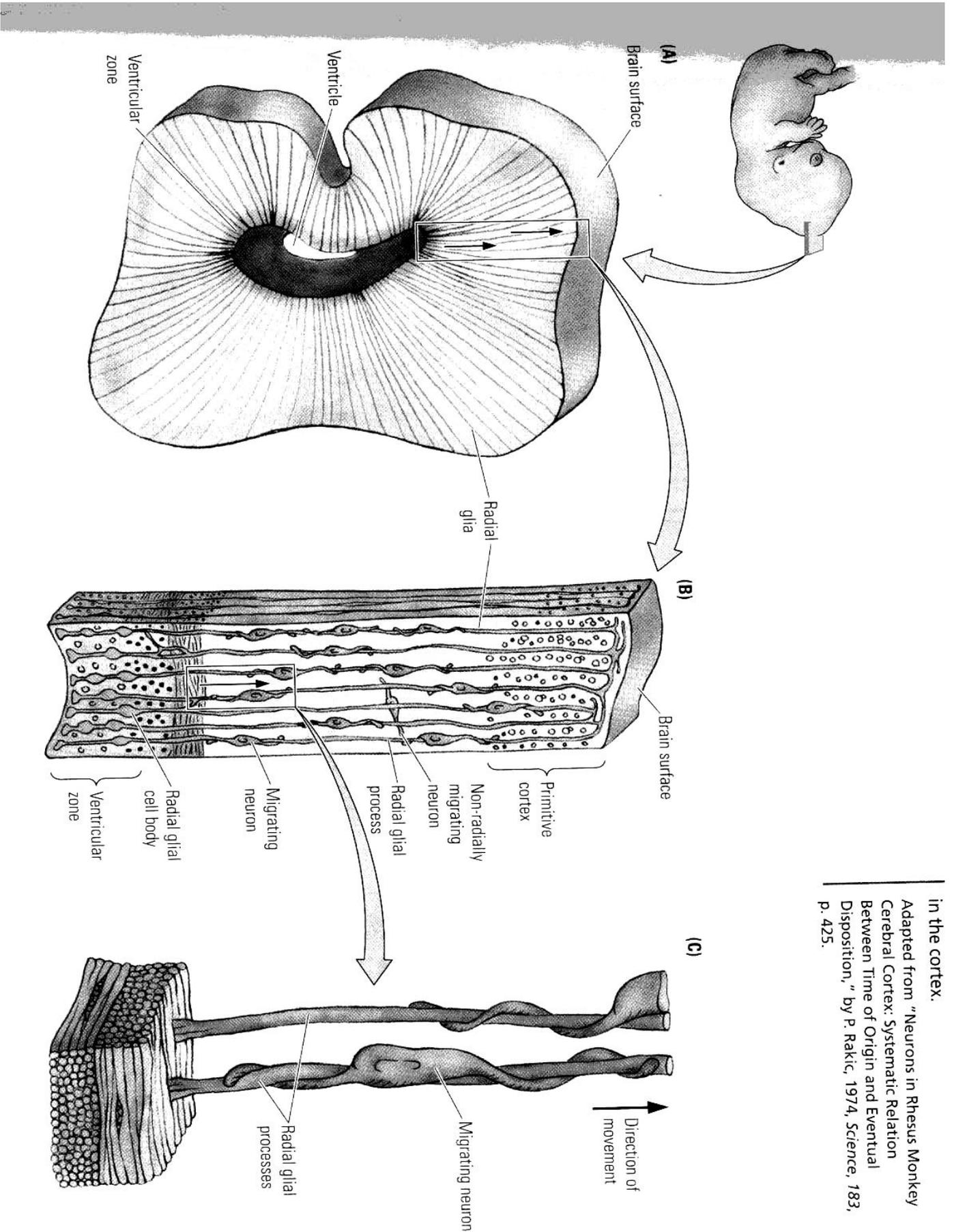
Day 21

Developing
brain

Neural
groove







in the cortex.
 Adapted from "Neurons in Rhesus Monkey Cerebral Cortex: Systematic Relation Between Time of Origin and Eventual Disposition," by P. Rakic, 1974, *Science*, 183, p. 425.