

# **Overlooking Sexual Binaries and the Equality of Women:**

## **Ideas that are neither new nor modern**

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### **Abstract:**

The overlooking of sexual binaries and the equality of women are two ideas that are considered to have followed a linear path in history resulting in the belief that these ideas are ‘modern’ and ‘new’ in today’s culture. This paper examines the different social institutions of past civilisations that aren’t considered modern, regarding the equality of women and overlooking of sexual binaries. The focus of this article is to compare the perspectives and experiences of these ancient cultures with our own modern culture regarding these two ideas. The method taken to construct this argument, is through the use of research sourced from peer-reviewed scholarly articles. The results of this paper conclude that acceptance of different sexualities and equality for women, did exist at various points in ancient history. Furthermore, there was a strong correlation between the Ancient Worlds observed in this paper regarding reasoning behind the acceptance. Most of these cultures lived the way they did because it benefited them in multiple ways. It was also found that religion played a part in the dissolving of these ideas that we consider new and modern when they were first introduced to these cultures, which explains how they were quick to fade. It also explains why we believe these ideas to be new and modern as they have not followed a linear pattern in history which has resulted in the disappearance of these ideas over time. These results are significant as they prompt us to question our modern perspectives and look back at the past to help create a better future. This paper is only limited to three civilisations, so it is restricted in the representation of the rest of the global community. Hence why this study could be further extended by research into other ancient cultures as to give us a broader understanding of the history of women’s equality and acceptance of different sexualities.

### **Introduction:**

What issues have defined the 21<sup>st</sup> century? The best way to answer this question is to firstly attribute this era to one of change where social and political institutions that once stood firmly in our global structures, are now being critically questioned and reformed. We’ve had issues ranging from political unrest, racial inequality, autonomy of states, immigration difficulties, women’s rights, LBGTIQ+ recognition and so forth. Over the course of history, these issues

have constantly reappeared and through small steps (and some massive ones) things are slowly becoming better. However, the two questions I am posing in this article is, how modern and new are these movements? And have they followed a linear pattern in history? Specifically, I will be focusing on the two movements of female equality and overlooking sexual binaries.

In answering this question, it helps to define what we mean by the term “modern”. Barry Smart traces the word “modern” to the fifth-century term, “*modernus*” derived from Latin. It was used to distinguish the transition of the pagan era to the Christian era (Smart, 1990). The word modern is also often associated with the Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Wokler, 2000). A period where new political ideas, social and cultural standards and attitudes started appearing. These structures went on to shape the world as we know it today and established this era as an end to traditional structures and a beginning to new “modern” ones (Delanty, 2013). Foucault follows this idea up in later writings arguing that modernity is an attitude that is philosophically questioning and transforming the present day (Foucault, 1997). He also sees modernity to be focussed on the advancement of what’s called a “new power/knowledge regime” where man is the object and subject of power in this regime (Fraser, 1985). Now it’s important when looking at what the word modern means, to address ideas on work ethic as it’s a topic that many past scholars and academics have pinpointed as being a driver of our “modern” society. Max Weber pinpoints the Protestant work ethic of the sixteenth century as one that influenced and drove work to be recognised as a symbol of modernity. Similarly, Hegel, positions work as the start of “human culture” that is driven by the consciousness of man which is what separates him from animal (Just, 2017). Additionally, capitalism is also inherently associated as a structure of modern society, as Karl Marx believed (Feng et, al. 2006). Another social structure we associate with modernity, is a sense of nationalism. The nation has been seen as the “highest symbolic value of modernity” and it’s always been Europe that we associate with nationalism and modernity (Llobera, 1994). Overall, there are five distinct features associated with what is a modern society. First one being, the global progression of social development, second is societies unique cultural programs, third is the movement of independence, fourth being the continuous consistency of “change and innovations” and five is the continual growth of “productivity, competitiveness and the quality of life” (Savelyev, 2013).

In relating back to the original argument, we need to look at how gender inequality and overlooking sexual binaries has been represented in current and past literature, in order to understand why it cannot be a modern phenomenon. In relation to female equality, there are studies that discuss how that gender inequality and discrimination were non-existent in some

ancient cultures, which will be further explored in this article. One study stipulates that gender relations were instead based on the acceptance that the human body was just designed differently and there was no doubt on their capabilities as women (Storozhuk et. al, 2017). Oddly enough, gender equality is something that's associated with Western countries despite the fact that it was once applicable in third world countries millennia ago. There is research indicating that the equal status of women did exist in countries like Egypt in and before the Hellenistic period (Khalil et. al, 2017) which will be addressed more in depth later in the article. However, it does incite questions as to whether Western cultures such as Europe should really be considered the founders of gender equality. We associate Western countries as being gender friendly simply because women's rights are more established in first world countries compared to what Niall Ferguson would refer to as, "The Rest" (Ferguson, 2004). Because our culture is constantly referencing the last two centuries as examples of what countries have been more progressive with female equality, they completely disregard other ancient culture's experiences of women's rights and freedoms. In relation to other cultures, the influence of religion in countries is one that has also been viewed as anti-feminist in the past and even to this day. Beliefs surrounding the gender discrimination in the Christian bible is one that's been highly prevalent throughout history. However, some are saying the interpretation of the bible that women are below men is incorrect. Groothuis makes reference that gender equality isn't something that's recently been established in the bible, but instead, something that was established from the beginning but misinterpreted the wrong way (Groothuis, 1996). The same runs for Islamic faith. Mashhour describes how it's due to patriarchal male-dominated societies, that there's been gender inequality in Muslim dominated countries rather than the Quran in where men and women are represented as equal (Mashhour, 2005).

There is the other side of the argument, which is more common, that gender equality is a new political phenomenon in the last 50 years leading us into a more modern society. Squires refers to this movement as a "new gender regime" where women's rights are becoming more prevalent (Squires, 2007). To a degree this is correct, the rights of women are more prevalent globally than ever before, however it cannot be dismissed that there were past cultures who allowed for the rights and freedoms of their women. Hence why the idea cannot be new nor modern.

Inglehart et. al, equates democratisation and modernisation to be linked. A society that is democratic is one that is modern. This draws onto the second point of the paper, which is how these democratic societies are one's that have pushed and achieved gender equality. By doing

this, they are linking the idea that modernity is associated with the gender equality movement (Inglehart et. al, 2002). Another paper similarly describes this trend of democratisation equalling elevated women's rights. It cannot be denied that there is a trend there however, it gives off the understanding that gender equality is one that's associated with modernity. Furthermore, it pinpoints European countries as being the leaders of gender equality in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which only prioritises the stance that Western cultures promote gender equality more than other cultures (Inglehart, 2002). In her book, Walter focusses on the major changes women's rights have gone through, but naturally she only references to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century in her writing. By solely focussing on these two centuries, it fully erases past examples of gender equality and further establishes the idea as relevant to the "modern" era (Walter, 2001).

In addressing the topic of sexual binaries, we need to dissect what this term means. Sexual binaries in simplest forms is male/female, masculine/feminine. It's the idea that every person has one sexuality, one gender and there is no other option (Lorber, 1996). Overlooking those sexual binaries relates to seeing other genders and sexualities outside of this box.

Gender and sexuality are two social structures that have been identified in the past with a masculine/feminine binary. It is assumed that it was a closed subject in the past and there were no other options. However, not only was overlooking sexual/gender binaries once a thing but so was the questioning and criticising of this binary. It is not something that should be identified as being recent or new (Corbett, 2008). Similarly, Cocks argues that viewing sexual identities as something that has never been accepted and in opposition to heterosexuality, is no longer relevant. History has shown there were moments where these sexualities were overlooked and regarded as the norm. He uses the binary "home/hetero" to demonstrate this idea (Cocks, 2006). Mayo and Sheppard, look at the connections between Two Spirit Native Americans and what has been known and taught about gender and sexuality in the past. They put forward the idea that we should be learning from past sexualities and genders of different cultures, in order to fully comprehend their different meanings nowadays. By accepting that our world has a non-linear pattern when it comes to sexualities, the authors aim to encourage society to overlook these sexual binaries and the way to do that is by addressing sexualities of the past that we not have heard from before (Mayo, et, al. 2012).

When we address the other side of the argument that believes acceptance and looking past sexual binaries is new and modern, we can see how sexualities of the past and of other cultures

have been disregarded. In Foucault's three volume work, *The History of Sexuality*, he describes how attitudes of sexuality are transitioning into a modern stage. He discusses how the "modern world" has allowed for subjects on the topic of sexuality to be made public and normalised to a degree (Johansson, 2016). Foucault then further claims that sexuality is a structure that's unique to the modern world only (Halperin, 1989). Continuing on from Foucault, Halperin identifies the history of sexuality to be one that is short and whilst referencing Ancient perspectives on sexuality, he claims that it is irrelevant to the definition of sexuality in the "modern world". He believes that they saw sexuality as something different (Halperin, 2016). Whereas I would disagree with that statement. Sexuality has always been prevalent in cultures throughout history and the arguments I make in this report, highlight the similarities that we see in the normalisation of overlooking sexual binaries. Western prominence to the history of sexuality in the modern world, can also be exemplified in other writings that unintentionally give off this viewpoint. Caplan identifies the history of sexuality and gender to be limited to Western experiences in the last three centuries to which she refers to as the "modern world". She presents the idea that the process of overlooking those sexual binaries has followed in a linear path in the modern world (Caplan, 1987) without addressing experiences further back in history.

### **Female Equality in the Past:**

As mentioned above in the introduction, the equality of women is one which has fluctuated over the course of history. This stance is one not taken by many, understandably, because women have for a long time been oppressed and denied different privileges of the male world. Additionally, it's easy to believe this as the timeline between the following civilisations that will be addressed in this section, is very non-linear regarding gender equality and would be easy to disregard. However, it is important that the history of women's equality is not overlooked to be one blanket statement of, "it's never existed until now in the modern world," because that only erases the history of civilisations that proved to be quite the opposite.

### **Ancient Egypt:**

One civilisation that proved otherwise were the Ancient Egyptians. In this section I will be addressing the treatment of women in ancient regimes of Egypt leading up to the Arab invasion with more reference to the Ptolemaic Kingdom as the research found was more common for that era.

It's been found that the most literature on the status of women in Ptolemaic Egypt is compared with the status of the Greek woman, in particular Athens where they had less gender equality (Pomeroy, 1990). Additionally, it should be pointed out that one of the major reasons for the equal positioning of women to men in Egypt, was in regard to the monarchy where women were found to be in charge of the kingdom (Pomeroy, 1990). Carney, shows that female monarchy in the Hellenistic period (323 – 250 BC) was common and the first two generations of Hellenistic Monarchy paved the way for a “pattern of royal women in their families” (Carney, 2010). Unlike their Greek counterparts, the status of Egyptian women was centred around their social rank in society rather than their gender (Khalil et, al. 2016). Women born in Egypt had the title “aste” which means citizen and allowed them to have a civic status. In reference to Aristotle, he claimed that citizenship allowed citizens to rule, “hold political offices and administer justice” and also follow the rules of those higher in power and those that rule over you. For Greek women as citizens, it allowed them to be ruled over and that's it (Pomeroy, 1990). Women in Egypt were also able to attain contracts concerning marriage, property, jobs, separation and settlements including the freedom to sue and claim joint property with their husbands. They were free to choose whom they married and if they wanted to separate and they were also entitled to a good portion of their husbands' inheritance whether they were with or without children (Khalil et, al. 2016). There is also evidence of Ancient Egyptian scrolls and texts written by both men and women. Though there are more found written by men, Rowlandson points out that finding the written perspective of women in ancient times is very rare (Rowlandson, 1998). Ancient art has also shown to be reflective of the treatment of women in Ancient Egypt. Women participating in art, music, science, medicine, education, fishing and hunting can be found in this art. This has allowed historians to discover the various achievements of women in Ancient Egypt regimes. For example, there have been over 100 notable female specialists in every area of medicine during the era leading up to the Arab invasion. This makes sense as both boys and girls were given the right to an education where they would study at educational institutions from the age of four and once they graduated, they were given a certificate allowing them to practice in any career they wished (Maktabi, 2013). Their representation of women in religion was very prominent too with both gods and goddesses illustrated in ancient art and tombs (Khalil et, al. 2016). By the fourth century Christianity had spread rapidly throughout Egypt and started changing the attitudes of different aspects of Egyptian people's lives. Christian influence regarding marriage was one that affected the attitudes of the Egyptians however, it was not fully prevalent. It wasn't until the Arab invasion in the 7<sup>th</sup> century (between 639 and 646 AD) where they took over Egypt

and Syria and effectively brought an end to the freedom of Egyptian women. The influence of Islam is made apparent as any following sources after the invasion were written in Arabic and have been since (Rowlandson, 1998). By looking at the history of Egypt after the Arab invasion to the present day, we can see how substantial the impact religion has had on Egyptian women's equality. Islam's influence has contributed to the gender discrimination of Egyptian women over history and what's interesting about the research done in this field, is that Egypt is now being represented as a country that has always had these issues (Brandt et, al. 1995). Whereas it's clear before Arab influence, this was not the case. Gender equality in Egypt have been identified with modern world institutions such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) which was signed by Egypt in the 1990s or the change to a unitary court system in 1955 where religion was less dominant in its ruling (Maktabi, 2013).

### **Ancient Sparta:**

Another civilisation that once showed gender equality was Ancient Sparta. Sparta is historically known as Lacedaemon and was a state of Ancient Greece that was heavily military focussed and was most prominent in their power between the seventh and fourth centuries BC (Cartledge, 1981). The research of women's equality in this civilisation is again, quite dependent on the comparison between Athens Greeks and Spartan Greeks. The treatment of women in this civilisation was comparatively different to others in that time period and it may have seemed odd from the Greek perspective of the time. However, if we look back on it in today's society, it can be seen as a crucial pillar and period in history where forms of female equality were already in place.

Before addressing this argument, it's crucial that we establish the extent of gender equality presented in the Spartan regime. It is true that they had a lot of freedom compared to other cultures at the time and especially their Greek counterparts in Athens. However, there are arguments that question whether these freedoms were more for the benefit of the state and the woman's ability to reproduce (Milander, 2017). In turn, it is fair to point out that this is true, to an extent. Women were very heavily relied on in Ancient Sparta to produce children and boys in particular to fight in the army. It is without saying though, that women were also encouraged in other areas to contribute to society and were viewed in a more uplifting way than other cultures we have known of in the past.

As the role of Spartan men was to train and serve as soldiers in the state's army, women were often left by themselves. This allowed a lot of free time for girls and women to participate in other activities. One aspect that was encouraged with women was education and physical activity. Women were required to train and participate in sports as much as men did. These activities would include running, wrestling, boxing, sword fighting, javelin and discus (Millander, 2017) activities that were seen as quite odd for women to participate in. They were educated in classes referred to as "mousike" which taught dancing, singing, music and poetry. There is a lot of questions surrounding the amount of literacy that Spartan men and women spoke however, it is known that the need for literacy was not as valued as it was in Athens and was not essential in a citizen's government and political involvement in Sparta. It is also highly presumed that Spartan women were more literate than their male counterparts due to their lifelong participation in the army starting from a young age and the continued education of girls until eighteen years of age (Pomeroy, 2002). Sparta was one of the only poleis where girls were expected, supported and encouraged to receive training and education. Therefore, women were seen as more culturally and educationally "superior" to men unlike females in Athens where education was not required of them. It was in the fourth century, that Plato made comment about how both women and men in Crete and Sparta took "pride in their education" and he admires the skills they possess in philosophical discussion. In addition to this, women were taught to speak in public especially when it came to shunning their sons and other males for being single or being a coward (more detail regarding this will be addressed further on in the article) (Pomeroy, 2002). On the other hand, women would be acknowledged and commended by the Spartan state for their contribution to society through male childbirth and those that died during childbirth were recorded on tombstones. Neither were they discriminated against and held to societies standards if they couldn't produce children or get married, unlike their male counterparts. Women were also allowed to own and manage property as well as inherit money and land and a good majority of wealthy land ownerships in Sparta were controlled by women (Millander, 2017). A key component of political activity within Spartan women was wealth. There are various schools of thought regarding why women were given such high hierarchical power within the household. Some say it has to do with the women's control over population size (birth-giving). Others say it's directly related to the absence of the husband in war which allowed them to become empowered (Millander, 2017).

The biggest reason as to why our "modern" society may not recognise the qualities of gender equality presented in Spartan history, is due to the fall of the empire in the second century BC

(Cawkwell, 2013). An era that was so long ago it can be seen as irrelevant in today's day and age when looking at feminism and the changing world of gender politics. The fall of the Spartan empire ended a system of varying gender roles and as we have seen with time, gender equality has since proved to be very non-linear as similar freedom of the Spartan women was not seen until millennia after.

### **Female Equality conclusion:**

Ancient Egypt and Sparta offer us a perspective that is rarely addressed in scholarly work. It gives us insight into two cultures that completely normalised equality between male and female. Furthermore, we have to look at these cultures acknowledging that these ideas were quite unique to other cultures of the world at that time and not pick out every detail to scrutinise it because the reality is, they weren't perfect but neither is our "modern" world. It's about addressing these cultures and recognising what they did well and what our culture can/has taken from it.

### **Overlooking sexual binaries in the past:**

In the next part of the article I will be addressing how looking past sexual binaries is another idea that is neither new nor modern. In order to fully comprehend this, we need to look back at previous cultures and eras where this was not an issue and there were genders beyond male and female and sexualities beyond heterosexuality.

### **Ancient Sparta:**

Continuing with the Spartan civilisation, homosexual and heterosexual behaviour was encouraged and normalised in the Spartan army. By reviewing current literature on the topic, we can also see this was something recognised and understood in other Greek communities.

At age seven, boys were taken away from their home and placed in "agoge" where they would be trained up until the age of 20 to be a soldier in the Spartan army (Pomeroy, 2002). Once they turned twelve, their training became more intense and that was when they would develop bonds with the men (Cartledge, 1981). These men were between the ages of 20 to 30 and it was an expected attitude in Spartan society that they would indulge in homoerotic relationships with these boys. In fact, it was seen as wrong if a young boy rejected an older male's sexual advances. It was seen as a sign of honour and respect. Additionally, men were also expected to get married in their 20s and start a family immediately (Flavel, 2014). Essentially Spartans did

not see themselves as being strictly heterosexual, in fact usually it was encouraged to be both homosexual and heterosexual for men (Cartledge, 1981). To really establish how much this didn't matter, before marriage, women's heads were cut and shaved so she resembled an adolescent Spartan boy. This was done as it was likely the man had participated in homosexual relations as a young boy with another Spartan man and by doing this it prepared him to "sexually initiate" other young Spartan boys into society (Millander, 2017). The reason why pederasty was encouraged in the Spartan army, was because it encouraged intimacy, reliance and affection which was believed to help bond the army together in fighting to protect each other. Furthermore, it was also done as to break familial ties with the outside world. So, their sole focus was on serving their state. If men wanted to see their wives, they had to sneak out at night time as they had to live in the army barracks until age thirty and it was seen as dishonourable entering and exiting their wife's bedroom (Flavel, 2014). Lycurgus was the original lawmaker of Sparta and established the reformation of the Spartan military. He played a critical role in this man to boy "mentorship". The laws themselves endorsed homosexuality among the Spartan army and boys in training (Crompton, 2003). Athenian Philosopher, Xenophon was an observer of the Spartan society and recorded in depth notes regarding homoerotic relations between men and boys in the "agoge". What is interesting is that instead of disguising these relations in his writing, he decided to instead "make a virtue of them". He writes that the act itself helps with "obedience, respectfulness and self-control" in the young boy (Cartledge, 1981). As we can see, overlooking sexual orientations in Greek culture was clearly, quite natural.

Again, this sort of behaviour is very rarely associated with the ancient world because most research on expanding binaries of male/female and feminine/masculine characteristics, has been referenced to the "modern" era. As it did with the equality of women, the decline of Sparta also contributed to the non-linear and forgotten history of recognising different sexualities and genders. Furthermore, the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance brought along the banning of homosexual relations (Lloyd, 1999) making the open attitudes of the European culture, regarding sexuality, continue to disappear into history.

### **Roman Eunuchs:**

Eunuch's, also known as the third gender, were once viewed as a normal aspect of society. For coherence sake, this section will purely be addressing eunuchs in Europe as eunuchs have been a global movement, the literature would be too scattered covering every form of eunuch.

Ringrose establishes that when historians have previously referenced eunuchs, they have referred to them as attributing to the “moral and political decline” of the era they are writing about. However, due to the changing landscape of the current society, recognition of eunuchs is now being addressed as a group of people that were essential to the societies of the time (Ringrose, 2007). Eunuchs are mainly men who have either been deliberately castrated, born with a genital defect or has suffered an injury there (Ringrose, 2007). There were different types of castration ranging from removal of testicles to removal of both testicles and penis and this could be achieved either by cutting or smashing the organs (Dettenhofer, 2009). Most castrations took place before the boy hit puberty as the chances of mortality as an adult getting castrated was higher. However, in the Roman Empire it was common for castration to be used as a means of punishment or torture (Dettenhofer, 2009). Demonstrating the acknowledgement of eunuchs, the emperor Seveus Alexander (222 – 235 A.D) often referred to eunuchs as “the third sex” (Roughgarden, 2013). The prominent era of eunuchs in Greco- Roman society was in the second to fourth centuries A.D. They were common in earlier centuries, no doubt however, their popularity and power growth in imperial courts were most popular in that time period (Stevenson, 1995). The most common purpose of a eunuch was as a servant in an imperial court. Their jobs included looking after the women, bed attendants or even providing sexual services with those in the court. If the eunuch had their testicles removed after puberty, they were still able to get an erection via testosterone through the adrenal glands which made them highly sought after as sexual partners for both men and women. Especially in Rome, it was common that eunuchs were used to fulfil the sexual desires of their owners (Dottenhofer, 2009). As they were so close to the emperors in Roman courts, eunuchs had an access advantage that many people did not have. Emperors favoured them so they had access to positions considered quite high ranking in the Roman court. One of the most influential top-ranking jobs was the Grand Chamberlain whose job was to overlook and manage the household of the emperors. They were also chosen for duties outside of the palace where they were considered high in ranking and power. This was common in “centrally organised empires” where eunuchs were allowed to progress up the hierarchical ladder and gain political influence and wealth (Dottenhofer, 2009). Non-eunuchs usually despised eunuchs in court because they were given roles of high status within the court. They were also given positions in military and civil work as they had no familial ties and they would have no threat to “imperial succession”. Additionally, they were also given positions as ministers (Roughgarden, 2013). A eunuch’s political power stemmed from their devotion to their ruler. Their job in mediating between the ruler and his subjects and women of the court, was valued by the emperors as one less job to

do. This made them powerful and essential in imperial courts however, a eunuch's social status was still considered quite low as to which an emperor would never consider them a rival as they were dependent on them (Dottenhofer, 2009). In fact, it was at a stage where almost all emperors in the fourth and fifth century were associated with powerful eunuch ministers" (Roughgarden, 2013).

Another form of eunuch that was popular in early centuries of A.D in the Roman Empire were Cybele priestesses. These Cybele priestesses were a form of eunuch that were involved in the cult of the goddess Cybele which they would refer to as the "Mother of all Gods." They would undergo castration as to honour her with reference to her partner Attis who she punished by castration. In a castration ceremony, it was common for men to clamp and cut off their genitals and afterwards adopt women's clothing and jewellery and grow long hair. After the surgery, the priestess would leave their severed genitals on a home's doorstep and the woman of the house would be required to give her some clothing as a symbolism for the beginning of their gender transition (Roughgarden, 2013).

These eunuchs represented an attitude of the wider society who accepted that there were more than two genders. In fact, it was considered essential for the functioning of their society to have that "third gender".

### **Overlooking sexual binaries conclusion:**

As demonstrated, the history of sexuality and gender is one that goes back millennia. We cannot simply disregard the sexualities of the ancient past as being irrelevant to our present time. Each culture portrays a different understanding of sexuality but they also show similarities in the sense that there wasn't just one understanding of male/female, masculine/feminine binaries. They prove that this idea was not one that we should consider modern or new because evidently, they are not and has travelled throughout history in a very non-linear fashion.

### **Conclusion:**

Overall, the two ideas that female equality and overlooking sexual binaries are modern world phenomenon's that have followed the linear course of history, is irrelevant and false. In order to identify this, there needs to be more work on comparing ideas of past cultures with those of today. No matter what, history cannot be a singular straight line where everything progresses in one direction. It is a zigzag of ups and downs and as a "modern" society, (especially Western

ones) how can we determine what's new and what's not without first reviewing the full history of our world.

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